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## Every Picture Tells a Story: Picture Books For Older Readers

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# Every Picture Tells a Story:

## Picture Books for Older Readers

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In my experience as a children's librarian in a rural community, many traditional juvenile non-fiction and fact based fiction books are rejected as too intimidating or too difficult by many readers. Pages of relatively small type and the occasional photograph or illustration can turn away readers who need the information for a school report or other educational endeavors. However, alternatives to these traditional formats have begun to fill the shelves of libraries.

Children's literature has undergone an exciting transformation over the past few years. Large, colorful and dynamic illustrations, complementing fact filled but engaging text are allowing the most difficult topics to be in presented in a much more accessible format.

These picture book-like books cover a wide range of sensitive and serious topics. Racism, sexism, adoption, alienation, and other relatively mature themes appear in this format. Science, biography, and history are also presented.

These books present serious subjects in a fresh and more accessible form, allowing students and other readers whose interest or reading ability are discouraged by conventional reading material, another way to approach the subject.

Listed below are books that I believe are excellent examples the presentation of thought-provoking topics in a picture book format. While these titles are well known to most librarians working with children's literature, others may not know them at all.

### *Smoky Night*

*By Eve Bunting;*

*Illustrated by David Diaz*

*San Diego: Harcourt Brace, c1994*

When the Los Angeles riots break out in the streets of their neighborhood, a young

boy and his mother learn the values of getting along with others no matter what their background or nationality.

The boy and a Korean grocer come to understand each other as they search for their lost pets.

The artist uses collage and other techniques to convey the fear and chaos of the riots. A Caldecott Award winner.

### *So Far from the Sea*

*By Eve Bunting*

*Illustrated by Chris Soentpiet*

*New York: Clarion Books, c1998*

When seven-year-old Laura and her family visit Grandfather's grave at the Manzanar War Relocation Center, the Japanese American child leaves behind a special symbol. Both the text and illustrations provide a powerful depiction of the forced relocation of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Large, realistic illustrations move between the present of the child and past of her father. The past is depicted through sepia tones while the present is in color.

### *Major Taylor, Champion Cyclist*

*By Lesa Cline-Ransome*

*Illustrated by James E. Ransome*

*New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, c2004*

This story is an introduction to the life of the African-American bicycle racer who won the 1899 World Championship title. Major Taylor was a phenomenal athlete in a time when bicycle racing was an international sport. He was the Lance Armstrong of his day, but racism tainted his every accomplishment. Powerful illustrations propel this story.



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***My Brother Martin:  
A Sister Remembers Growing  
Up with the Rev. Dr. Martin  
Luther King Jr.***

*By Christine King Farris*

*Illustrated by Chris Soentpiet*

*New York: Simon & Schuster Books for  
Young Readers, c2003*

This is a story of the early life of Martin Luther King, Jr., as seen through the eyes of his older sister.

The story travels back to the youth the iconic civil rights leader where the reader sees him as boy growing up in a loving family in a middle class neighborhood, while living with the racial separation of the South. Like nearly every child young Martin plays, goes to school, and sometimes gets into trouble.

The illustrations are rich with color and suggest an almost bucolic life despite the ever-present menace of racism and racial separation.

***Dear Katie, the Volcano is a Girl***

*By Jean Craighead George*

*Illustrated by Daniel Powers*

*New York: Hyperion Books for  
Children, c1998*

A grandmother and her granddaughter argue over whether a volcano is a geophysical phenomenon or an angry Hawaiian goddess.

In this unique book, the author successfully reconciles the traditional beliefs of native Hawaiians and modern geologic science.

The art is supportive of the text, alternating illustrations of scientific depictions of volcanic eruptions with those of Pele, the goddess of the volcano and the lush Hawaiian.

***The Cats in Krasinski Square***

*By Karen Hesse*

*Illustrated by Wendy Watson*

*New York: Scholastic Press, 2004*

Two Jewish sisters, escapees of the infamous Warsaw ghetto, devise a plan to thwart an attempt by the Gestapo to intercept food bound for starving people behind the dark Wall. The younger girl is able to mingle with the people on the streets, passing as a Polish Catholic. By following city cats she discovers ways to smuggle food into the Ghetto.

The illustrations are somber, with a pale, nearly monochromatic color. The menace of the Nazi's omnipresence permeates every picture.

***Mama Went to Jail for the Vote***

*By Kathleen Karr*

*Illustrated by Malene Laugesen*

*New York: Hyperion Books for  
Children, c2005*

This is a fictional account of the women in the suffrage movement of the early 1900's, who demanded that women be given the right to vote in all U.S. elections. Through direct action and civil disobedience they picketed the White House.

Tormented by men who objected to their protest, they endured being pelted with rocks and rotten food thrown at them, men who physically attacked them, and finally jailing. A little girl tells the story of her mother's imprisonment and the ultimate success of the suffragettes cause.

The illustrations are colorful and almost cartoon-like yet they match the girl's recollections and accurately depict the settings and events.



***Snowflake Bentley***

*By Jacqueline Briggs Martin  
Illustrated by Mary Azarian  
Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998*

This is a biography of a self-taught scientist who photographed thousands of individual snowflakes in order to study their unique formations. It is a remarkable story of a man who asked a simple question and spent the rest of his life trying to find ways to answer it. The question: What is the nature of a snowflake? His photographs taken before the turn of the twentieth century remain the standard catalog for snowflakes and their crystal forms.

The illustrations are both simple and complex. The actual book design allows for factual information to appear in sidebars while the story of his life is told on the main page. The colors are lively and the style of the illustrations reminds the reader of old woodblock prints and emphasizes the nineteenth century setting.

Winner of the Caldecott Award for illustration.

***Just Add One Chinese Sister***

*By Patricia McMahon  
and Conor Clarke McCarthy  
Illustrated by Karen A. Jerome  
Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press, 2005*

Claire and her mother are working together on a scrapbook as they relive their first days and hours together following Claire's arrival from her birth home in China.

As more families include adopted children from China this story, based on an actual family's experience, depicts the events around the addition of a new family member.

The illustrations are lively and joyful, presented in the manner of a photo travelogue.

***The Girl Who Loved Caterpillars***

*Adapted by Jean Merrill  
Illustrated by Floyd Cooper  
New York: Philomel Books, c1992*

In this retelling of an anonymous twelfth-century Japanese story, Izumi resists social and family pressures as she befriends caterpillars and other creatures deemed unfit for young women.

Izumi is a very strong young woman who chooses to live a life free from the demands of marriage and expectations of her culture.

The illustrations employ soft, muted colors and are in the style of traditional Japanese painting.

***Civil War Artist***

*Written and illustrated by  
Taylor Morrison  
Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999*

This wonderfully researched and illustrated book traces an illustrator's sketch of a Civil War battle from the time it leaves his hands, through the engraving and printing processes, and to its final publication in a newspaper.

Morrison is an Oregon artist who does extensive research before he begins his latest book.

The illustrations are realistic and detailed and they depict the actual events described in the text.

***Pink and Say***

*Written and illustrated by  
Patricia Polacco  
New York: Philomel Books, 1994*

Say Curtis describes his meeting with Pinkus Aylee, a black soldier, during the Civil War, and their capture by Southern troops. Based on a true story where the wounded Say is rescued from the battle-



field and nursed back to health by Pink. In return Say teaches Pink to read.

The illustrations are drawn loosely with great expressive details. The people and settings are vibrant with color.

***Grandfather's Journey***

*Written and illustrated by Allen Say  
Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993*

A Japanese American man recounts his grandfather's journey to America, a journey he too makes years later, and the feelings of being torn by a love for two different countries. He belongs to two countries and two cultures but he does quite feel at home in either one.

Illustrations are formal and realistic with muted colors. Neither Japanese nor Western in style and composition, they combine both to create a sense of detachment alienation.

***Song of the Water Boatman:  
and Other Pond Poems***

*Written by Joyce Sidman  
Illustrated by Beckie Prange  
Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005*

This is a collection of poems that provide a look at some of the animals, insects, and plants that are found in ponds, with accompanying information about each. The powerful and descriptive language of the poetry is the perfect complement to the factual information accompanying each illustration.

Beautifully illustrated with line drawing depicting each subject and its place in the pond's ecology.

***Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds:  
the Sammy Lee story***

*By Paula Yoo  
Illustrated by Dom Lee  
New York: Lee & Low Books, c2005*

A biography of Korean American diving champion Sammy Lee. The story focuses on Lee's childhood determination to achieve his personal goals, and, fulfill his father's dreams. His force of will and the ability to overcome obstacles of every sort, led to a medical career and Olympic gold. As a platform diver he earned Olympic gold medals in 1948 and 1952. While he became the doctor his father always wanted him to be.

This is a rare story of urban west coast racism set in Los Angeles, when people of color were prohibited from using the municipal swimming pool. Sammy Lee overcomes this obstacle and many more to become a champion in and out of the water.

Sepia toned illustrations done in the style of newspaper photos reinforces the story of history being made.



