Understanding History through the Visual Images in Historical Fiction

> *"Our research certainly confirms that children can become more visually literate and operate at a much higher level if they are taught how to look."*
>
> —Arizpe & Styles, 2003

This opening quote from Arizpe and Styles was the inspiration for a study that focused on the visual aspects of historical fiction picturebooks. In their study of picturebook reading, Arizpe and Styles (2003) found that when readers were taught about the visual images and design elements in picturebooks, even young readers were able to form sophisticated interpretations of the visual images. They also found that children, regardless of reading ability, navigated and empathized with complex stories (Arizpe & Styles, 2003).

Researchers have suggested that explicit instruction focusing on visual images and design elements can enhance students' visual and reading competencies (Arizpe & Styles, 2003; Pantaleo, 2007; Serafini, 2005; Sipe, 2000). In this article, I share how students in a fifth-grade classroom navigated the textual, visual, and design elements of historical fiction picturebooks, and negotiated meaning during read-alouds in whole-class and small-group settings. This study also investigated how instruction focusing on visual images, design elements, and aspects of genre influenced students' responses, and how students were supported during classroom discussions to respond to aspects of particular historical fiction picturebooks.

In the last ten years, historical fiction picturebooks have won numerous children's literature awards and are assuming a prominent role in the literacy landscape of elementary and middle school classrooms (Temple, Martinez, & Yokota, 2006). Too often, historical fiction picturebooks are used as supplemental material to the social studies curriculum, as many intermediate teachers find these texts a useful form to present complex historical concepts and to promote critical discussions (Albright, 2002; Baghban, 2007; Johnson Connor, 2003; Wolk, 2004). When this is the case, the visual images and design features of the text are often overlooked, and readers' construction of meaning with textual features (printed words) is privileged (Kress, 2003, 2010). As classroom teachers use historical fiction picturebooks in their reading and history instructional practices, more research is needed to understand the types of meanings readers construct when they are encouraged and taught how to attend to the visual images, design elements and textual features of picturebooks.

In this article, I address three important aspects of the picturebook: text, image, and design. The textual features refer to the words within the narrative; image refers to all of the visual images, illustrations, or pictures within the narrative; design refers to the ways in which the picturebook is put together. The design of a picturebook includes the peritext, which are all of the features not part of the narrative (front cover, back cover, jacket, title page, dedication, author's note, etc.). Design also refers to size, shape, framing, layout, etc. Text, image, and design are also referred to as systems of meaning.

Historical Fiction and Picturebook Reading

Historical fiction picturebooks are realistic stories set in the past where an author and illustrator or author/illustrator creatively and imaginatively

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weave a story around historical facts (Keifer, 2006). Historical fiction: 1) offers readers a vicarious experience of the past; 2) encourages readers to think about the past as well as to feel and empathize with characters; 3) helps readers understand human challenges and relationships; 4) offers a way for readers to compare issues from the past and present (Keifer, 2006); and 5) helps readers understand that there are a variety of possible truths (Levstik, 1989). Research suggests that attending to the nature of historical fiction as a genre enhances students' reading repertoires as they attend to the structure and characteristics that set up expectations for reading (Keifer, 2006; Shine & Roser, 1999; Sipe, 2001; Youngs, 2010).

Historical fiction picturebooks require a multifaceted approach to reading that includes attention to literary, historical, and visual aspects.

The research on historical fiction (chapter or picturebook) has focused on its ability to support the social studies curriculum (Levstik, 1989; Roser & Keehn, 2002; Wineburg, 2001). Some studies focused on classroom uses of picturebooks and described ways in which readers were introduced to various social studies topics and concepts through their use (Albright, 2002; Baghban, 2007; Johnson Connor, 2003; Wolk, 2004). These studies highlighted the qualities of historical fiction; however, they viewed the picturebook as an avenue for further investigation into content area knowledge rather than as an opportunity to examine both the aesthetic qualities of the picturebook (Sipe, 1998) and the ways picturebooks can expand understandings by attending to and teaching visual systems of meaning. Historical fiction picturebooks require a multifaceted approach to reading that includes attention to literary, historical, *and* visual aspects.

Picturebooks are multimodal because they convey meaning using more than one mode. Modes include the text, visual images, and design elements. Understanding the multimodal nature of picturebooks can enhance readers' understandings and broaden the possibilities for the construction of

INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK

Understanding History through the Visual: Students Respond to Visual Images in Historical Fiction

The ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan **"Looking for the History in Historical Fiction: An Epidemic for Reading"** pairs the reading of historical fiction with nonfiction to introduce students to the large themes of history.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/looking-history-historical-fiction-404.html

Using the book *The Tale of Despereaux,* students look a closer look at medieval times to see if the novel accurately portrays this time in history. Looking at key sections of the book, students will use a ReadWriteThink.org online tool to help them distinguish between fact and fiction.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/tale-despereaux-fact-fiction-30561.html

Students write resumes for historical fiction characters in the lesson plan **"Book Report Alternative: Writing Resumes for Characters in Historical Fiction."** They first explore help wanted ads to see what employers want, and then draft resumes for the characters they've chosen.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/book-report-alternative-writing-295.html

Hear more about historical fiction in the ***Text Messages*** **podcast episode "Exploring History"** (http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-episodes/exploring-history-30425.html)

or the ***Chatting about Books*** **podcast episode "Historical Fiction"** (http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-episodes/historical-fiction-30735.html).

—Lisa Fink
www.readwritethink.org

meaning (Kress, 2010; Serafini, 2010; Unsworth & Wheeler, 2002; Youngs, 2010; Youngs & Serafini, 2011). Illustrators, authors, and publishers rely on the multimodal potential of picturebooks, communicating historical representations through text, visual images, and design features.

When reading historical fiction picturebooks, the relationship between words and image is important to the overall meaning and requires readers to understand and interpret that relationship (Lewis, 2001; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; Sipe, 1998, 2000; Youngs, 2010). Careful inspection of both text and image yield a greater understanding of the whole than either could do independently (Sipe, 2000). Readers must continually generate meanings as they entertain ambiguity and assess the interplay between text and image (Serafini, 2010). Therefore, it is important to understand what each meaning system contributes when approaching picturebook reading.

Even though a great deal of attention has been given to the synergistic relationship of text and image (Sipe, 1998), printed text is still privileged over image (Kress, 2010). For example, if readers were to privilege text over image when reading the picturebook *Home of the Brave* by Allen Say (2002), they would miss the irony that Say portrayed as he juxtaposed Native American kivas with Japanese American internment tags. Say does not bring the reader's attention to this interpretation through print, but rather he challenges the reader to draw this conclusion through the intratextual nature of the images. It is important for readers to understand that historical images carry the visual narrative, but that individual images and icons embedded within the full illustration also contain meaning that readers should attend to in order to critically read and understand the historical content and author/illustrator's perspective.

Therefore, it is the intention of this article to demonstrate that when readers of historical fiction picturebooks attend to the visual and design systems of meaning, a greater understanding of the picturebook, historical event, and illustrator's perspective becomes possible. This article will also demonstrate how intermediate-grade readers learned to attend to symbolic images and how attention to the visual and design aspects of historical fiction picturebooks enhanced their understanding of how historical fiction picturebooks work and opened the possibilities for meaning construction.

The Study

Method

I (a university researcher) conducted this qualitative study (Erickson, 1986) over four months in a fifth-grade classroom in collaboration with Emily (all names are pseudonyms), the classroom teacher. Emily taught in a district where a core program was mandated and in a school where teachers were expected to stay true to the program. Because of the curricular expectations placed upon Emily, we met before initiating the study to negotiate and brainstorm how my presence in the classroom and my interaction with the students would best serve the students and research study. We then approached her principal with our design and negotiated a two-week break from the core program. All standards were to be addressed, but we were allowed to accomplish this through the unit of study presented in this article.

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Book Selections

Picturebooks were chosen around four major historical eras that Emily would later address in her social studies curriculum: 1) Slavery; 2) The Holocaust; 3) Japanese Internment; and 4) Civil Rights. (See Appendices A and B for a summary of the books read.) I then selected picturebooks where the images were as compelling as the text and the text/image relationship was enhancing. "Enhancing" describes text/image relationships where the printed text and images would be incomplete without the other. They each add something to the narrative, and the story would not be the same if

either one was eliminated or changed (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001).

Once I had a selection of historical fiction picturebooks, I narrowed my choices to books where the visual narrative included symbolic images that were not referenced in the text. In other words, the illustrator created a narrative that not only enhanced the text but also provided an interesting perspective. For example, *Rose Blanche* (Innocenti, 1985) and *Henry's Freedom Box* (Levine, 2007) were selected because the visual images included historical symbols, and they each positioned characters to portray a sense of power. Each book used color, line, shape placement, and framing in interesting ways. I also looked for books that provided varied perspectives on historical events and met the criteria for high-quality historical fiction (Temple, Martinez, & Yokota, 2006).

Procedure

The study was conducted in three phases. During the first phase, I observed students' literacy behaviors and responses to literature three times per week during their 90-minute literacy block. I also interacted with students during independent work time in order to become part of the learning community. In the second phase, which lasted approximately two weeks, I took on the role of teacher and conducted a series of 10 whole-class read-alouds with purposeful demonstrations and learning experiences that helped readers become familiar with visual images, design features, the interplay between text and image, genre, and how to use these features in meaning construction. Emily observed the read-alouds and kept observational notes on student responses and interactions. Appendix A provides an outline of books read, dates, lesson topics, and examples of purposeful lessons.

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During the third phase, Emily returned to core program instruction and met with her guided reading groups five days per week while I met with other small groups in the hallway. The small groups allowed for a more intimate setting and helped Emily manage classroom instruction. Students were organized into three small groups of mixed reading abilities. I met with a different small group each day and read the same book to each group. One book was read each week for approximately 2 months, with each meeting lasting 45 minutes. I facilitated small-group discussions (Peterson & Eeds, 2007) and took advantage of teachable moments. During the small groups, students were invited to share ideas with each other or with me during the read-aloud. See Appendix B for an outline of titles, dates, and examples of possible discussion points.

Data sources included field notes taken by Emily and me, video and audio recordings of all read-alouds, transcripts of whole- and small-group classroom discussions, and weekly interviews with the teacher. Each week I made copies of or collected student reader response notebooks, written artifacts, classroom charts, and other artifacts generated during the instructional experiences.

Data Analysis

Initially, I looked across the entire data set and across all the conversational turns/responses (a conversational turn is a unit of analysis referring to each time a new student speaks) to determine which meaning system (visual image or printed text) students were attending to. I wanted to know if student responses were influenced primarily by the visual images, the printed text, or both. Similar to the findings of Walsh (2003), it is evident that responses were influenced by text *and* images as they read the entire book; however, for the purposes of this study, responses were differentiated. See Figure 1 for an example of each type of response. Later in this article, I provide a more nuanced description of the responses to visual images and what they did for readers.

My analysis indicated that 61% of the conversational turns were in response to visual images, 14% were in response to printed text, and 25% were in response to both image and text together. Then I focused on *only* the responses to visual images (61% of the data), coding the responses as either

What readers attended to	Definition	Example
Visual 61%	Noticing, naming, or analyzing a visual image. The reader specifically names an image or visual design element. Meaning was constructed by analyzing and attending to the illustrations or design features.	"In that picture she is holding an apple." "I think the bird in the illustration represents freedom."
Textual 14%	The reader specifically refers to words or phrases in the text. Meaning is constructed by attending to the text within the story or within the peritext.	"I think this is like right before they got sold or something, like it said in *So Far from the Sea* right before all the houses got auctioned."
Visual/Textual (Both) 25%	Neither words nor images were named specifically. These turns were influenced by both the text and images. Readers were responding to the page or book as a whole.	"If they saw them and they caught him eating an apple, what would happen?"

Figure 1. Definition of visual, textual, and visual/textual coding schemes

literal or interpretive. Student responses were coded as literal if the student named a visual element that was in the illustrations but the naming did not lead to further interpretation; in other words, a student named or noticed an image and the conversation ended. Comments were coded as interpretive if a student's interpretation was not directly depicted within the image or if the student named an image but it led to interpretive dialogue. In other words, a student named an object or aspect of the image, but it led to a much deeper interpretation of the image—something that was not evident just by looking at it. For example, Katie noticed the bird in *Angel Girl* (Friedman, 2007), but another student, Alisa, picked up on the metaphoric potential of the bird to symbolize freedom. This conversation was coded as interpretive. Literal responses comprised 35% of the total responses to visual images; interpretive responses comprised 65% of this set of responses.

Findings

Responses originating from visual images allowed for readers to interpret meaning and construct more sophisticated responses. Student interpretations were deeper when they analyzed the visual images. Close analysis also helped me to see that student responses to the visual images changed over time. For example, during the very first small-group read-aloud of *Sister Anne's Hands* (Lorbiecki, 1998), 31% of student responses were in reference to the visual images. In comparison, during the last small-group read-aloud of *Angel Girl* (Friedman, 2007), 62% of student responses related to the visual images, doubling the conversational turns in response to the visual images. As I brought students' attention to these visual features, they were able to construct meaning with the visual narrative as opposed to merely noticing and pointing to images.

Also, during the very first read-aloud of *Sister Anne's Hands* (Lorbiecki, 1998), there were 149 conversational turns. Of these turns, 51% were literal. In comparison, during the last small-group read-aloud of *Angel Girl* (Friedman, 2007), there were 205 conversational turns and only 1% of the responses were literal. Across the two months of reading and purposeful instruction in historical fiction and visual systems of meaning, conversational turns increased, literal responses decreased, and interpretive responses constructed from attending to the visual images dramatically increased. As students learned more about genre and visual systems

of meaning, they had more to discuss and were able to construct interpretive responses to the visual images and design features.

More interesting than the numbers and percentages is *how* student responses became more sophisticated over time. First, students named, used, and analyzed visual images and design elements in order to construct literary and historical interpretations. Second, students increasingly identified objects as symbolic visual images embedded within the visual narrative and connected these images to their historical understandings. These two results are described below.

Naming, Using, and Analyzing Visual Images for Historical Understanding

During the initial phases of the whole-class read-alouds, I constructed purposeful lessons to teach the students about the art of picturebook design and visual design elements—line, texture, shape, color, shape placement, character's gaze (what the characters are looking at), spatial relations, and composition (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Lewis, 2001). Initially, it was important for students to be able to name the design elements, but as time progressed, students began to use and analyze design elements in their meaning construction. For example, in the beginning of the study, students did not really attend to the endpages or know that a repeating image was called a *motif.* After learning about these features and how to read the endpages, Amy noticed the image of a chalkboard on the endpage during a discussion of *Sister Anne's Hands* (Lorbiecki, 1998) and recognized it as a motif, but struggled to use the motif to help her make meaning.

Students increasingly identified objects as symbolic visual images embedded within the visual narrative and connected these images to their historical understandings.

Amy: It's a motif because it repeats that image of the chalkboard on the next page.

Suzette: Okay, so you're looking at this as kind of being a motif, the chalkboard. But what meaning does this chalkboard have? Let's go deeper with it.

Amy: I think it is showing the setting.

John: Then it also has XYZ, that's the end.

Amy: The handprint is a repeating image, too, because the hand . . . and there is another one and it is in the title.

Suzette: So what are we thinking about handprints?

Amy: I'm not sure but I know it repeats, so it is a motif.

As our time together progressed, our read-alouds became longer and the number of conversational turns increased. In essence, students had more to talk about as the visual and design systems of these books became a resource for constructing meaning. In teaching the students how to use these features in their meaning construction, I gave them the tools to benefit from this increased attention; students named the design elements, made interpretations, talked about why an illustrator might use these design elements to communicate certain messages, and interpreted the interplay between text and image. For this unit of study, the visual and design systems provided an avenue for all readers to respond.

Color

The first visual design element we focused on was an illustrator's use of color. Students could easily identify color and interpret possible meanings. Illustrators use color in picturebooks to depict moods, express symbolic meaning, show importance, and to draw on universal reactions to color (Albers, 2008; Sipe, 2001). Illustrators of the picturebooks read in this unit of study used color to signify time periods, changes in time periods, and the importance of various objects.

A Sweet Smell of Roses (Johnson, 2007) tells the fictional story of two girls sneaking out of the house to join others in a freedom march with Martin Luther King Jr. During a small-group discussion, students navigated back and forth among three images that were colored red. With the exception

of three red images (roses, ribbon on a teddy bear, and flag), the pictures were depicted in graphite. In this conversation, students flipped back and forth trying to understand the symbolic nature of the red images:

> **John:** I didn't understand why things were colored red. Why is the flag, roses, and the bow red?
>
> **Suzette:** Yeah, three things in the story are red.
>
> **Mari:** That's the only thing I didn't get about the story. Like they are trying to tell us something.
>
> **Jenni:** Roses might be freedom to them, because of the smell, and it might be because roses are kind of free, they're not all caged up.
>
> **Jenni:** Their teddy bear is red, too. Does that mean freedom?
>
> **Dylan:** No, I think it means scared or happy.
>
> **Kali:** Whenever that the flag was red, the teddy bear wasn't.
>
> **McKenna:** And whenever the teddy bear's bow is red . . .
>
> **Jenni:** But in some of them, like when Martin Luther King was alone in the picture, there was nothing there, so I guess that that's the sign of freedom, like he's talking?

We continued our conversation about the three red images and what meaning they might suggest. Students built upon the idea of freedom suggested in the above transcript and later made a connection between the red images, freedom, and the Pledge of Allegiance.

> **Dylan:** Like the Pledge of Allegiance, I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. It's kind of pledging to a umm . . .
>
> **Jenni:** The people.
>
> **Kali:** The United States, to the people and the United States with the flag. And then with the bear because she is carrying it and it might be that she wants to be free. She does not want to go through this.
>
> **Jenni:** Well I just guessed that they are saying something about the roses, you know the sweet smell of roses because Martin Luther King was talking about freedom.
>
> **Suzette:** What could the roses or the sweet smell of roses also stand for?
>
> **Kali:** It could be representing the sweet smell of freedom.

Students in this literature study came to the group with the idea that a picturebook was fairly straightforward. The words were not confusing to them and, in a retelling of the story, they understood the historical era, made connections to the children, and understood the importance of marching with Martin Luther King Jr. The story, however, became complex because of Velasquez's interesting use of color. Only three objects were colored red—the ribbon on the bear, the flag, and the roses. What was even more perplexing to the students was that these images were never colored red on the same pages. When the ribbon was colored red, the roses and flag were graphite and vice versa. Students attended to the symbolic nature of the images and began to interpret and analyze the narrative more closely, negotiating the symbolic meaning of each image and interpreting the rationale for why they were red on some pages and not on others. Attention to the visual design element of color created a space for negotiation and interpretation.

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Motif

Closely related to color is *motif*—a repeated image—and both offer interpretive possibilities. During our discussions, we looked closely at images that were repeated and how they might signify importance as well. Just as color can be used to signify salience or importance, the repetition of a particular image can suggest importance as well.

In the picturebook *Rose Blanche* (1985), Innocenti signifies importance by coloring the main

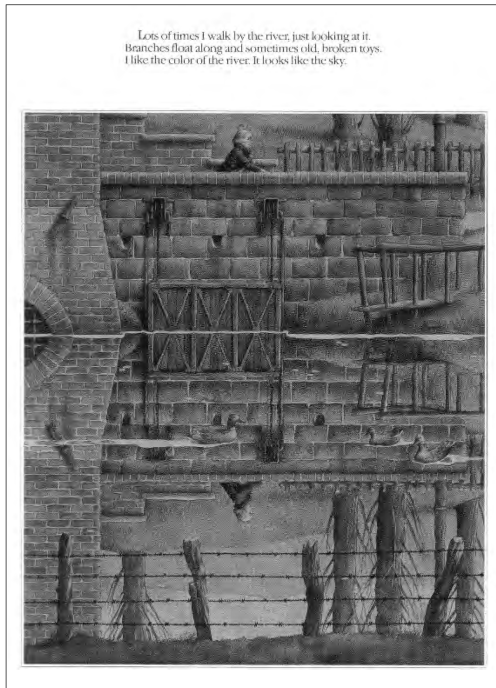

Figure 2. The character of Rose Blanche initially wears a red ribbon, the only color on the page.

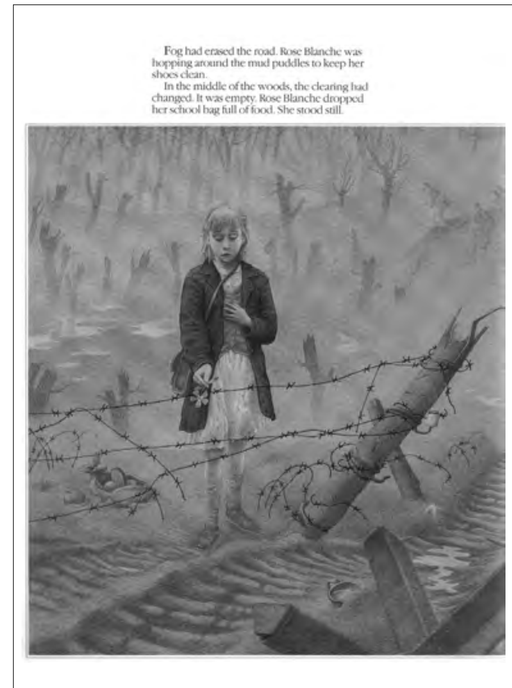

Figure 3. Students discussed the significance of the loss of Rose Blanche's red ribbon.

character's ribbon red (see Fig. 2) (Youngs & Serafini, 2011). A powerful discussion occurred during the study as students attended to the red ribbon, remarking that it made the character of Rose Blanche "stand out," and thus made her important. They identified the ribbon as a motif and then suggested its significance when the ribbon disappeared. (see Fig. 3).

> **Connor:** She is so colorful in this picture, she is saying look at me I have no idea what is going on. That is why she sticks out next to all those gray buildings.
>
> **Brad:** The ribbon is a motif.

Then the ribbon disappeared from Rose Blanche's hair. . . .

> **Connor:** Hey look, the ribbon is gone.
>
> **Brad:** She knows.
>
> **Suzette:** What does she know?
>
> **Brad:** She knows now and [the ribbon] is gone. She knows that people are starving and they are hungry and she knows about the concentration camps.

With the first comment of "look at me I have no idea what is going on," Connor equated the ribbon with her innocence. Rose did not understand in the beginning of the book what was happening outside her German town. Then, when he realized the motif disappeared, Connor simply stated, "She knows." At that point in the story, Rose followed a truck outside of town to where Jews were placed in concentration camps. Throughout the story, Rose visited this camp and brought bread to feed them. Connor and Brad understood that because of her awareness of their hunger and the condition of the camp, her innocence was gone.

Lighting and Vector

In addition to motif and color, students attended to how illustrators connected characters through the use of lighting techniques. I did not explicitly teach this; rather, students picked up on how certain characters were cast in particular types of lighting. In this vignette, two different groups on two different days discussed and analyzed the cover of the book *Angel Girl* (Friedman, 2007), in which the reader sees the back of a boy's head. He is wearing a concentration

camp striped uniform and his head is shaved. He is looking at a girl on the other side of barbed wire. The girl has long blond hair in braids. Her face is much lighter than the boy, and it is illustrated as if a light source is shining on her. At this point, students had not read the book and were attending to and analyzing the peritextual features only.

In these discussions, students were constructing hypotheses about the relationship and importance of the two characters featured on the cover. Students also negotiated which character was in the concentration camp as they analyzed the illustrator's use of light and shading in the visual images.

Group 1

Suzette: So why are you thinking *she* is in the camp?

Kyli: He could be behind the wire and we could just be seeing it from his perspective.

Derek: Well, it's about her though.

Anna: I'm thinking that it is about her [pointing to title].

Suzette: You're thinking it is about her because of the title.

Anna: If you look when you open [the book] like this, it is all dark except where they are, it's like all light.

Kyli: So it's like the spotlight is on them.

I read the same book aloud to another group on a different day. Both groups attended to the lighting techniques and discussed and negotiated possible meanings.

Group 2:

Bryce: The spotlight's on them.

Craig: Between them.

Denise: When there's like a spotlight on the main character or something . . .

Isha: Or like when they dance, they put like the spotlight on people.

Suzette: Herman lives in a labor camp. It is 1942 and the Nazis have made him a prisoner.

Bryce: So he's the prisoner and she's . . .

Isha: Maybe she's visiting.

Denise: Maybe she's like an angel and the light, you know how like when there's an angel, the light shines down on them.

Craig: And they do this in movies sometimes. That behind her, it's lighter. and behind him, it's darker. And since it's darker, it's probably like in the internment camp cuz the internment camp is dark and it's lighter over there so it's good over there.

John: Everything except for him is dark.

Suzette: Yeah, they put him in the light. And illustrators do that to what?

Bryce: To make him stand out.

Denise: So he's like the main character.

Isha: He's the center.

In these read-alouds, the students in two discussion groups used a variety of resources to connect these two characters and to think about how they were related. Students noticed the light source, which took the form of a vector connecting the boy and girl. They attended to the cover's visual perspective and compared it to the title to show how the light connected them. Determining the relationship later helped students to better understand the plot of the story. They attended to the illustrative techniques within the pictures, used the cues the illustrator provided, and read the written text on the jacket to make assumptions about setting and importance of character. Students also related the illustrative techniques to personal experiences and cinematic techniques.

Visual design elements became a resource students turned to again and again during their readings and discussions.

Visual design elements became a resource students turned to again and again during their readings and discussions. In the beginning of the study, during the read-aloud of *Sister Anne's Hands* (Lorbiecki, 1998), students did not name *any* visual design elements; by the end, they not only noticed and named them, they used them to construct literary and historical interpretations.

Interpretation of Symbolic Visual Images

Objects depicted by the illustrator in historical fiction picturebooks invite meaning construction by the reader at both literal and metaphoric levels. Images hold both denotative (more literal, obvious) meaning and connotative (interpretive, personal, and cultural) meaning (van Leeuwen, 2001). As the read-alouds progressed, students noticed how various images/objects were repeated throughout the picturebooks and began to compare the use of these images. Each consecutive picturebook built upon the information and interpretations taught during the previous read-aloud. Students analyzed images and details on each page. Analyzing the symbolism of images affirmed the idea of reader as co-constructor of meaning and promoted a kind of playfulness with the book as students were challenged to piece the visual puzzle together (Sipe, 2001). This next section highlights the various historical or symbolic images students noticed and analyzed—yellow stars, tags, birds, and barbed wire.

Yellow Stars and Tags

The Yellow Star (Deedy, 2000), tells the story of how King Christian of Denmark asked all of his citizens to wear yellow stars to make the Jewish people of his country harder to distinguish and, therefore, more protected. In this next conversation, students discussed the star and interpreted how the Nazis might have used it against the Jewish people.

> **Jake:** They also sort of mocked them by putting the Star of David on them.
>
> **Suzette:** What do you mean mocked them?
>
> **Jake:** Well, they're in a concentration camp. A concentration camp is, as you know, a place where you just round them up and kill them. But the Star of David is the largest Jewish symbol ever to exist. And so it sort of sounds to me that the Nazis were mocking them by putting that on because this is where they were killed wearing their symbol. So it sort of makes me think that the Nazis were trying to mock them.
>
> **Payton:** The Nazis. They turned their symbol into something bad. And so if they see somebody, they could see if they have a yellow star and that way they can know that that person is a Jew.
>
> **Molly:** The tags for Japanese were the same thing.

Students looked to the symbolic meanings of these historic images, attending to the metaphorical and symbolic nature and power behind the star and tag. Students made broad connections and critically analyzed the Nazis' purpose in placing stars on the clothing of the Jews. They then made a connection to how the United States used tags on Japanese internees for identification and control.

Birds

In the early read-alouds, students did not recognize birds illustrated in the picturebooks as symbols of freedom. It was through the repetition of birds across many picturebooks that students began to see the connection to freedom. In the picturebook *Home of the Brave* by Allen Say (2002), the central character took many Japanese internment tags and threw them up in the air as they turned into doves (see Fig. 4). I shared with students that birds are

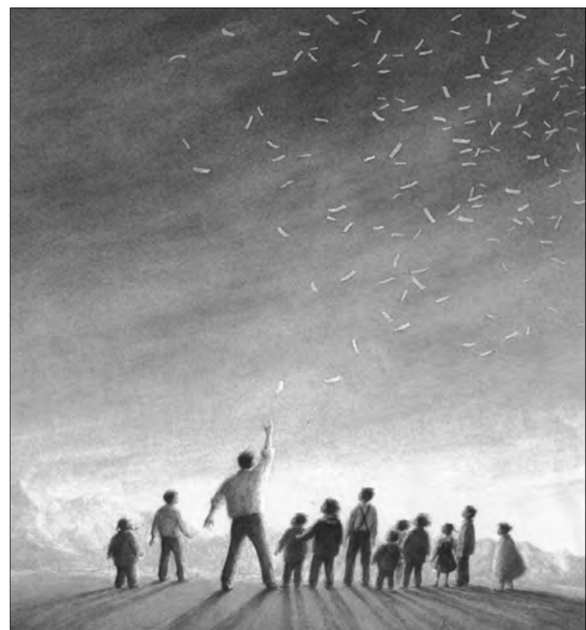

Figure 4. Students grasped the symbolism of birds as freedom.

often used as symbols of freedom. Chris and Brittany then connected the image of the bird in *Angel Girl* (Friedman, 2007) with the birds and tags in *Home of the Brave.*

Chris: That bird reminds me of the birds in *Home of the Brave*—the symbol of freedom and he's free now.

Brittany: When they threw the tags, they said they turned into a flock of birds.

Chris: And the kid said "they're going," they went home, so that made me think like those [pointing to birds *in Angel Girl*] were a symbol of freedom. They're birds.

The metaphoric nature of visual symbols opened avenues of discussion for students, who attributed possible meanings to the images and analyzed how they connected to the story as a whole. Birds were a frequent image in these books, and students began to associate birds with freedom.

Barbed Wire

In all of the picturebooks about internment, barbed wire was used to suggest containment, control, and harshness of the historical setting. In this last discussion, students noticed how Innocenti (1985) constructed an image that foreshadowed what was to come. In this part of the story, Rose, the main character, had followed a truck taking Jews to a concentration camp, unaware of where the truck was going. The illustration referred to in the following discussion depicts Rose walking over a bridge (refer back to Fig. 2). In the image of the river, there is a reflection of barbed wire, but no barbed wire exists in the image above it. Students noticed this subtle difference and then analyzed it as a foreshadowing symbolic technique.

Will: I think it looks like the sky because it's a reflection.

Suzette: What's happening in the story?

Christina: I think she's gonna figure out about the war and then she's gonna protest.

Will: If you flip the book over—it's a reflection.

Martina: Yeah, but in this image, there's no barbed wire and in this image, there's like broken trees and barbed wire.

Suzette: Why might [barbed wire] be there? Where might she be heading?

Will: To the . . .

Christina: Camp.

Will: Yeah. Yeah, because the barbed wire—right here it is in the picture and here it is not.

Martina: Oh, it changed.

Suzette: It's different here, isn't it? The reflection is very different.

Will: It's like a reflection but it's not really a reflection. It tells us what is coming.

Allowing students the freedom to explore illustrators' use of a variety of visual design elements created a space for visual symbolic analysis. Students constantly pointed out aspects of the visual images (for example, the barbed wire in the reflection in *Rose Blanche* [1985]) that I had missed during my initial reading. Toward the end of the study, students understood the image was purposeful, evoking the reader to piece the puzzle together. Symbolic images became a source for deeper historical and literary interpretations. Students in this classroom attended to the various ways characters were connected to each other, examining this relationship through lighting, shading, gaze, and vector. In addition, they analyzed complex settings and considered various objects as historical timepieces and historical symbols. To students, birds were birds in a fall sky *and* symbolic representations of freedom for slaves, Japanese American Internees, and Jews in concentration camps. These complex visual structures influenced readers to think in terms of multiple meanings, rather than trying to find one unified main idea (Nystrand, 1997).

These complex visual structures influenced readers to think in terms of multiple meanings, rather than trying to find one unified main idea.

Implications for Teaching

I was a classroom teacher for 15 years and in that time, I conducted numerous genre studies with my students. Together we analyzed and interpreted visual, textual, and design systems in a variety of text types. In graduate school, I took an American history class in which my learning experiences made me realize how much deeper my analysis could be with historical background knowledge as

USING CRITICAL LITERACY AND TEXTS SETS TO STUDY VISUAL IMAGES IN HISTORICAL FICTION PICTUREBOOKS

Critical literacy views texts as tools for social justice; this stance raises questions about how picturebooks represent particular perspectives on the world and society (Jones, 2008; Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005). Additionally, gathering sets of picturebooks about the same historical event or era can facilitate students' inquiry into these issues by helping them compare and contrast various depictions of people, places, and settings. Students can use their understanding of visual imagery concepts, such as line, color, texture, and motif, to interrogate issues of power, privilege, diversity, and equity in picturebook images.

Gathering Text Sets:

- Ask your local bookstore and local or school librarian.
- Use a professional listserv to ask for colleagues' suggestions.
- Search various children's literature databases, such as the Database of Award-Winning Children's Literature (http://www.dawcl.com), the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database (http://www.clcd.com), and Titlewave (http://www.titlewave.com).
- Check out *The Classroom Bookshelf* (http://classroombookshelf.blogspot.com), which reviews recently published children's books and contains lists of related books, online resources, and critical literacy activities.

Facilitating Critical Literacy Skills:

- Have students consider:
  - what looks similar or different across the texts.
  - what looks similar to or different from what they know through their own experience or prior knowledge about the historical period.
  - what in the illustrations is emphasized across the texts.
  - who appears in some pictures and not others, and who is missing from the pictures all together.
  - what perspectives seem dominant across the visual representations.
- Have students recreate the images or scenes from another viewpoint to represent more diverse experiences of the historical time.
- Ask students how they might go beyond picturebook illustrations to address the discrepancies and inequities they notice from this inquiry.

You'll find that students will not only attain deeper insights into the visual images, but also the historical time you are exploring together.

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I attended to the visual historical narrative in picturebooks. I also learned about reading images in history. As a reader and teacher of children's literature, I immediately applied these new understandings to the reading of picturebooks. From these new understandings I was able to notice how illustrators embedded symbolic images, how they used color to depict the mood, and how they used the visual narrative to present their perspective on historical events.

These experiences inspired me to teach children how to read historical fiction picturebooks with a sense of "connoisseurship" (Eisner, 2004), where readers would gain a wide variety of knowledge and begin to see these books in new ways. I then read aloud books to students and began to teach them how to *look* (Arizpe & Styles, 2003). In fact, the more we learned about history and how picturebooks worked, the more complex these books became. Once students realized they could read the visual narrative and that these images could have both denotative and connotative meanings, these books became like historical puzzles and they enjoyed the challenge.

Historical fiction picturebooks are complex, and so it took time, practice, and explicit demonstration for students to learn to read images and to articulate possible meanings (Arizpe & Styles, 2003). Students began to look to images as resources and moved beyond literal description to critically analyze and articulate what the illustrator was communicating through design elements and visual systems of meaning. Meanings were not limitless as they were constrained by the text and the background knowledge of the reader, but students were encouraged to entertain ambiguity (Serafini, 2005) by revisiting images to build on their emerging interpretations of the text, historical era, and author/illustrator intent. Approaching these books as a genre study also helped students to see connections across historical eras. Many images became symbolic to the students as they began to see the same visual images (boxcar, birds, barbed wire, tags, etc.) across picturebooks and eras. This type of critical thinking enhanced the historical and literary understandings of the students in this study.

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Appendix A: Outline of Phase II: Whole-group read-alouds, lesson topics, and examples of purposeful lessons

Historical Era	Dates	Picturebook Summary	Lesson/Topic	Teaching Points
Japanese American Internment	10-13	*So Far from the Sea* (Bunting, 1998) This picturebook is a narrative about a family that visits what is left of Manzanar Relocation Center. The family visits the grave of their grandfather. The father was eight years old at the time and, prompted by his children's questions about his experience, he tells them the story. Bunting uses flashback, and Soentpiet oscillates between black-and-white (depicting 1942) and color (for present day) drawings.	What Is Historical Fiction?	Story, based on interview and historical details, was researched. Differences in how history is portrayed in text and image. Read and analyzed the author's note.
	10-14		Approaching Historical Fiction	Attended to the blend of historical fact and fiction. Black-and-white images show historical context; colored images show the fictional story.
			Peritextual Features	Front and back covers establish storyline and flashback. Read and analyzed historical icons: boy scout scarf represents a sail. Barbed wire as a symbol of internment.
Civil Rights	10-2	*Sister Anne's Hands* (Lorbiecki, 1998) This story, set in the 1960s, tells the story of Sister Anne, a black nun who is a teacher at an all-white Catholic school. Sister Anne encounters racism from some children and takes the opportunity to teach them about the evils of hatred. This story is told from the perspective of Anna, a little girl who learns about hatred, racism, and discrimination and forms a friendship with Sister Anne that she will never forget.	Characteristics of Historical Fiction	Story is set in the 1960s and focuses on racism. Story based on research and personal experiences.
	10-15		Peritextual Resources	Pertiextual Features: *Cover illustrations*: hands are symbols of love, openness, peace, and forgiveness. *Title page*: establishes setting and socioeconomic status. *Cut-out image*: wreath, book bag, and saddle shoes establish setting and tone. *Endpages*: cursive ABCs signify the opening and closing of the book.
			Visual Design	Visual Design Elements: *Framing:* full-bleed images connect reader and characters. *Icons*: 1960s toys and clothing establish setting and socioeconomic status. *Lighting:* signify saint-like qualities of Sister Ann. *Motif:* hands and apples.

Continued

Historical Era	Dates	Picturebook Summary	Lesson/Topic	Teaching Points
Japanese American Internment	10-16 10-17 10-21	*Home of the Brave* (Say, 2002) *A* picturebook that presents a surrealistic story about a young man who travels back in time to a Japanese relocation camp where his grandparents and parents were sent during World War II.	Peritextual Resources Visual Design Elements	*Title page*: Analyzed metaphorical possibilities of Japanese American internment tag. *Cover:* Establishes setting, color sets mood and tone of book. Analyzed plot structure and use of time travel. Icons and cultural images show historical irony: kivas were juxtaposed with internment tags. Intertextual connections with use of iconic photograph by Dorothea Lange.
Slavery	10-17 12-18	*Henry's Freedom Box* (Levine, 2007) This story is about a slave named Henry Box Brown who mailed himself to Philadelphia in a wooden box. The story tells of Henry's life as a child and how he was sold and separated from his mother, and later how his wife and children were sold away from him. In the end, with the help of a doctor (abolishionist), he mails himself to freedom.	Visual Design Elements: Mood, Motifs, and Historical Symbolic Images	Color brown on the endpages symbolized the box. Attended to birds, leaves, and box as symbols of freedom, and brick wall as a symbol of containment. Analyzed embedded historic image on the pitcher on last page spread. Analyzed the illustrations where Henry looked directly at the reader, demanding something (demand and offer). Named this *demand*. Compared it to *offer* when characters look at other characters or objects, thus removing the reader from the story.
Japanese American Internment	10-22	*The Bracelet* (Uchida, 1993) *The Bracelet* is about a little girl, Emi, who is Japanese American. The story begins on the eve of their relocation. Her neighbor friend, Laurie Madison, brings her a bracelet for her to take to camp. Emi is angered by the confusion and disloyalty her country is showing as her family is placed in an internment camp.	Visual Design Elements: Signifying Importance	Attended to placement of images to signify importance. Images of soldiers juxtaposed with suitcases and lines of people. Compared the placement of characters to each other. *Title page*—analyzed the cut-out image of a suitcase and how it symbolized how they could take only what they could carry. Analyzed the implications of this statement/action.
Japanese Internment	10-23	*A Place Where Sunflowers Grow* (Lee-Tai, 2006) Story of a young girl named Mari as she and her family are interned in the Topaz Internment Camp in the desert of Utah during WWII. The story follows Mari's journey as she leaves her home and all that she loves behind and enters the internment camp. Behind the barbed wires, with the help of the adults in the camp, she finds a piece of home in the sunflower she plants, her artwork, and her new friend.	Peritextual Resources Visual Design Elements: Symbolism	Analyzed cut-out images of cabins in peritext. Attended to the sunflowers as symbols of how characters coped with their situation and provided a place for hope.

Appendix B. Outline of Phase III: Small-group read-alouds and discussions points

Historical Era & Dates Read	Picturebook	Picturebook Summary	Example of Discussion Points
Civil War 10-24 10-25	*Pink and Say* (Pollaco, 1994)	This story is set during the Civil War and tells of an unlikely friendship between two young boys—Pinkus Aylee, a black Union soldier, and Sheldon Curtis, a poor white soldier. Pink rescues Say on the battlefield and brings him back to recuperate with his family. Say teaches Pink how to read. In the end, they are captured by marauders and taken to prison where Pink is hanged. Say lives and passes this story on to his family.	**Symbolism:** Glasses as motif became symbols of freedom.
Civil Rights 10-24 10-25	*A Sweet Smell of Roses* (Johnson, 2007)	This is a story about how two young girls sneak out of their house to march with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. They meet up with many men and women who are marching for freedom.	**Symbolism and Signifying Importance:** Use of graphite images with one image in red can signify importance. Ribbon on bear, flag, and roses are motifs and can suggest freedom, innocence, and hope.
The Holocaust 10-28 10-29 10-30	*Angel Girl* (Friedman, 2007)	This book is about the Holocaust and tells the story of how a girl notices a boy in a concentration camp and risks her life to save him by bringing him apples to eat. After time passes, they meet again and get married. This book has met with great controversy as the authors divulged that the events were not all true. The students and I read it as a piece of fiction because the events seemed exaggerated.	**Symbolism, Perspective, and Lighting:** Characters are given importance by placing them in the light and in the foreground. Birds as motif can suggest freedom, and boxcars and barbed wire as motif can suggest imprisonment and death.
The Holocaust 11-5 11-6 11-7	*Rose Blanche* (Innocenti, 1985)	This is a story about a young German girl who witnesses a young boy being taken away in her town during WWII. She follows the truck and learns that the boy was taken to a concentration camp. From this point, Rose takes food to camp until the war comes to her town, new soldiers arrive, and Rose is killed. This story is a metaphor for the Rose Blanche Resistance Group.	**Motif, Color, Symbolism, Perspective, Demand and Offer, and Framing:** The color red can symbolize importance, power, and knowledge. Character looks out at the reader, demanding a relationship and an understanding with the character. Tank breaks the frame to foreshadow and lead the reader.
Civil Rights 12-2 12-3	*Freedom on the Menu* (Weatherford, 2005)	This story is set in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960. Connie, a young girl, learns of her brother's friends' brave acts as they sat at the lunch counter when they were refused service. She also learns how this act was the beginning of change in their community.	**Artistic Style/Iconic Images:** Artistic style is more abstract (expressionism) and elicits emotion through the use of movement, color, and placement. Note the juxtaposition of little girl in her dress at the counter.