

Art Filled Social Studies Resources: Considering the Books of Jeannie Baker

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Visual artist Jeannie Baker is a truly international children's book author. An English-born Australian, her innovative books address universally shared themes, such as family relationships and human-land interactions, through the use of collage. Her publications have won Australian and international awards, including a National Council for the Social Studies Notable Trade Book Award, and have been published in non-English speaking countries such as France, Israel, and Japan. Her most recent books have been published simultaneously in England and the USA.

Her oeuvre includes early work as an illustrator as well as an impressive collection of books she has both written and illustrated. However "written" is putting it metaphorically because many of Baker's creations are wordless books. Readers will enjoy puzzling over the various materials she uses to construct collages that, not surprisingly, have brought her accolades as an artist.

The attraction of Baker's work for social studies teachers is that she deliberately addresses issues that are commonly explored in social studies classes. So, while there is an incredibly strong sense of place and "Australian-ness" in the illustrations, the underlying narratives speak strongly to readers in other parts of the world (Aitken, 1997). Many of Baker's books could be used on their own, paired together, or as a group.

"Grandfather" (1977) and "Grandmother" (1978) depict a little girl with her grandfather in an antiques store, and in a cottage with her grandmother. They provide rich material for discussing cross generational relationships and the role of artifacts and stories of the past in establishing personal identity and interpersonal connections. Either of these books could be paired with "Millicent" (1980), which depicts the rich inner world of an elderly lady on her daily walk through a busy city park. With its detailed depictions of city life, this book could also be partnered with "Home in the Sky" (1983), which tells the story of a New York City homing pigeon that gets separated from his flock. New York based reviewers have enthused over the quality of these depictions of life in their city. This book was reissued in Spanish in the 1990s.

In the 1980s Baker also produced "Where the Forest Meets the Sea" (1987), which tells the story of a boy's beach picnic with his father, while cleverly alluding to the people and creatures who once inhabited that location. This book could easily be read with a later creation, "The Hidden Forest" (2000), in which Baker brings a boy into contact with the world below the surface of the sea he thinks he knows.

Reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's iconic movie, "Rear Window," Baker uses a window to frame views of changing

landscapes in the appropriately titled “Window” (1991) and in “Belonging” (2004), which was also published and lauded as “Home” (2004). The mechanism of the window in these wordless books enables the artist to depict growth in the individual main character, Sam in “Window” and Tracy in “Home,” while focusing readers’ attention on changes in the environment: urban sprawl and urban gentrification respectively.

A growing body of research in literacy and early childhood education asserts the effectiveness of using wordless books such as Baker’s with young pre-readers, students with learning disabilities, foreign language learners, and bilingual students. Perhaps not surprisingly, when adults and children tell stories about books they tend to use broader vocabularies and use more words than when they read them (Jalongo, Dragich, Conrad, & Zhang, 2002). Meticulous illustrations in Baker’s collages provide readers with numerous opportunities to look for details to describe, question, discuss, and integrate into their narratives. Given that so many children now live in urban areas, discussing particular elements of Baker’s illustrations, such as the direction vehicles are driving on the roads, the multinational companies being advertised on billboards, or the types of plants in the gardens, can foster their awareness and help them have insights about the cityscapes they see each day. The incremental positive changes in the cityscape of “Home” can provide children with a plan of action for their own communities.

However, explaining some details in Baker’s books requires background knowledge. The word “Sorry” being written by a skywriter in “Home” is the author’s message to Australia’s indigenous peoples. Four years after its publication the Australian Prime Minister made an official apology for past mistreatments, and in particular for the Stolen Generations, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait children who were forcibly taken from their families and communities (The Australian, 2008).

In her most recent creation, “Mirror” (2010), Baker uses the attractiveness of Arabic and Roman type as well as collage to communicate her appreciation of not only the uniqueness of each place on the planet but also of our connected shared humanity. Readers will notice how the explicit context of her work has globalized. They can also look at the development in her artistic techniques and use of technology. Her innovative work with collage has been extended to the quality of the book itself. Opening the book in the middle allows readers to follow a story in English and Arabic at the same time. Turning the pages they follow the daily lives of two boys, one in Australia and one in Morocco. At a time when many social studies educators are saddened by what Baker observes as “political poisoning of attitudes towards foreigners and foreignness” (2010, afterword) they can appreciate and be uplifted by using teaching resources such as the ones Baker has created.

The author's website:

www.jeanniebaker.com

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