

# Realities of War

## Using Picture Books to Teach the Social Effects of Armed Conflicts

**Tadayuki Suzuki, Jeanine Huss, Barbara Fiehn, & Roxanne Myers Spencer**

### Introduction

Teachers regularly evaluate children's literature for literary quality and age-appropriate information. Today's picture books address issues such as world population, homelessness, climate change, and other socially important themes, but when faced with social studies lessons on sensitive topics such as war and its reality, elementary teachers may hesitate when faced with realism in text and images.

School librarians provide excellent opportunities for teachers to collaborate in the selection of suitable titles which will maximize student learning and understanding, especially when reading about sensitive or controversial topics. Our research leads us to believe that well-written literature on stressful topics helps children in a variety of ways (Bargiel et al, 1997; Bowen & Schutt, 2007).

A strong social studies program provides students opportunities to explore similarities and differences within varied cultural contexts. Elisabeth Strehle (1999) tells us younger children begin to understand their own cultures first through their own experiences, then expand to encompass their families, friends, school, and the larger community (p. 214). Placing the right books at the right time in children's

hands can make an important impact in developing children's worldview.

For example, students may have family members serving in the military; others may be refugees in the United States due to conflict in their home countries. To help teachers respond to the variety of their students' backgrounds and experiences, culturally responsive teaching plays an important role. Geneva Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching "as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 31). Culturally responsive teaching practices, irrespective of students' ethnicity, religion, gender, or race, apply to all academic subjects and instructional settings. The fundamental purpose is to bridge gaps that exist between home and school cultures.

In this article, we review a variety of picture books that look at the realities of war from several periods in recent history and from several perspectives:

- ◆ protection of innocence
- ◆ Japanese experiences in World War II
- ◆ experiences of the Holocaust
- ◆ costs of war
- ◆ resiliency

In this brief exploration, we discuss titles that will engage student attention, provide room for discussion, and address serious issues in ways that children can comprehend. We address considerations in title selection, classroom use, and Common Core Anchor Standards connections (see Table 1).

### Protection of Innocence

Children are frequently protected from life's realities by adults (Sandmann, 1997). Many picture books provide a sanitized

portrayal of war, emphasizing patriotism and downplaying reality.

An example of an unrealistic portrayal of war is *Army: Civilian to Soldier* by Meish Goldish, which follows 17-year-old Ian through boot camp. The layout is well-balanced between photos and text. This book will be enjoyed by elementary students, but it lacks the exhaustion, grime, and sweat experienced by recruits.

Similarly designed is Dorothy Hinshaw Patent's book *Dogs on Duty: Soldiers' Best Friends on the Battlefield and Beyond*. Photographs and an overview of history, training, and working in the field are used in the text, but again, none of the grit of battle is visible. Nor is there mention of dogs that died or were left behind when troops departed (Burnham, 2003). Both books, while factual, present a sanitized image of the realities of war.

There are many books about war and families which vary in quality and portrayal of reality. David Adler wrote about a real event, the two-year separation of four-year-old Lore from her parents in *Hiding from the Nazis*. Lore was protected and hidden from Nazi raids by a Dutch farm family. The book ends with Lore and her family happily reunited. While the illustrations elicit feelings of fear, the text lacks the depth to express the trauma suffered by Jewish parents and children. Teachers should explain that many children and families did not survive the Holocaust.

The late Walter Dean Myers produced a challenging book for teaching about war in the visually complex *Patrol: An American Soldier in Vietnam*, illustrated by Ann Grifalconi. The text is in verse and presents an emotional first-person narrative of war. Mixed-media illustrations support and extend the text but may need interpretation and study. Nothing is as simple as the casual glance would suggest: Will students make the connection between the war plane and the shark's shadow across a valley? Will they see the village burning

---

*Tadayuki Suzuki is an associate professor in the Literacy Department at the State University of New York at Cortland, Cortland, New York. Jeanine Huss and Barbara Fiehn are associate professors in the School of Teacher Education and Roxanne Myers Spencer is an associate professor and coordinator of the Educational Resources Center, all three with the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences at Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky.*

in the distance, as a patrol climbs a hill on which rice grows and villagers work?

Teachers can work with school librarians to incorporate visual and information literacy skills into lessons to add depth to student exploration and discussion of the realities of war. While the protection of innocence is a consideration for young children, it should not override the use of quality picture books.

### Japanese Experiences of World War II

This section focuses on Japanese and Japanese-American picture books related to war.

As a way to protect young students, elementary teachers may avoid reading stories with sad endings. Well-known and often read by Japanese students, Yukio Tsuchiya's *Faithful Elephants: A True Story of Animals, People, and War*, may be challenging for young readers in the United States. As World War II intensified,

zookeepers at Ueno Zoo in Tokyo were instructed to euthanize all large, dangerous animals. Repeated attempts to euthanize three Indian elephants failed, so the zookeepers reluctantly decided to starve them to death. The story and illustrations are moving and tragic. *Faithful Elephants* provides an opening for classroom discussion of why zoo animals may be in danger during war. Classroom or school libraries may include books with similar themes, such as *Babylon's Ark: The Incredible Wartime Rescue of the Baghdad Zoo*, which occurs during the Iraq War, and *An Elephant in the Garden*, set in the Dresden Zoo in World War II.

The experience of Japanese-Americans in U.S. internment camps during World War II is a common setting used by Japanese-American authors. Mari, in Amy Lee-Tai's *A Place Where Sunflowers Grow*, lived "in a horse stall that smelled of manure" (Lee-Tai, 2006) at an internment camp in Tanforan, California. From the illustrations, however, the camp in general

looks quite sterile. When Mari asks her father why they have to stay in the camp, he responds with the figurative example, "Spring comes after winter, and flowers bloom again. Peace comes after war. Try not to worry, Mari-chan" (Lee-Tai, 2006). This passage provides an opportunity for culturally responsive teaching, discussions on cultural differences, and the author's use of metaphor and simile.

In *So Far from the Sea* by Eve Bunting, Laurie Iwasaki and her family visit Grandfather's grave, located near the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Although Grandfather was a loyal U.S. citizen, he and his family were placed in an internment camp in Manzanar, California. Flashbacks contrast Laurie's feelings in the present with her grandfather's experiences in the camp. Two different narratives and settings in the story allow readers to compare and contrast text and illustrations, allowing students to gain more insight into the past.

The selection and instructional use of picture books varies depending on culture

**TABLE I**  
 English Language Arts Standards: Anchor Standards: College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading  
<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/R/>

English Language Arts Standards: Anchor Standards: College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading	Protection of Innocence	Japanese Experiences of World War II	Memories of the Holocaust	Costs of War	Resiliency
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.				×	×
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.				×	
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3: Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.			×		
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5: Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.		×			
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.			×	×	
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.	×		×	×	×
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.			×	×	×

and country. The titles discussed here are among many examples of quality picture books about the effects of war on Japanese and Japanese-American cultures. Such well-crafted books enhance classroom discussions about the impact of war on different cultures.

### Memories of the Holocaust

Another perspective on World War II focuses on explaining the Holocaust to children in earlier grades. It is helpful to introduce a variety of picture books to students who may have no knowledge of the Holocaust. Lisa Silverman's bibliography (2009) is a useful tool for selecting age-appropriate titles. Discussed below are a few books providing children with a gentle introduction.

In Marisabina Russo's *Always Remember Me: How One Family Survived World War II*, young Rachel loves Sunday dinners, when her grandmother, Oma, shows her the family photo albums. Rachel has not seen one album section, which begins this Holocaust memoir of a Jewish family separated and interned in concentration camps. An heirloom necklace with a gold heart threads through the story as a beloved talisman. Illustrations of documents and family portraits provide a realistic reminder of the tragedies of war. Fortunately, most of Oma's family survives and is reunited, but the story echoes the loss of so many other families.

A familiar token of childhood is the main character in Tomi Ungerer's unusual story, *Otto: The Autobiography of a Teddy Bear*. Otto is the beloved toy of a young Jewish boy, David. When the Gestapo rounds up Jewish families, David gives Otto to Oskar, his best friend. This begins Otto's journey, which many years later lands him, battered and torn, in an antiques shop. Otto is restored and placed in the store window. Eventually an old man recognizes Otto by a distinctive ink blot on his head and takes Otto home. The device of a familiar childhood object is contrasted against the setting of war and destruction, ultimately representing a return to stability, continuity, and friendship.

The stark, crooked collages from illustrator Josée Bisailon provide a compelling backdrop to *Benno and the Night of Broken Glass* by Meg Wiviott. This story is told from the perspective of a neighborhood cat, Benno, who lives in Berlin. Benno happily visits all the local tenants and businesses. Then the arrival of Nazi soldiers begins to erode the friendliness and generosity of

neighbors. Benno observes the escalated tension, when attacks are made on some people and businesses, but not on others. Wiviott implies the differences between Jews and Gentiles, but to a cat, these distinctions do not exist. This subtle but powerful device provides opportunities for introducing the differences in the backgrounds of those who were and who were not persecuted.

These books present touching Holocaust stories with facts and concepts that young readers can grasp and grapple with, without being too grimly realistic.

### Costs of War

William Kreidler (1990) suggests making the classroom a safe place for children to ask questions and to lead discussions. Reading and discussing books on serious issues helps children think about the feelings the text and images evoke. The following stories show the costs of war and consequent effects on children, families, and society.

J. Patrick Lewis' *And the Soldiers Sang* opens with soldiers naively going to war, lacking an understanding of the realities of battle. The illustrations become more somber as the story unfolds: soldiers endure harsh weather and hide in trenches. On Christmas Eve, 1914, British soldier Owen Davies hears a German soldier begin to sing *Stille Nacht (Silent Night)*. Davies responds by singing *The First Noel*, which brings about an unprecedented Christmas Day truce. Davies' journal, found after he is killed, includes this story, which helps children realize death is a reality of war.

Visually compelling and deceptively innocent imagery complements the poetic verse in Alice Walker's *Why War Is Never a Good Idea*. The illustrations become progressively more graphic: One image is a monster composed of melted toy soldiers, another shows how mothers and children become victims in war, and a third depicts destruction of ancient art and statues. This book shows children how deceptive war can be, with seemingly innocuous scenes transformed by the ugliness and violence of battle.

It is important to select books that do not misrepresent the realities and costs of war to soldiers and their families. The hardships of war are personal and global. Acknowledging students' personal experiences with war and their questions about personal losses enhance cultural literacy. These books show somewhat removed

experiences of war, but provide a glimpse into the hardships of conflict.

### Resiliency

Hope after conflict shows the futility of war and demonstrates humanity's resilience. Teachers may focus lessons on books that portray rebuilding after war, encouraging discussion and providing reassurance to young children (Kreidler, 1990). These books about war can be used to incorporate visual literacy skills and music appreciation, as addressed below. They demonstrate to children that adults are concerned about issues of war and are trying to resolve these conflicts.

Eve Bunting's *Gleam and Glow* is set in war-torn Bosnia-Herzegovina. Young Viktor and his sister Marina are given two goldfish, Gleam and Glow, to care for by a neighbor fleeing the war. The children leave the goldfish in a pond near their home when their family become refugees. Eventually their family return to their village to find their home burned to the ground, but Gleam and Glow and their offspring survive. This book shows the harsh realities of war while offering hope and appreciation of the familiar.

*The Cello of Mr. O* by Jane Cutler offers the inspiration of music. In a war-torn city, neighborhood girls tease Mr. O, who plays Bach on his cello daily at four o'clock. When the local food truck is bombed, Mr. O moves outside and continues to play, until his cello is blasted by incoming fire. The neighborhood girls, who now appreciate the music, are afraid he will stop playing, but Mr. O brings out a harmonica the next day and continues playing Bach. This story portrays an embattled neighborhood's experience of music, which helps people forget, momentarily, the losses of war.

As refugees of war, children are deeply affected by their experiences, as depicted in *The Color of Home* by Mary Hoffman. The book's vibrant illustrations represent the bloodshed and violence experienced by Hassan, a young refugee from war-torn Somalia. A compassionate teacher helps Hassan learn to cope with his troubled past, and he begins painting happier pictures of his new home. This book shows how war affects all family members, even young children.

William Kreidler (1990) tells us we should reassure children by sharing a variety of books with clear messages, encouraging questions to foster critical thinking, and placing the discussions of war in the larger context of resiliency.

## Summary

While many adults instinctively wish to shelter children from the harsh realities of life, our research confirmed our belief that realistically written literature on difficult topics helps children. Discussed here are considerations for selecting quality, age-appropriate titles that address the realities of war in a variety of cultural settings. We examined the complexity of text and illustrations. We included books that demonstrate the costs of war as well as resiliency and hope. Our connections to the Common Core College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards (see Table 1) indicate how picture books about war are vehicles for addressing standards-based learning.

We incorporated culturally responsive teaching as an appropriate framework for approaching the study of war. The framework is age- and grade-appropriate at all levels; it acknowledges and validates

students' backgrounds and experiences and requires student engagement and interactions. Culturally responsive teaching accommodates all learning styles and strengthens communication within the classroom.

We conclude with a graphic organizer that provides teachers one way of examining the books discussed here and will work equally well with other selections (see Table 2 on next page). Teachers can adapt the graphic organizer to meet the needs of their students, remembering to encourage student-led discussion.

## References

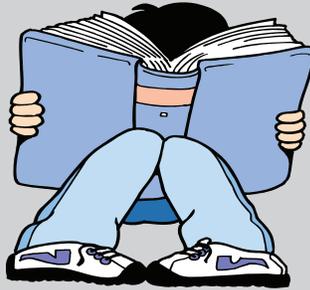
- Bargiel, S., Beck, C., Koblitz, D., O'Connor, A., Pierce, K. M., & Wolf, S. (1997, January). Talking about books: Bringing life's issues into classrooms. *Language Arts*, 74(6), 482-490.
- Bowen, D. N., & Schutt, M. (Winter 2007). Addressing sensitive issues through picture books. *Kentucky Libraries* 71(1), 4-7.
- Burnam, J. C. (2003). *A soldier's best friend: Scout dogs and their handlers in the Vietnam War*. New York: Carroll & Graf.
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kreidler, W. (1990). *Elementary perspectives: Teaching concepts of peace and conflict*. Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility.
- Lee-Tai, A. (2006). *A place where sunflowers grow* [bilingual ed.]. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Sandmann, A. (Summer 1997). Multiculturalism and *My two uncles*: Promoting understanding. *OCSS Review*, 33(1), 22-30.
- Silverman, L. (2009). Teaching the Holocaust through picture books. In *Proceedings of the 44th Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries* (Chicago, July 5-8, 2009). To be found at <http://databases.jewishlibraries.org/node/17751>
- Strehle, E. (1999). Social issues: Connecting children to their world. *Children's Literature in Education*, 30(3), 213-220.

## CHILDREN'S LITERATURE BIBLIOGRAPHY

- David A. Adler. *Hiding from the Nazis*. New York: Holiday House, 1997.
- Lawrence Anthony & Graham Spence. *Babylon's Ark: The Incredible Wartime Rescue of the Baghdad Zoo*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2008.
- Eve Bunting. *Gleam and Glow*. New York: Harcourt, 2001.
- Eve Bunting. *So Far from the Sea*. New York: HMH Books for Young Readers, 2009.
- Jane Cutler. *The Cello of Mr. O*. New York: Dutton Children's Books, 1999.
- Meish Goldish. *Army: Civilian to Soldier*. New York: Bearport Publishing, 2011.
- Mary Hoffman. *The Color of Home*. New York: Phyllis Fogelman Books, 2002.
- Deborah Hopkinson. *Knit Your Bit*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2013.
- Amy Lee-Tai. *A Place Where Sunflowers Grow* [bilingual ed.]. San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 2006.
- J. Patrick Lewis. *And the Soldiers Sang*. Mankato, MN: Creative Editions, 2011.
- Michael Morpurgo. *An Elephant in the Garden*. New York: Feiwel and Friends, 2011.
- Walter Dean Myers. *Patrol: An American Soldier in Vietnam*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- Dorothy Hinshaw Patent. *Dogs on Duty: Soldiers' Best Friends on the Battlefield and Beyond*. New York: Walker & Company, 2012.
- Marisabina Russo. *Always Remember Me: How One Family Survived World War II*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2005.
- Tomi Ungerer. *Otto: The Autobiography of a Teddy Bear*. New York: Phaidon Press, 2010.
- Yukio Tsuchiya & Ted Lewin. *Faithful Elephants: A True Story of Animals, People and War*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
- Meg Wiviott. *Benno and the Night of Broken Glass*. Minneapolis, MN: Kar-Ben Publishing Group, 2010.

**TABLE 2**

*Graphic Organizer for Exploring Picture Books about War*



Title of the Book: \_\_\_\_\_

Things I recognize...	This book makes me feel...	The characters feel...
I want to talk about...	The pictures tell me...	I learned...

Name: \_\_\_\_\_