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SILENT BOOKS

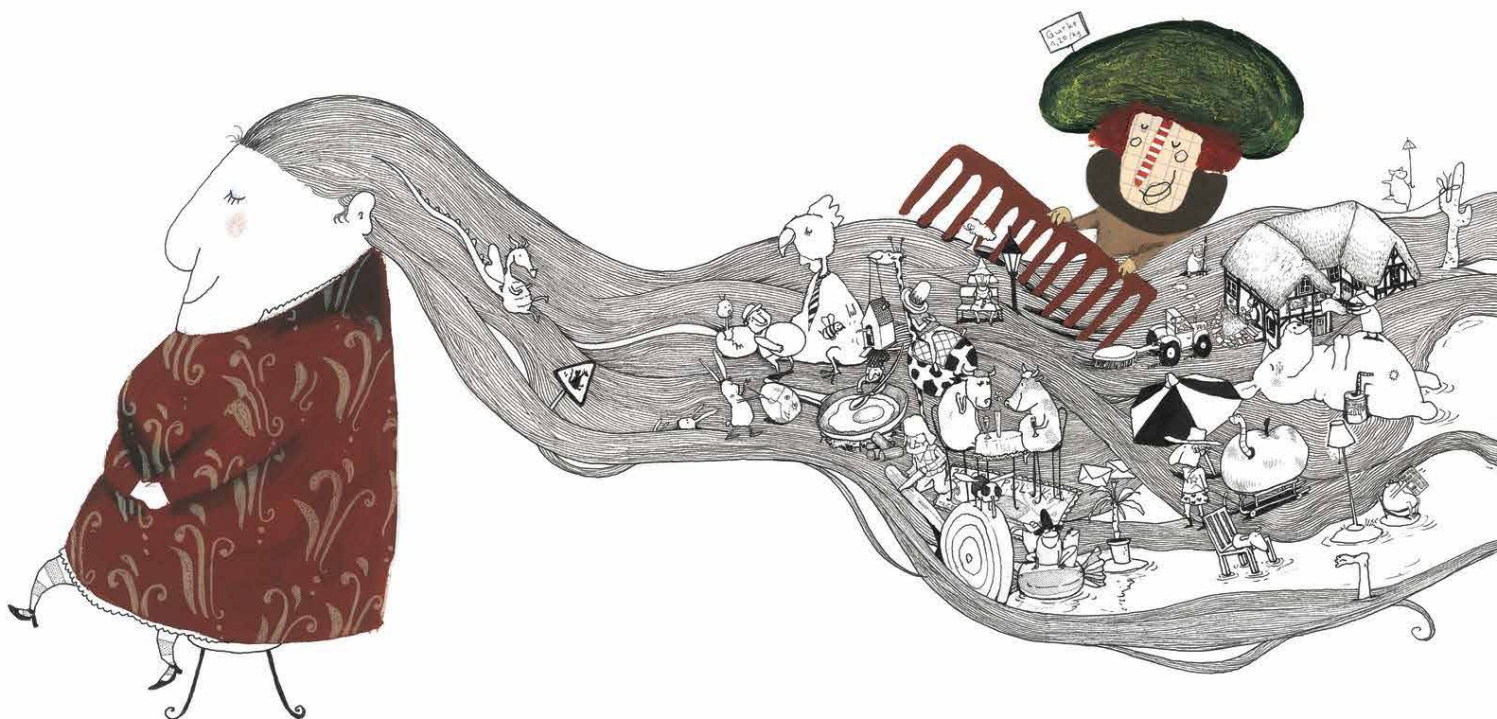
An invitation to shared reading



Reading picture books as an adventure

With careful and creative pedagogical preparation, shared reading in a classroom or a preschool group can become a highly stimulating event comparable to other group cultural activities. A picture book read aloud by an educator while showing illustrations, with children listening attentively, can thus be perceived as a kind of map taking the group on a reading journey from the first to the last page. It neither dictates to readers-travellers the rhythm of reading nor does it show a single reading direction. It lets them travel through the book at will, straying en route, turning back if necessary or ending the journey at any point. All they are given are hints where it would be good to stop and rest for a while, to talk about what has been read, where the going might get tougher and therefore slower, and where – as if after a steep climb – it is worth sitting down and enjoying the view, the beautiful illustrations and exciting twists in the story being the reward for the path travelled. A reading journey through a picture book can be repeated time and again, with many possible destinations and attention to different details. If at the end, upon turning the last page together with the children, we feel enriched by the pleasant experience, the reading journey was successful.

In fact, creative shared reading is an exploration of the possible ways to read a given book, of its content, of the details most stimulating our imagination. As every book is special and different, methods of group reading must be designed or at least adapted for every single one. And in searching for these methods, children can be excellent partners. So, as readers and as teachers, we explore with children the various dimensions of picture books.



Michael Roher, *Fridolin Franse frisiert*

Admittedly, such an approach to reading makes it necessary for the book selected to spend a prolonged time in a classroom or group. To keep our minds busy for much longer than the actual reading takes. To establish connections between the illustrations, topics and other aspects with our regular teaching activities. For the children to spontaneously use details from the story in their games. To transpose some of the sentences or words into our everyday mutual communication. The characters might leave the world between the covers and – as ideas, thoughts and images – become intertwined with our world, thus enriching our lives and learning processes. Among other things, it is this fluidity of ideas and overlaps between both worlds – the literary and the real – that makes reading so enchanting.

Educators have a wide choice of materials available for use in classrooms or preschool groups, but wordless picture books or silent books, as they are often called, are quite specific. Illustrations are thus the only thing that has a say in these books, and they speak all the languages in the world and can easily cross national borders.

However, by no means do silent books require silent reading or reading in silence. Rather the contrary: they invite readers to speak up and find the words not yet contained in the book.

All that silent books do is offer possibilities, opening up paths to different ways of understanding. This is why they invite shared exploration of the content and shared narration. Silent books are actually quite loud, overflowing with possible stories to be weaved by the children.

If we want to hear their stories, they must become the main readers, and we – educators – their mere assistants. We will helpfully suggest the right words when needed, encourage the young storytellers with questions or draw their attention to this or that detail. With the help of silent books, children can become readers before they learn the alphabet and thus enter the written culture. In addition, children grow out of silent books later than out of picture books as their content can grow with them, so to speak. The stories children tell while looking at the same illustrations change as they grow older, and become more elaborate and complex.

Thanks to their open possibilities of interpretation and a variety of uses, silent books can be valuable tools in the teaching process both in preschool and primary school.

Let's read a silent book

When illustrations alone tell a story, verbal interpretation has yet to happen. Illustrations with their colours, motifs and images hint at the story their creator meant to tell, but readers are co-authors who must figure it out and turn it into words. Readers thus look for the key to unlock the author's work, trying to identify with the images suggested and characters drawn. They are invited to give the characters and images their voices, emotions, ideas and, of course, words. By looking at the images, they try to see the connecting elements, make deductions, summarise, put things into a wider context and question possible meanings. All these are the processes necessary for effective communication.

Through this specific reading technique, young and adult readers can explore the limits of their vocabulary. When children attempt to describe images in their own words, they develop and strengthen their ability of creative narration.

Furthermore, reading wordless books has shown to be a perfect starting point for developing empathy in young readers. When they “read” a particular book alone and later share their understanding with classmates and friends, they enter into dialogue, compare their views and observe how a story changes during shared reading. A story thus becomes a living organism belonging to all and allowing for numerous but equally valid interpretations.

Reader – a traveller through mysterious worlds

Some silent books in the proposed selection literally invite readers on a journey. Every time they turn a page, they find themselves in a new landscape, a new wonderland, a new, yet unexplored part of a city. We can view some pages together with the children for a long time and repeatedly, and yet we might time and again be surprised by details previously unnoticed. Through these landscapes, we can travel with fingers and eyes, and also with words. We can give names to the lands, imagine what it would be like if we went there, how we would feel and what we would do. Journeys into imaginary worlds offer innumerable possibilities, and like many authors throughout the history of literature who invented their own wonderlands, we can draw our own and put it into words. Thus, we might create a new silent book with marvellous landscapes conceived in the children’s imagination.



Bente Olesen Nyström: Hr.Alting

Storytelling with silent books

When illustrations in a book are verbally connected into a rounded whole, a story emerges.

Children are excellent storytellers if given the right space, enough time and affectionate attention. As numerous studies have shown, encouraging storytelling in children has a long-term positive influence on the development of speech and later literacy and reading culture, meaning that it most favourably affects their overall future academic achievement. Silent books are thus excellent tools for stimulating storytelling as they open many doors through which children can enter into an improvised story.

The first step, however, is an attempt to put into words the story envisioned by the illustrator, but beyond that, there is ample space for new, yet untold stories. Children-narrators can invent dialogues and characters' backgrounds, and explain how the characters feel, what they want and what they think about. Why should the hero of a picture book be the hero of the story? Children-narrators can select a side character as their hero and tell their story, or they can tell a story of the hero not rendered in the illustrations. Rich full-page illustrations provide enough material for independent narrative improvisation.