

# Reading (and Rereading) *Dear Juno* with Kindergartners

Brooke Graham Doyle

**AN ENGAGING STORY GRABS YOUNG CHILDREN'S ATTENTION.** Their wide eyes examine the illustrations and they listen carefully. When teachers repeat favorite stories, children enjoy participating in the retelling. A story that is complex enough to read multiple times helps children understand how some sources can be revisited and mined for more detail and deeper meaning. Teachers can use this powerful tool for social studies instruction. Historians constantly revisit sources as they probe for a fresh perspective, new revelation, or deeper meaning. Reading a story multiple times models this same practice on a simpler level.

## Choosing Books

Children's literature titles abound, but teachers must be careful in their choices. While reading stories to young children can be an effective instructional strategy, it is critical to choose books wisely.

- A top concern is accuracy. A quick-study biography or work of historical fiction may contain factual errors. Check the statements in a juvenile book against a more detailed, scholarly work for adults.
- Another concern is a book's relevance to the curriculum. Skillful teachers are always on the lookout for interesting trade books that can enhance a particular unit of study, helping young students to imagine the personalities, risks, and decisions behind a historical event, or to grasp a key concept in economics, geography, or civics. For example, a multicultural story can serve as an entry point into an in-depth study of

another country, its history, geography, culture, and so forth. A powerful story about fairness can open a lesson on the Bill of Rights, in which children study the historical context for each amendment as well as learn about modern day applications.

- A teacher can also consider whether a book addresses social studies curriculum standards.<sup>1</sup> For example, Would the book at hand help a first grader's understand the concept of fairness (Strand **VI POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**)?
- A book must be developmentally appropriate for the age of the audience. A book about a violent incident during the Civil Rights struggle may be appropriate for young adults, but not for an elementary audience. A carefully researched and written biographical account from the point of view of a six-year-old protagonist (Ruby Bridges, for example) might be just the ticket for a first grade class.
- One can select a book that has been recommended by a colleague (a fellow teacher at school may praise a book), reviewed and selected by educators (such as "Social Studies Trade Books for Young People," published by NCSS annually), or received an award (such as a Newbery, Caldecott, or Carter G. Woodson Award).<sup>2</sup>
- One can also read longer reviews of the book, written by educators, that appear both in print journals and online sites.

After deciding that a children's book is accurate, meets curricular goals, addresses social studies content standards, and is developmentally appropriate for the stu-

dents' age, teachers might consider additional criteria to help determine a book's quality and appropriateness.

1. Will the story speak to my particular class of youngsters?
2. Are the illustrations engaging?
3. Is the language compelling?
4. Does it include some useful new vocabulary?
5. Is the story complex and rich enough to read multiple times?

## Cultural Diversity

One of the purposes of social studies is to help children become citizens of a culturally diverse and interdependent world (Strand **I CULTURE; III PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS; IX GLOBAL CONNECTIONS**). By choosing stories that sensitively broaden and deepen children's understanding of cultural diversity, teachers can help meet this goal. To choose such books, teachers should consider:

1. Is the author a member of the culture discussed in the book or qualified in some other way to write about the subject? (Or is the author just picking up on a literary fad?)<sup>3</sup>
2. Does the author's perspective substantially strengthen the written work? (Or are there biases that limit understanding and insight?)<sup>4</sup>
3. Are the characters portrayed with some complexity and authenticity? (Or is the reader presented only with stereotypes and not challenged to learn anything new about this culture?)<sup>5</sup>

Answering these questions in the affirmative indicates that one might be holding an authentic and sensitive book that will promote children's understanding of a diverse world without bias.

## Reading Aloud

Once a book is chosen, use interactive reading to allow children to be active participants in discovering the book. Ask questions and engage students in dialogue during the reading to help them construct meaning. Children's responses, in both questions and comments, are a critical part of the interactive process.<sup>6</sup> When teachers pause to discuss new information, students receive immediate feedback that helps them to construct meaning and make sense of

## Reading *Dear Juno*

*Dear Juno*, written by Soyung Pak and illustrated by Susan Kathleen Hartung, is an appropriate choice for a kindergarten social studies lesson.<sup>7</sup> Young learners need to develop self-awareness, an awareness of others, and an awareness and appreciation of other cultures (Strands **I CULTURE; III PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS;** and **IV INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**). *Dear Juno* addresses these content areas as it focuses on the relationship between Juno, who lives in America, and

finding one's identity. The powerful illustrations are drawn from different perspectives and include certain small details such as a dog and kittens that children find particularly engaging. The author uses rhythmic language and rich and novel words such as "persimmons", "photograph", "artist", "envelope", and "sipping". Additionally, the story is deep enough to read multiple times, all the while finding new meaning in it with an audience of kindergarteners.

Pak, the Korean-American author, addresses cultural issues in a sensitive manner. Juno is corresponding with his grandmother, who lives in Seoul and writes in Korean. Cultural differences, such as the Korean alphabet, are part of the story. Juno and his grandmother are portrayed naturally rather than stereotypically. The book offers a "window" into Korean culture for non-Korean students and a welcoming "mirror" for Korean American students to see a bit of their own culture reflected.<sup>8</sup>

*Dear Juno* should be read multiple times and probed for deeper meaning each time. For example, the story can be read once as a pleasure read to understand the basic plot. A second reading can be done while encouraging the students to think about the story from the perspective of Juno. Teachers can pause at critical moments and engage children in dialogue using these questions:

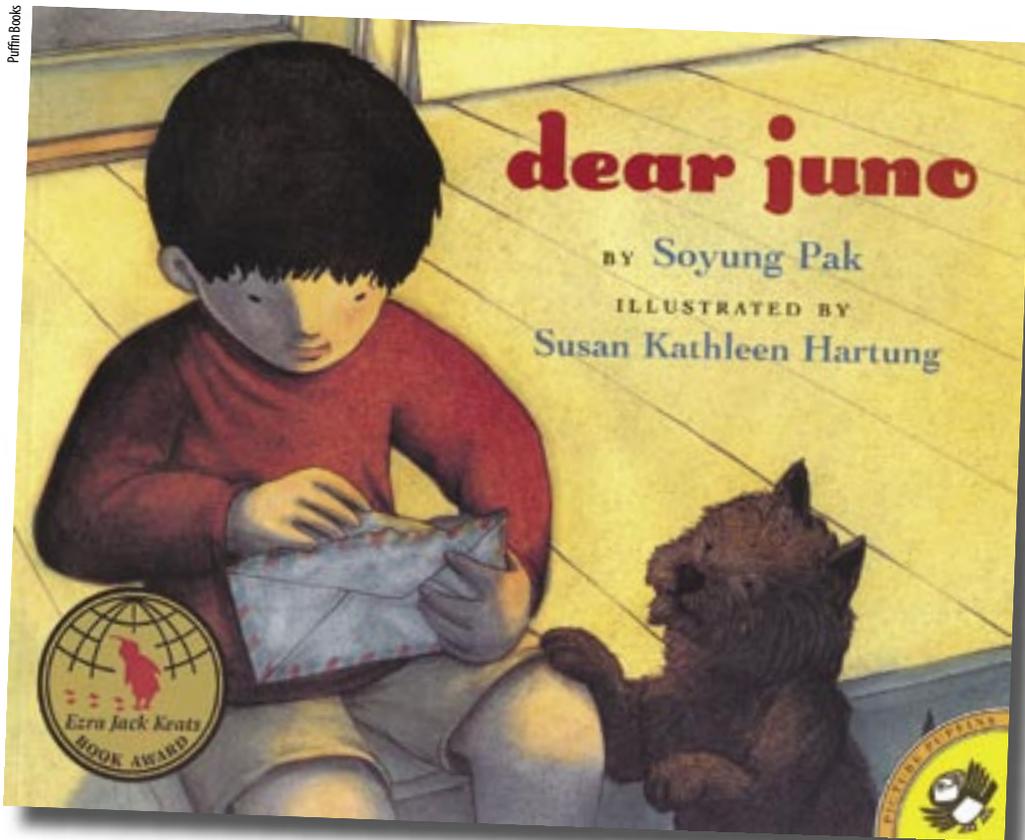
- How is Juno feeling?
- How does he "read" Grandmother's letter?
- How does he communicate with his Grandmother without being able to write?

The questioning and responding that is part of interactive shared book reading models comprehension skills for children. In this example, the teacher meets the child at her level and scaffolds her understanding by continuing to ask questions that build on the previous answer. The teacher affirms the child's answer each time while building her understanding.

Teacher: What did Juno put in the envelope to send to his grandmother?

Student: His drawings.

Teacher: He did send his drawings. What



the text, which aids in their comprehension. This dialogue between teachers and students models inquiry skills for children. Teachers model pausing and asking questions to probe for deeper meaning. By making their thought process explicit, teachers can model how to analyze a text and search it for meaning. Using interactive shared book reading while reading the book multiple times and focusing on different perspectives each time makes for a rich social studies learning experience.

his grandmother, who lives in Korea. Through the thoughtful exchange of letters and special gifts, Juno and his grandmother communicate their care for each other as their relationship grows. Juno builds his self-awareness as he decides what to send his grandmother about himself. Additionally, Juno learns about his grandmother's life in Korea.

*Dear Juno* addresses social studies content while also being a quality children's story. It speaks to many children's experiences of wanting to be able to read, finding ways to make meaning from text, developing a relationship with a grandparent, and

else did he send?

Student: A leaf!

Teacher: Yes, Juno did send a leaf. Why did he send Grandmother a leaf?

Student: Because he likes to climb trees.

Teacher: He does like to climb trees. What is he trying to tell his grandmother with the leaf?

Student: That he likes to climb big swinging trees.

Teacher: Juno is telling his Grandmother something that he likes to do—climb big swinging trees. He wants Grandmother to know about himself even though she lives faraway.

Teachers can read the story a third time and focus on the perspective of Juno's Grandmother, pausing and conversing with students about these questions:

- Why does she send Juno a letter?
- What is it like where she lives?
- How does she feel when Juno's letter arrives?

One of the most powerful pages in the book is a double-page illustration without text. Grandmother has received Juno's "letter," and she is reading it. Teachers and children can discuss what is happening, what the artist is communicating without words, and how Grandmother must feel as she "reads" Juno's letter.

Finally, on the next day, reading the story a fourth time allows students to discuss what they could send to their grandparent or faraway friend. This is an excellent opportunity to have children explore their own identity. Sharing how they will represent themselves to someone faraway, and discussing their relationships with grandparents or distant friends, develops children's individual identity (Strand IV).

### Extension Activities

This final reading offers an entry point into a letter writing activity between children and grandparents or faraway friends. Children model Juno's first letter by telling their grandparent about themselves. Children might draw pictures of their favorite activities and their family.

Writing or dictating a sentence describing their drawing builds literacy skills as well as their individual identity. Children can develop geography skills by also discussing where their grandparents or faraway friends live, particularly in relationship to themselves. Teachers may wish to use a globe or maps to demonstrate how distance can be understood and measured. Finally, sending their letters might begin a pen-pal dialogue between children and their grandparents or faraway friends. Reading, writing, and social studies then become seamlessly integrated.

Another extension activity involves exploring the characters of the Korean alphabet as seen in the book. Teachers may bring in a Korean and English newspaper from their community, and children can compare and contrast the characters in both newspapers. Children can trace a few Korean characters. Teachers can explain that different languages often use different alphabets, and that Juno's grandmother used Korean characters as shown in the illustrations.

The title page of *Dear Juno* offers a model for another extension activity to help children develop their identities. This page depicts Juno and his grandmother sitting on opposite sides of the same tree. Both are reading a letter. Juno's dog is sitting beside him, chasing a butterfly, while Grandmother's cat is sitting beside her, chasing a bug. Upon closer examination, the reader sees that the tree actually has different branches: the one on Juno's side is from the tree he enjoys climbing, and the one on her side is from the persimmon tree in her garden. The page is a great entry point for a discussion of similarities and differences. It also leads smoothly into an activity where children draw themselves and their grandparent or faraway friend in a similar style that shows similarities and differences. Children compare and contrast their own characteristics with those of a special person as they develop their identity.

### Summary

By choosing a children's book with careful attention to social studies content and quality, teachers have the opportunity to use reading as a powerful lens for social studies. Read a complex book multiple times, engage students in dialogue during the reading, and focus on different perspectives. Such activities help young children make meaning out of their world and build social studies skills. A lesson plan using a book like *Dear Juno* can link important social studies concepts with crucial skills such as gathering information, critically examining that information, taking various perspectives into consideration, and revisiting sources.<sup>9</sup>

### Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).
2. Newbery Medal, [www.ala.org/alsc/newbery.html](http://www.ala.org/alsc/newbery.html); Caldecott Medal, [www.ala.org/alsc/caldecott.html](http://www.ala.org/alsc/caldecott.html); Carter G. Woodson Book Award, [www.ncss.org/awards/woodsonlist.shtml](http://www.ncss.org/awards/woodsonlist.shtml).
3. Council on Interracial Books for Children, *Guidelines for Selecting Bias-Free Textbooks and Storybooks* (New York: Council on Interracial Books, 1980).
4. Council on Interracial Books for Children.
5. Rudine Sims Bishop, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," *Perspectives* 6, no. 3 (May 1990): ix-xi.
6. A. S. Palincsar and A. L. Brown, "Reciprocal Teaching of Comprehension-fostering and Comprehension-monitoring Activities," *Cognition and Instruction* 1 (1984): 117-175.
7. Soyung Pak, *Dear Juno* (New York: Puffin Books, 1999).
8. Bishop, ix.
9. Committee for Children (CFC) is introducing a new program, "Woven Word: Linking Emergent Literacy with Social and Emotional Skills." *Dear Juno* is one of the books used in this new curriculum. For more information, visit [www.cfchildren.org](http://www.cfchildren.org). CFC is a nonprofit organization seeking to improve children's lives by providing research-based violence prevention, anti-bullying, and child abuse/personal safety programs for schools, families, and communities.

**BROOKE GRAHAM DOYLE**, a former social studies teacher, is a curriculum developer at Committee for Children in Seattle, Washington.