

Reading Is Thinking, Part I

Modeling Comprehension Strategies with Picture Books

Help struggling readers learn to question text and make connections with these thought-provoking picture books. **By Monika Schröder**

When we read, a lot is going on in our heads. We mentally interact with the text, making connections to previous knowledge and experiences, including other books, to help with our comprehension of what we read. We draw inferences, combining this background knowledge and textual information to draw conclusions and interpret facts. We create mental images and synthesize information. We ask questions and wonder about the book before, during, and after reading. These mental activities, also called reading strategies, help us to make sense of what we read.

Proficient readers utilize all or most of these strategies automatically. But young readers, particularly those who struggle with making sense of the text, benefit from learning to pay attention to what good readers do naturally. Research has confirmed that metacognitive awareness—being able to name and discern these reading skills—helps reading comprehension.

As a school librarian, I make my students aware of my invisible dialogue with the text through “think alouds.” While I am reading a book to a class, I stop and talk about what is going on in my head. I note questions and comments on sticky notes or on the whiteboard and invite students to follow my example in their note-

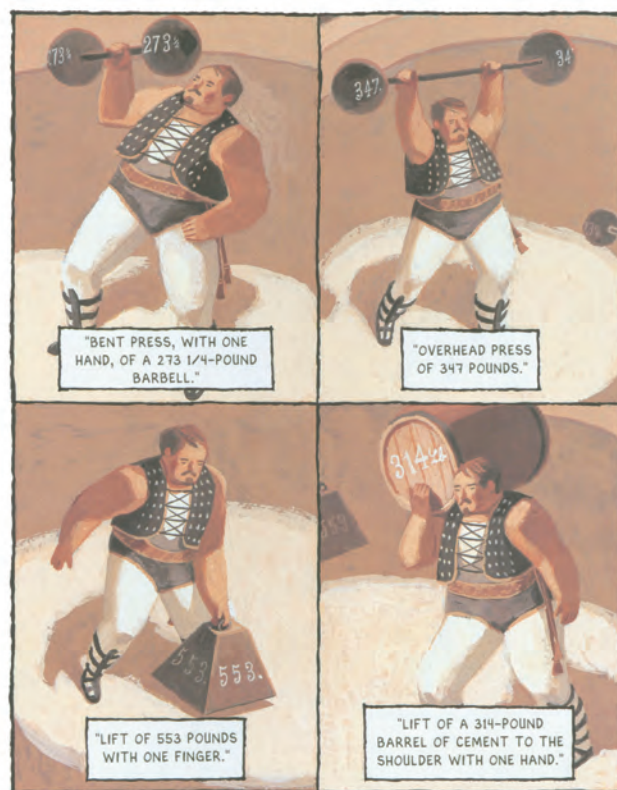
books. For my struggling readers, I find that picture books are the perfect tool to use in modeling different strategies, since they provide a short text that can be used in a minilesson.

In the first of two articles, I will share several picture books that can be used to model and practice reading comprehension strategies with students. This first article will focus on books that can help to model the questioning of text and making connections. The next installment will focus on books that can help teachers demonstrate visualizing, synthesizing, and inferring.

Questioning the Text

Good readers ask themselves questions all the time as they read. Some questions can be answered by re-reading and may require the use of a dictionary. Other questions lead to a discussion about different interpretations

of a character's actions or motivations. When I read a story aloud I ask students to note their questions. Discussing and comparing them as a class provides a good opportunity for teachers to divide questions into groups (questions before, during, and after reading), and to sort them by “weight,” from “light” literal questions to “heavier” questions that require



reading between the lines. Students often try to get away with superficial questions, so choosing a text that offers more food for thought is crucial. The books below do just that.

Roanoke: The Lost Colony: An Unsolved Mystery from History. By Jane Yolen and Heidi Elisabet Yolen Stemple. Illus. by Roger Roth. 2003. 32p. Simon & Schuster, \$17.99 (9780689823213).

Gr. 2–5. Framed by the fictional story of a detective's daughter who tries to solve a historical mystery, this picture book gives an account of the English colonists who came to Roanoke Island in 1587 and then disappeared without a trace. The page design includes key words defined on Post-It notes as well as background information in text boxes that resemble notebook pages. These features support teachers' efforts to model their own

note-taking while reading the book. The mysterious disappearance of the settlers leaves lots of room for speculation. Were the settlers murdered by Native people? Why was the word *Croatoan* carved into one of the fort's posts? The authors present five possible answers to the mystery. Read this book multiple times and, along with students, look for clues that support each hypothesis. This book will stir up a lively discussion in the classroom.

When I Met the Wolf Girls. By Deborah Noyes. Illus. by August Hall. 2007. 40p. Houghton, \$17 (9780618605675).

Gr. 2–5. Based on a true story, Noyes' book tells of two feral children, Amala and Kamala, who in the 1920s were brought to an Indian orphanage after a missionary found them living in the jungle with a wolf mother. A look at the cover will provoke the first

question: Who are the Wolf Girls? Read up to the description of how "they ate licking the plate like dogs and tore at their clothing. Pacing all night, they plagued our dreams." Stop here and model your own thoughts: What was it like for the other orphans to see these two wild children? How did Amala and Kamala feel? Stop again when the orphans watch the fireworks and invite students to share their thoughts. The author's note includes historical background and more intriguing details about the feral children, such as their ability to smell raw meat from far away.

Making Connections

Connecting what we read to what we already know is one of the foundations of comprehension. Just like questioning, making connections needs to be modeled so that young readers learn to identify and discuss them. Below you will find suggestions for modeling text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections.

Text-to-Text Connections

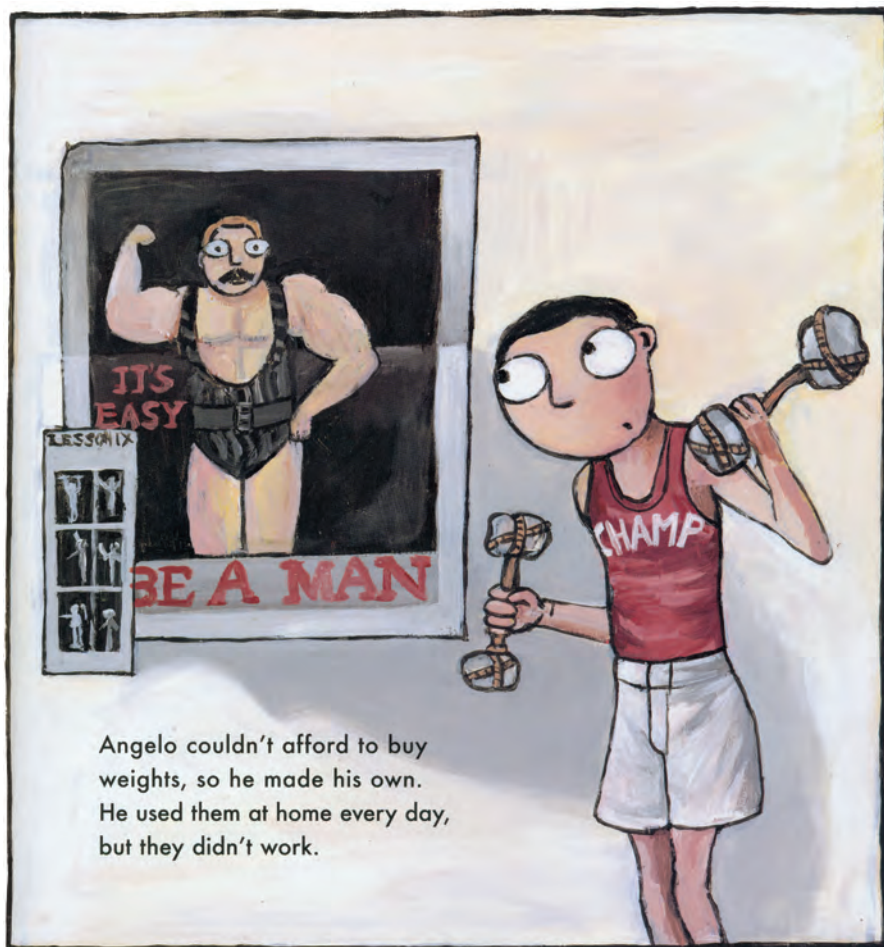
Text-to-text connections can be made between books about a similar topic, books by the same author, or books with the same theme. Finding connections and similarities between two stories leads to deeper understanding and appreciation.

The Story of Charles Atlas: Strong Man. By Meghan McCarthy. 2007. 32p. Knopf, \$15.99 (9780375829406).

The Strongest Man in the World: Louis Cyr. By Nicolas Debon. 2007. 36p. Groundwood, \$17.95 (9780888997319).

Gr. 3–6. These picture books are

Text-to-text connections can be made between Meghan McCarthy's *The Story of Charles Atlas* and Nicolas Debon's *The Strongest Man in the World* (opposite).



Professional Connections

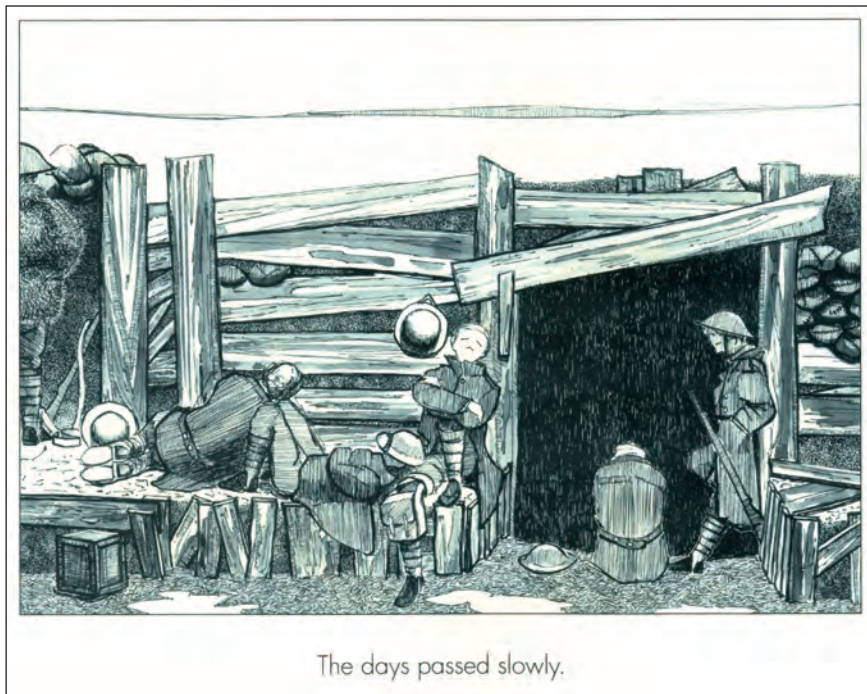
- **Collaborative Strategies for Teaching Reading Comprehension: Maximizing Your Impact.** By Judi Moreillon. 2007. 170p. ALA Editions, paper, \$38 (9780838909294).

Moreillon's book offers collaborative teaching strategies for teachers and librarians to improve reading comprehension of students with different abilities. Includes lesson plans, list of resources, and links to additional material on the American Library Association Web site.

- **Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement.** By Stephanie Harvey and Ann Goudvis. 2000; reissued 2007. 360p. Stenhouse, paper, \$30 (9781571104816).

This revised edition of the classic resource for teachers who want to teach thinking strategies and help students become engaged and successful readers includes new comprehension lessons and book lists and extends its scope to content literacy.

both about men who were famous for their physical strength. Charles Atlas founded the Dynamic Tension program and became an early guru for physical fitness, while Louis Cyr was Champion Strongman of the World in the nineteenth century and rose to fame for lifting massive rocks, a draft horse, and even a platform holding 18 audience volunteers. In the classroom, read both books together and make a chart with comparisons. The characters' similarities and differences as well as their motivations and the manifestations of their successes can be discussed. Each book has interesting illustrations that support the text. Debon depicts Cyr's story in a comic format, while McCarthy uses big-eyed figures and bold colors in her artwork. Some readers might even make a text-to-world connection with contemporary "strong man competitions" on TV.



Timothy Decker's *The Letter Home* will spark connections between readers and the topic of war.

Music for the End of Time. By Jen Bryant. Illus. by Beth Peck. 2005. 32p. Eerdmans, \$17 (9780802852298).

A Song for Cambodia. By Michelle Lord. Illus. by Shino Arihara. 2008. 32p. Lee & Low, \$16.95 (9781600601392).

Gr. 3–6. These two picture-book biographies, inspired by true events, are connected by a common theme—the power of music and the triumph over suffering. *Music for the End of Time* tells the story of French composer Oliver Messiaen, who wrote and performed while a prisoner in a German POW camp during World War II. *A Song for Cambodia* introduces Arn Chorn-Pond, who was taken to a work camp in 1975 after the Khmer Rouge attacked his village. There he volunteered to learn the *khim*, a traditional Cambodian instrument. To fully understand the stories students might require some background information about their historical settings. Learning about the history might enable students to make text-to-world connections as well.

Text-to-Self Connections

Text-to-self connections can be modeled using stories based on memoirs or with narratives that depict behaviors or problems that remind readers of their own situations. When book characters have experiences or feelings that are similar to ours, we sympathize, which leads to deeper understanding.

Don't Let the Peas Touch! And Other Stories. By Deborah Blumenthal. Illus. by Timothy Basil Ering. 2004. 48p. Scholastic/Arthur A. Levine, \$15.95 (9780439297325).

Gr. 2–5. Three short stories describe how Annie and Sophie, two sisters who couldn't be more different, negotiate eating habits, quiet time, and pets. In the first story, preschooler Sophie, a very picky eater, demands that the peas be kept separate from the other food on her plate. The next story depicts what happens when Annie tries to read while Sophie wants to play. Students won't have any problem relating their own eating habits or their experiences with annoying younger siblings to those of the sisters.

How to Make Friends with a Giant. By Gennifer Choldenko. Illus. by Amy Walrod. 2006. 32p. Putnam, \$16.99 (9780399237799).

Gr. 2–5. Giacomo, the new kid, is tall—very tall. The kids in his first-grade class tease him about his height, but Jake, the shortest kid, takes a liking to Giacomo and helps him fit in. I model my own connection to this book by telling students that I was always the tallest girl in class and measured over six feet when I was 14 years old. I also was lucky enough to meet a friend like Jake. Students will be able to relate to not fitting in, even if it isn't height that sets them apart.

Saturdays and Teacakes. By Lester L. Laminack. Illus. by Chris Soentpiet. 2004. 32p. Peachtree, \$16.95 (9781561453030).

Gr. 2–5. In this memoir based on the author's childhood in Alabama during the 1960s, a young boy remembers his Saturdays at his grandmother's house, where the two worked together in the garden and made delicious teacakes. After sharing the story and illustrations, which are reminiscent of Norman Rockwell's work, describe your own memories about grandparents and food to model the connections, and students will be able to follow your example easily.

Scaredy Squirrel. By Mélanie Watt. 2006. 40p. Kids Can, \$14.95 (9781553379591); paper, \$7.95 (9781554530236).


Gr. 3–6. Scaredy Squirrel is a creature of habit and full of obsessive-compulsive worries. He doesn't like to leave his tree and has even drafted an emergency plan for any disaster that might strike. When a killer bee attacks, Scaredy Squirrel falls out of the tree and, to his surprise, learns that he is actually a flying squirrel. The message—that if you break out of your routine you might learn something new about yourself—provides a good opportunity to show readers how we relate our personal experiences to books.

Text-to-World Connections

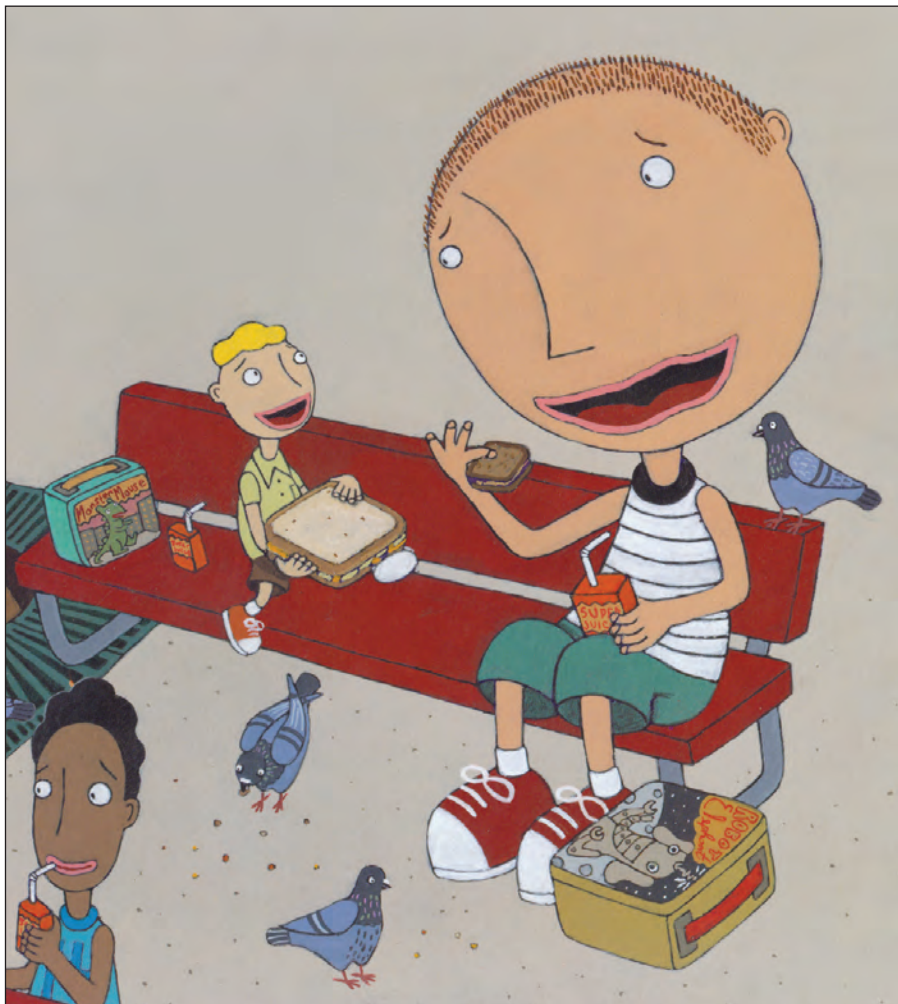
The Letter Home. By Timothy Decker. 2005. 32p. Front Street, \$16.95 (9781932425505).

Gr. 5–8. Read this picture book slowly and make sure students see the drawings that illustrate this stark fable about the horrors of war. A father is writing a letter to his son, describing his experiences as a medic during World War I. I model a text-to-world connection by talking about my grandfather's letters from Russia during World War II. You might have students who have received correspondence from someone fighting in the Iraq War, but other connections between readers and war might also surface during the classroom discussion.

Selvakumar Knew Better. By Virginia Kroll. Illus. by Xiaojun Li. 2006. 32p. Shen's, \$17.95 (9781885008299).

K–Gr. 3. When a tsunami rolls toward his family's village in southern India, seven-year-old Dinakaran hopes to find shelter in his house by the shore. Just before the wave hits the beach the family's dog, Selvakumar, nudges and drags the boy to higher ground and saves his life. Read this story based on true events in one sitting and model the text-to-world connection by talking about your reaction to the dramatic images of the 2004 tsunami on the news. 

Monika Schröder is the elementary-school librarian at the American Embassy School in New Delhi, India.



Readers can make text-to-self connections with Gennifer Choldenko's *How to Make Friends with a Giant*, illustrated by Amy Walrod.