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Picture Books Teach Empathy and Much More

By Sheryl Lain

Mrs. Fox asked me to read aloud to her class of third graders. The bell rang, and a tough little towhead roared into the room. Under her breath, the teacher said, "There's Carla," as if the girl's name portended more significance than Mrs. Fox had time to explain. Carla's hair was sweaty, and her deep scowl signified frustration. Maybe during recess she'd tangled with some boys over the football. (Note: all students' names used are pseudonyms).

The teacher arranged the students on the floor around me as I perched on the edge of the rocking chair in the corner of the room. In my hand, I held a tender picture book, *Amelia's Road* (Altman, 1993), a story about the daughter of itinerant farm laborers. Amelia Luis Martinez and her family will soon hit the road again, chasing sugar beets to weed and apples to pick. She doesn't have a place where she belongs until she finds a tall, friendly tree and buries her little shoe box of precious mementos in its shade. She makes herself a home.

I read the book aloud, and after I turned the last page, I glanced at Carla. I caught her surreptitiously flinging tears off her cheeks. This picture book strummed a cord in Carla's heart and broke through her tough exterior. Hers were tears of empathy.

Such is the power of the picture book, a rich resource for teachers from primary grades through high school. Beautifully illustrated and carefully crafted, *Amelia's Road* and other picture books teach the craft of writing and empathy with their messages of love, kindness, tolerance, and forgiveness. (Table 1 lists some especially powerful picture books with the theme of empathy, promoting character development and civil behavior.)

What Is Empathy Really, and Why Does Teaching It Matter?

Merely reading literature promotes feelings of empathy (Kaplan, 2016), but classroom teachers can teach empathy even more effectively if they understand it and realize its importance in our classrooms, schools and society. Empathy means walking a mile in someone else's moccasins, to paraphrase a Native American proverb, or, in the words of Harper Lee (1962), "You never really understand a person until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."

Empathy is not sympathy, which is more abstract and passive, even a bit condescending. Rather, empathy is personal and active; it means living another person's experience whether we meet the other face-to-face or get to know and care about characters through reading literary fiction (Burton). Empathy is personal. As Steinbeck says, "It means very little to know that a million Chinese are starving unless you know one Chinese who is starving." This personal reaction, can lead to compassion, which elevates emotion to the universal and transcendent (Burton).

Scholars say that students are hard-wired genetically to cooperate, a precursor to feeling empathy. According to evolutionary biologists and developmental learning theorists, babies as young as a year old have a tendency to help others (Hammond, 2014). Such research claims, moreover, that cooperating, a precursor to empathizing, is necessary for human survival.

Indeed, feeling empathy for others is crucial if we are to learn together in a civil classroom. As Carl Rogers, renowned psychologist and researcher, says, a high degree of empathy is possibly the most potent factor in bringing about learning, hence, changing (Krzniac, 2012). When students are exposed to literature and engage in writing and talking about themes, they develop empathy, reports one study in *Time* (Paul, 2013). According to another research report (Ivey & Johnson, 2013), literature changes lives. Reading fiction, especially fiction that exposes the way characters think and feel, helps students understand others and relate to their lives. This literary fiction not only expands our knowledge of others' lives but also requires us to interpret—the same skill we use when we interact with others (Chiaet, 2013).

We, as teachers, remember moments when literature moved our students, causing them to respond. One of those moments for me was when Louann, a seventh grader, felt the sorrow of the character, Billy, when she finished *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls (1961). The class was quiet, reading their books, when Louann approached my desk, her face averted to hide her tears. "Can I go to the restroom," she whispered. I handed her the pass, and after she hurried out, I wandered down the row to her desk. *Red Fern* was turned spine-side up. When I picked up the book, I saw she was on the very last page where the dogs die saving Billy's life. Louann grieved with Billy as if his loss were her loss.

Another time, Carl, previously a resistant reader, pulled up in his headlong rush out the door after the bell to tell me about his reaction to *Nightjohn* by Gary Paulsen (1993). "I am sorta ashamed, Mrs. Lain," he said. "That guy risked life and limb to teach other slaves to read, and I don't even read when I can. How silly is that?" When our students imagine and then infer the feelings of fictional characters, they take a giant step toward developing empathy for real live people, no matter their gender, race or religion (Chiaet, 2013).

Picture Books Teach More Than Empathy

Picture books accomplish other important learning goals besides teaching and modeling empathy. Well-written picture books teach national standards (CCSS, 2010) including authors' crafts and speaking/listening, reading and writing processes. Since our days are jam-packed, why not teach several lessons at once? The picture book is short, therefore usurping less class time. It conveys a meaningful message, it offers prompts for kids to jot about in their journals, and it models how authors mold the language to convey their ideas using literary devices including alliteration, flashback, personification, imagery, metaphor, and symbolism.

I use picture books to teach empathy as well as the writing process, reading process, and speaking/listening process, all of which help students develop as not only better students but also better citizens. As Franklin D. Roosevelt noted, "If civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships - the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together at peace."

Picture Books Teach the Writing Process

Writing for me is an act of sustained empathy, and I hope to encourage this sense in my students by creating a warm, welcoming writing workshop. In my workshop, I deliver a lesson followed by independent work. While students write, I observe, comment, and tweak student products (Graves, 1993).

With Mrs. Fox's third graders, I finished reading the picture book and posed a wide-open prompt

before sending the students back to their desks and their journals. I wanted to help students capture their thoughts and feelings engendered by the read aloud- the first stage of the writing process and a tiny step toward feeling empathy toward others.

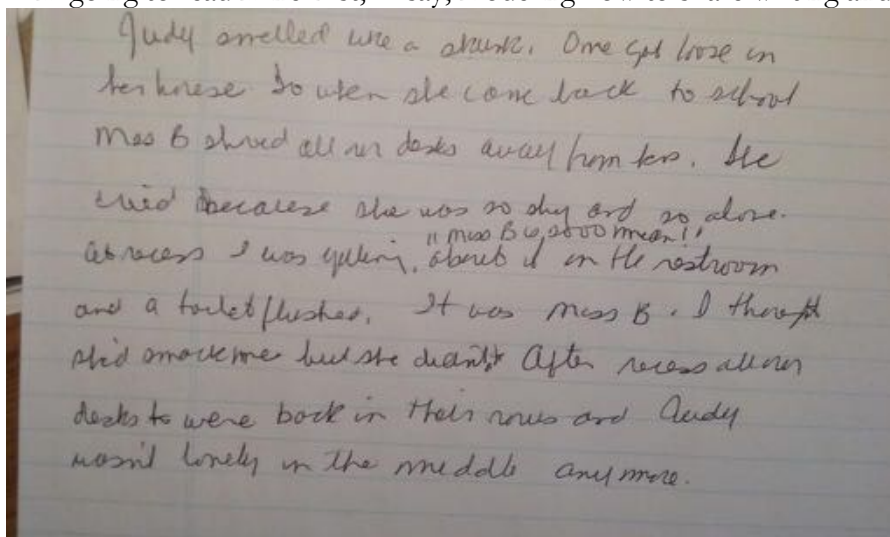
I began the lesson by quoting Lucy Calkins: "Let's jot a 'small-moment story' in our journals" (Calkins, 2010). "The author makes us feel for Amelia. This emotion of feeling for someone else is called empathy. Can you think of a time to write about, a time when you felt for someone or you saw someone else do a kind thing? I'll write, too. What could I write? Let's see, I could tell about how my dad came home from the war and instead of hating the enemy, he organized the farmers to send food to war-torn Germany. He had empathy. Or I could write about a time when I felt so sorry for Judy Jacks when Miss Billings was mean to her." I pause and put my finger on my chin, thinking. "Yeah, I think I'll write about my empathy for Judy."

Before we begin writing, I try to help them overcome their reticence by explaining: "I have a writing teacher named Natalie Goldberg (1986). She gives me good advice. She says that I am free to write the worst junk in America. So let's write without a single worry about how stuff is spelled or anything else. Just hurry to get down your ideas."

"You should know ahead of time that we will only write for four minutes. Plus, we will all share our pieces out loud in our groups." I tell students these things because it's only fair they know that they'll share their pieces after they write.

With housekeeping out of the way, we are ready. "Okay? Let's write." I start the timer and begin scribbling on the whiteboard, words rushing across the space like spilled water. When the timer rings, I say, "Take another few seconds and finish your thought," and I bring my piece to a close, too.

"I'm going to read mine first," I say, modeling how to share writing and how to respond to others.



When I finish reading my little piece, I ask, "What do you notice about mine?" They comment about how messy my writing is, how they can't read cursive yet, how the opening sentence gets attention.

"Okay," I say. "Time to share in your writing groups. Be sure to read yours aloud, and, listeners, be

sure tell the author a thing or two that you notice. When I say, *go*, I should hear the sound of babbling all around the room. Go!"

They share and give feedback to one another. All the little empathy stories make Mrs. Fox's classroom a small incubator of hope for an otherwise callused world.

Picture Books Teach the Reading Process

Teaching writing in a workshop setting provides a fertile field for students to develop empathy while learning to write, but reading also fosters the ability to feel empathy, or live in other people's skin, while learning to read and comprehend. Beyond decoding words, readers read to interpret and evaluate the text which requires that they understand, analyze and evaluate the characters' motivations and the author's themes.

One example of how students cultivate empathy through reading in my classroom is with the picture book, *The Worry Stone*, by Marianne Dengler (1996). It's the story of a lonely child befriended by an elderly lady who empathizes with the boy and puts her feelings into action. She tells him a story and eventually gives him her worry stone, a tangible symbol of connection to the past and comfort in the present. The old lady has no ulterior motive, no expectation of personal gain. She cares only to relieve one person of his loneliness. Her empathy helps the boy, and, in so doing, she enhances our collective humanity. (See Table 2 for a basic lesson I use for my favorite picture books, including *The Worry Stone*.)

To begin the lesson with my eighth graders, I model a reading strategy, building context to enhance comprehension (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). I show the students how the book is structured, fulfilling a reading standard to analyze structure (CCSS, 2010). Inside the main story is a fable about the origin of the worry stone. *The Worry Stone* uses story-within-a-story and flashback structures. In class, I say things like, "See how the illustrator depicts these two structures by changing the color schemes?" I point to the pages. "And he changes the pages' borders and fonts." This mini-lesson takes only a minute or two and models this important pre-reading strategy. Then, I read the book to them.

Afterward, I launch into the protocol for journal jotting to combine students' reading with students' writing. "The worry stone is so important in this story that it becomes a symbol," I tell my eighth graders. "You could write about an object that is a symbol for you," I say. "Here is one student's jot, and I read a former student's piece about a childhood blanket in which he uses personification and metaphor (see Table 3). "Or you could tell about a time when you saw someone reach out a helping hand to someone else." I launch into teacher talk as I did with Mrs. Fox's third graders.

These journal jots are important because later, during a-writing workshop, my students will go back and look through their journals for nuggets to use to develop their pieces into poems or prose, stories or essays. The student piece in Table 4 is an essay about an object that began as a jot and became a full-fledged narrative.

Picture Books Teach the Speaking/Listening Process

When we read and write, we see with another's eyes. When we speak and listen, we also teach students to "listen with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another" (Alfred Adler, 1998). Besides teaching a reading strategy and beginning the writing process with a journal jot, a picture book like *The Worry Stone* advances classroom discussion, a speaking and listening standard (CCSS).

These picture books make the abstract concept of empathy specific and tangible. I like to begin discussions with the personal and immediate and then move to the global. (Table 5 shows a chart that depicts a hierarchy of probing questions moving from the personal to the universal.)

To optimize the success of early discussions, I use more scaffolding, such as Socratic circles, a structure that organizes classroom talk and encourages civil behavior. We arrange desks in a circle, and I pose the question to which the students respond, one after the other, building upon the prior speaker. To encourage each student to participate in the discussion, I ask them to speak at least three times and keep track of their contributions on a slip of paper which they turn in as they exit the classroom at the bell.

One discussion question might hinge around fables, how humankind passes down stories through generations to illuminate group values. Students can offer other fables they've read or heard. Another discussion might be the sharing of family objects or stories passed down from prior generations. Another question could discuss empathy and altruism: "Tell about a time when someone you know reached the apex of Kohlberg's Law of Moral Development (1981) and sacrificed herself for another?"

Picture Books Teach Author's Craft

Picture books also teach authors' crafts, a set of tools for writing named in the standards. I tell students that authors employ literary devices to set a tone in their work, to convey their messages, and to appeal to our emotions. Sometimes authors make us mad; sometimes they tickle our funny bones. I ask students to notice how the author uses literary devices and then, in subsequent mini-lessons during writing workshop, they try their hand at inserting these devices into their journal jots. For example, in *The Worry Stone*, the author appeals to the senses of touch (i.e., the description of running fingers across the hills and valleys of the surface) and sight (i.e., the bobbing red feather on the old lady's hat). Dengler also uses onomatopoeia with the use of the vivid verb, *whomped*, and figurative language with her poetic word choice, *hacienda on the edge of time*, and I encourage students to practice these techniques in low-stakes writing.

Picture books demonstrate powerful lessons of author's craft that the kids can mimic in their own pieces. In this way, the writing process is recursive. Students harvest ideas from their jots and then revise—rearranging structure, elaborating with description or dialogue, and making use of literary devices. After the revision process, my mini-lessons shift to editing and correcting or conventions—how to punctuate commas and quotation marks, how to avoid vague pronoun referents, and how to vary sentence construction.

Conclusion

When teachers use picture books, they fulfill reading, writing, and speaking/listening standards, including author's craft. However, more importantly, they help their students develop empathy, one student at a time. In the words of John F. Kennedy, "One person can make a difference, and everyone should try." Picture books teach the ethical behaviors that hold a classroom and a society together by encouraging people to develop relationships with one another. Listening, sharing words, and working with others not only creates a warm classroom but also works to develop better citizens outside of the classroom. Empathy- thinking about others- impacts democracy from performing civic duties to sacrificing oneself for others. Without the thoughtful classroom that models ethical behavior, how will we maintain a reflective society that values empathy and tolerance?

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Table 1

| Title and Author | Summary |
|--|---|
| <i>Amelia's Road</i> | Amelia's family will soon hit the road again. She doesn't have a place to call home until she finds a tall, friendly tree and buries her little shoe box of precious mementos in its shade. |
| <i>Baseball Saved Us</i> | Surrounded by guards, fences and desert, Japanese Americans in an internment camp create a baseball field. A young boy tells how baseball gives the inmates a purpose while they endure injustice and difficulty. The book models symbolism and repeated motif. |
| <i>Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*</i> | Chief Seattle was a respected and peaceful leader of an Indian nation. When the government wants to buy the lands from his exhausted and defeated people, he responds with this speech, rich with imagery. |
| <i>Faithful Elephants</i> | During World War II, zoo masters are ordered to put down all the animals in the Uen Zoo in Tokyo so that, in the event of a bombing, the animals will not run loose through the city. The elephants do not die easily, and the zoo personnel suffer along with the elephants. |
| <i>Fly Away Home</i> | A homeless boy and his father live at the airport, struggling not to be noticed. The young boy sees a bird caught inside the airport, trying to get out, and draws a parallel with his life. |
| <i>Knots on a Counting Rope</i> | A blind Indian boy faces a great challenge. The counting rope is a metaphor for the passage of time. |
| <i>Little Blue Little Yellow</i> | Little blue and little yellow share wonderful adventures. One day, they can't find one another. When they do, they are so overjoyed that they hug and become green. |
| <i>My Secret Camera</i> | This story give a glimpse into the life of the Lodz Ghetto during the Nazi occupation of Europe in the mid 1940s. The pictures are both beautiful and sad, for these people are bound for a life of slavery and eventual death. But people laugh, help each other, and struggle to be humane. |
| <i>Smoky Nights</i> | Two very different families discover during a city riot that they can learn peacekeeping in their daily lives. |
| <i>Stand Tall, Molly Lou Melon</i> | Molly Lou has a wise grandmother who gives her the advice of being proud of yourself even when being bullied. Eventually Molly wins her bully over and forgives him. |
| <i>Thank You, Mr. Falker</i> | Who hasn't had trouble learning something and worried about public disgrace and bullying? This book paints a crystal clear picture of heartless rejection and the abject despair from feeling different. In the end hope and joy reign. |
| <i>The Rough Face Girl</i> | In this tale, an Algonquin Indian Cinderella finds true love and happiness. The kind and good are rewarded, while the cruel and thoughtless get their just desserts. |
| <i>When Jessie Came Across the Sea</i> | Jessie and her grandmother live in a poor village in a valley of eastern Europe. When young Jessie is chosen by the rabbi to travel to America, she leaves her grandmother behind. This inspirational story shares immigrant heritage as Jessie goes across the ocean to a new life in America. It's a tribute to courage and hope. |
| <i>Worry Stone</i> | This book includes a Chumash Indian legend. Every day the old woman walks to the park. She watches the children play. One day she notices a small, serious boy, and she remembers that she was once small and serious. But she had Grandfather and his stories to make life wonderful. Teaches flashback. |
| <i>Voices in the Park</i> | This book teaches how different people color the same experience differently. They see and hear through very unique eyes and ears creating reality from their own perspectives. |
| <i>Welcome Comfort</i> | Welcome Comfort is a foster child moving from home to home and getting picked on by kids at school. But when the school custodian becomes his best friend, things change. Now Welcome has someone to talk to and a family. |

Table 2

Book Title: *The Worry Stone*

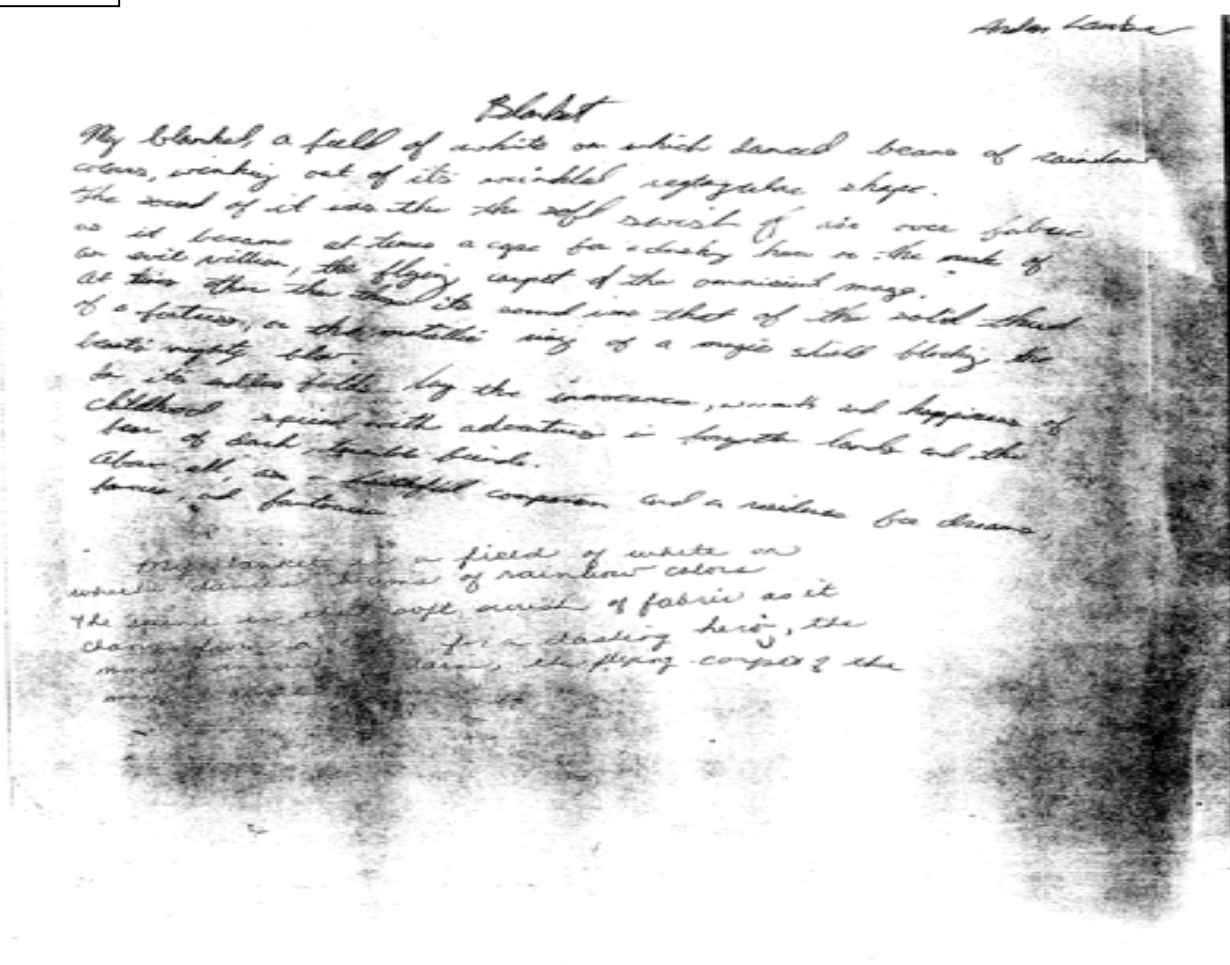
Author: Marianna Dengler

Summary: *The Worry Stone* is three tales woven together. It teaches flashback and the story-within-the-story written in the form of a Chumash Indian legend. An old woman has empathy for a sad little boy and ends up not only giving him the gift of a worry stone but also telling him wonderful stories.

What to do:

1. Build context by opening the book to the flashback and the story-within-a-story—two literary techniques. If you want, demonstrate this structure with three paper bags in decreasing size. Decorate the outside of the bags with icons, sketches and/or pictures representing what went on in each of the three sections of the story. Put each bag inside the bigger bag (like nested Russian dolls).
3. Ask students to jot about a time when they realized the importance of an object or a time when someone showed empathy. Later during workshop, they can develop this quick write into a descriptive or narrative essay like the student sample on the mink coat.
4. Hold a class discussion using the structure of Socratic Circles on questions about legends, precious objects, or empathy stories. Show kids the Probe Chart.
5. Point out examples in the text of author's craft/literary devices: symbolism; sensory appeals (i.e., touch as the narrator rubs her fingers over the stone and sight as we visualize the bobbing red feather on the old lady's hat); onomatopoeia (i.e., the vivid verb *whomped*), and figurative language (i.e., *the hacienda on the edge of time*).

Table 3

**Typed out version of above:**

My blanket, a field of white on which danced beams of rainbow colors, winking out of its wrinkled, rectangular shape. The sound of it was the soft swish of air over fabric as it became at times a cape for a dashing hero or the mask of an evil villain, the flying carpet of the omniscient mage. At times its sound was that of the solid thud of a fortress or the metallic ring of a magic shield blocking the beast's mighty blow. In its endless folds lay the innocence, warmth and happiness of childhood spiced with adventures in forgotten lands and the fear of dark terrible fiends. Above all, a faithful companion and a residence for dreams, fantasies and fantasia.

Table 4

Growing up I've had my share of play things but one has always been extremely special to me. My great grandma, Ruth, had a mink coat that was given to her by her mother, my great great grandma. This coat has been in our family for generations and loved to pieces.

When Ruth tragically died the coat was left to my grandma, Helen. By now the coat was so fragile it couldn't even be worn, but it was loved just the same. Eventually my grandma, along with my mother, decided to preserve this coat so it could be enjoyed by future generations to come. It was carefully packaged and sent to a professional seamstress to be made into stuffed animals.

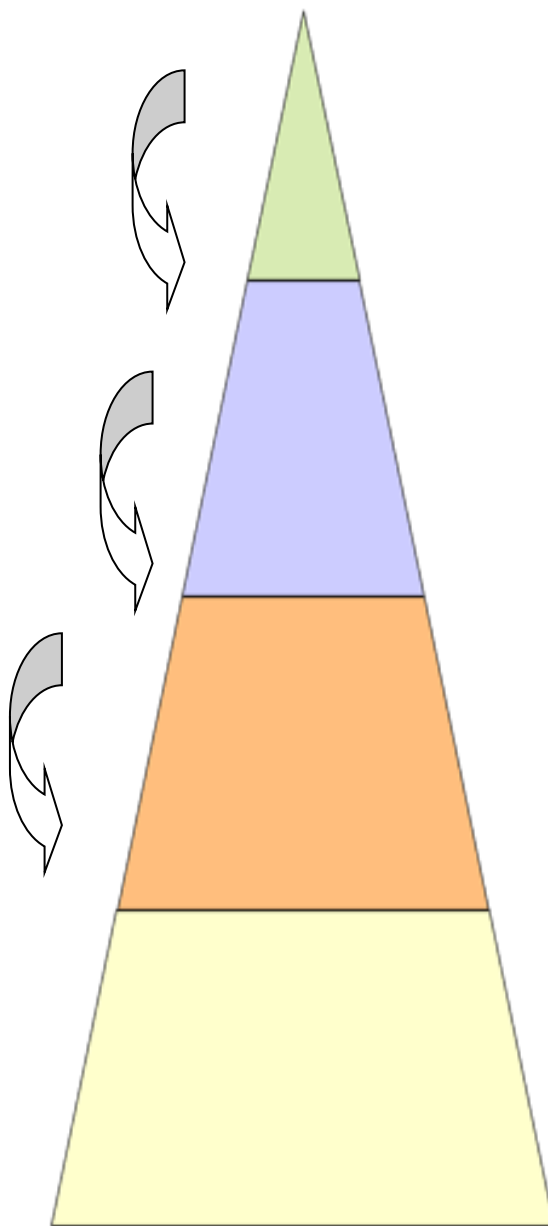
The coat was made of just enough fur for four stuffed bunnies, and six weeks later we received our shipments. We gathered around the mysterious brown box as pirates would to a treasure chest and waited for our gifts. As the

Table 5

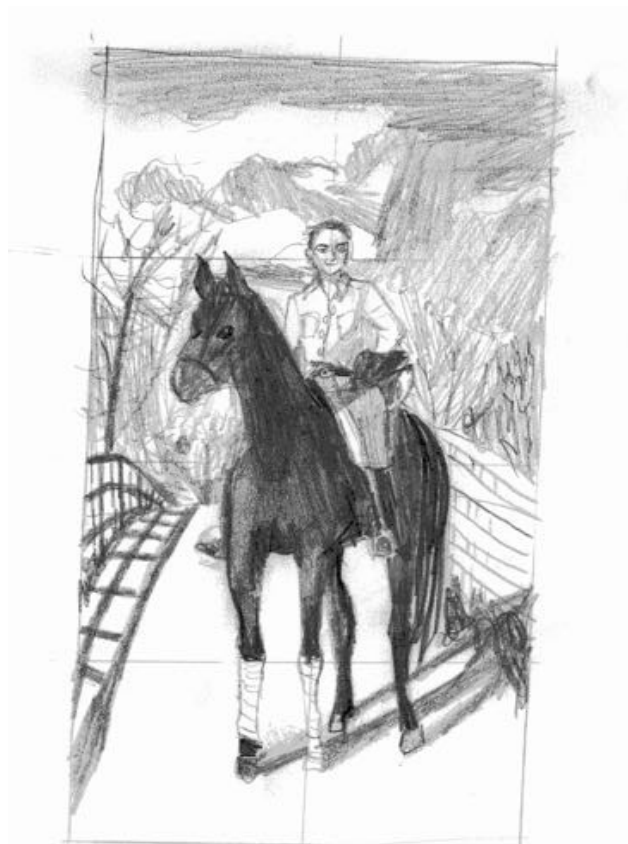
Probe the Reasoning

The bottom line when you Probe the Reasoning is to ask yourself: What is the bedrock point of this text? Then ask, Why does this matter to humans—me first, and then all humankind? (There is never just one right answer.) To dig more deeply, keep asking, Why? What about...? Use the stages of Probe the Reasoning in discussion, or, as the group reads aloud together, stop at pre-selected places to *probe the reasoning*, using the steps below as needed. The arrows indicate that the thinking is going deeper, into more universal themes.

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| level 1 | What does the text seem to be saying (word, line, passage)? |
| level 2 | Have you ever experienced ____? Is this the way it is in your culture, family, group? |
| level 3 | Do you know of anyone who has experienced ____? |
| level 4 | Why do people do it? |
| level 5 | What could we do with regard to ____ to make the world a better place? |



Sheryl Lain has been a secondary English and reading teacher for decades. She wore other hats too including language arts coordinator, instructional coach at the district and state levels, director of the Wyoming Writing Project, and international presenter. Her book, *A Poem for Every Student*, details the zany, challenging and fulfilling teaching life.



“Horse” by **Bridget Fajvan**, a junior at Newton High School, who has many interests including writing, musical theatre, and horseback riding. She volunteers at the therapeutic riding center where she rides. She is an artist as well as an active member of the Newton Chapter of Future Farmers of America, and is working on her Girl Scout Gold Award project. She loves her two cats dearly, and she loves her parents who always encourage and support her.