

Text Optional

Visual Storytelling with Wordless Picturebooks

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Wordless books by Shaun Tan, David Wiesner, and Mitsumasa Anno in SUNY Cortland's Teaching Materials Center collection. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Gibson.

Wordless picturebooks are on the rise and are increasingly revered by readers and critics. In many countries, including the United States, wordless picturebooks have become a sub-genre unto themselves—a publishing trend resulting in author/illustrators who even specialize in this type of book.

A current search on worldcat.org for juvenile books with the Subject Heading “Stories Without Words,” yielded just over two thousand, with a notable increase in the latter half of the twentieth century leading into the twenty-first.

In *Wonderfully Wordless*, an ambitious reader's advisory of sorts for several types of wordless books, author William Martin gleans expert worldwide opinion to select the best in contemporary wordless books, including picturebooks.¹ Many of the wordless picturebook makers highlighted, such as three-time Caldecott winner David Wiesner (see sidebar), have been informed by the rich history of wordless books for adults, artists' books, and graphic novels.²

Creating picturebooks without words for children, however, has its roots in educational aids to simply encourage younger children to speak about a story, until the 1970s, when wordless picturebooks shifted their emphasis to the unlimited possibilities in graphic narration.³ Images have become more than simple didactic aids prompting young readers to speak, and instead reach new levels of artistry within the picturebook's thirty-two-page format. The visual sophistication of the author's/illustrator's work allows readers of all ages to interpret the story for themselves, whether orally, in writing, or in a different form of creative response.

Literacy Use: Putting Words to the Wordless

While wordless picturebooks are excellent ways to introduce preschoolers to the book's format and design and to book handling and sequencing of a story,⁴ the wordless picturebook is no longer just for beginning readers. While emphasizing middle-grade readers, Judith Cassady notes that any grade level can benefit from exposure to wordless picturebooks for the inherent creativity involved in developing one's own interpretation of the story.⁵ She summarizes:

The use of wordless books can encourage reluctant and struggling readers in middle school and junior high to read, develop vocabulary, and make the connection between written and spoken language. Older readers seem to respond to wordless books because they are so visually appealing and because they often involve cleverly developed plots. But best of all, these books seem to counter struggling readers' tendency to focus on the words to a degree that interferes with their being able to make sense of the story and predict outcomes.⁶



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A straightforward approach to using wordless books in the library or classroom is to invite readers to provide their own dialogue or narrative to accompany the pictures according to their level. Limiters such as a maximum word count, or even a list of vocabulary words to utilize in their story, could enrich the activity.⁷ Tuten-Puckett and Richey suggest further opportunities for many lessons, such as students conducting their own self-directed library research on the topics presented in wordless books.⁸ Author/illustrator websites sometimes contain supplementary activities for readers to accompany wordless books as well.

Beyond Linguistic and Cultural Barriers

Researchers in education and language-learning are recognizing the potential of wordless picturebooks as teaching tools specifically for second language learners. As for any readers, interpretation of the story plays a key role. Parents who speak a second language can become more involved in their child's education by "authoring" wordless books for their children. Open-ended questions about wordless stories allow young language learners to respond to the story in their own words and build confidence in the new language. Flatley and Rutland note that

Because wordless picturebooks tell a story without the use of words, the linguistically and culturally different students can create text that is in their natural language pattern and based upon their prior knowledge and schemata.⁹

Wordless books can also provide a starting point for sharing immigrant experiences. Two wordless books interpreting the theme of migration (Wiesner's *Flotsam* and Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*) used in the international research project *Visual Journeys: Understanding Immigrant Children's Responses to the Visual Image in Contemporary Picturebooks* benefited immigrant children in Scotland in more than literacy development:¹⁰

What this project did was more than involve the children in developing and using their critical literacy skills, it also created a safe space for the children to begin to share their stories of immigration, not by asking them outright, but through weeks of nurturing a trusting relationship with each other as we read the wordless texts.¹¹

Creators of wordless texts are from many countries and cultures, and researching their backgrounds and artistic heritages can provide librarians and teachers with the opportunity for cross-cultural experiences among diverse young readers. In *Crossover Picturebooks*, Beckett highlights wordless books created by Mitsumasa Anno in the tradition of Japanese scroll painting, as just one example.¹² Whether in story plot, technical artistry, or page layout, culture can be an interpretive talking point.

Perfect for Visual Literacy

While there is an ever-growing body of research on wordless picturebooks' multiple contributions to childhood literacy, there is less material, but much potential, concerning the format's capacity for visual literacy. Defined as "how people perceive, evaluate, apply, and create conceptual visual representations,"¹³ visual literacy's importance to K–12 education is emphasized in an increasingly visual, cinematographic, and digital environment.¹⁴

Tuten-Puckett and Richey outline supplemental cross-disciplinary activities, many of them art-related, that librarians and classroom teachers could easily incorporate after introducing a wordless book.¹⁵ Book reviews for illustration will typically highlight the medium and tone of a book's artwork, whether wordless or not, and are great to share with K–12 students or give as an assignment to write their own review emphasizing visual elements. The inclusion of Art Notes on the copyright page gives important details for illustration processes, such as technique and choice of medium.¹⁶

Exactly how a wordless book tells a story via pictures, and provides didactic artistic appreciation to its readers, are scholarly topics worth exploring, especially considering the richness and variety of the contemporary wordless picturebook genre. Palette, perspective, design, point of view, atmosphere, and characterization, to name a few visual elements, are no longer secondary to the text, but actually tell a story.

How that artistry works can be explored by an illustrator's perspective of wordless books about his craft. As Wiesner notes in the introduction to *Wordless/Almost Wordless Picturebooks*, "Because the images are the "text," everything in them must contribute not only to the advancement of the plot but to revealing the emotions and feelings of the characters."¹⁷

Growing Wordless Collections Have Much to Offer

For librarians, increasing the collection of wordless books and suggesting them to readers benefits many. Whether patrons are new arrivals to this country, beginning or reluctant readers, or anyone who simply appreciates an interesting plot and a spectacular array of art, wordless books can enhance literacy, cross borders, and provide a new way of seeing the world.

Luckily, there is no sign that wordless books will decrease in production or readership. In 2013, the School for Visual Arts in New York City developed a Visual Narrative Master's program where the most recent class's senior projects included wordless picturebooks.¹⁸ Master's theses on wordless books are being written as scholarship on the subject continues.¹⁹ There are additional wordless book activities for readers to appreciate online (too many to mention in just one article), and of course, for librarians to recommend. ☺

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Caldecott Winner David Wiesner Speaks Volumes on Wordless Books

The only living three-time Caldecott Award winner David Wiesner took time to speak with *Children and Libraries* about the state of wordless books...and what’s next.

You have done other types of illustration, but are known for wordless books. How does illustrating a wordless book differ from that of books with words, or editorial illustration?

Sequential book work is its own world. Editorial work is completely different. I did editorial early on and it didn’t appeal to me.

When I was in art school, my direction became clearer. Putting pictures together sequentially to tell stories is what really excited me. And when I saw examples of wordless books, I became really excited. The wordless books by Lynd Ward—*God’s Man*, *Madman’s Drum*, *Wild Pilgrimage*—were particularly inspiring.

It is during the process of developing a story that it becomes clear whether it will be wordless or not—the needs of the story determine whether I use text or not.

For *Art and Max*, I thought of doing it wordlessly, but I would have had a different book with a lot more pictures. The text, or dialogue, is able to make conceptual leaps in a much easier way. It can be more difficult to show some things just with pictures. There are times when a sentence or text will convey information more quickly and simply.

Having the characters speak in *Art and Max* allowed me to do a simpler page layout, which I found appealing. Had I done the book wordlessly, the layout would have had many, many more panels and would have been a different reading experience. That’s not bad, but I envisioned the story in a much simpler way.

There is a point at which a story could go either way. In *Flotsam*, I did early versions wordlessly and with text. I was still working out the story and was trying different approaches to help me clarify what I was trying to say. When the story finally came together, it just flowed out in pictures. There were no words that would add anything to it.

A wordless book doesn't have the author's voice—the text—telling the story. Each reader tells it in their own way. There is an interpretive element that is really interesting.

Let's talk about your overall process. What steps do you take to create a wordless book?

In simplified terms, it's a four-step process. It starts in my sketch book and thumbnails. I then go to a full-size dummy. The third step, the place between the dummy and finished painting, is when I make very detailed drawings. This is when I do my research and find my reference. It's when I decide what everything will look like—where I build the world.

The final part is to paint, and that is all about how well I can render the images. Everything before painting is all about the story. Especially in a wordless book where the images do the storytelling, every decision I make in terms of the drawings is about how it affects the story.

The flow of the story and pictures is the fun part. I want to design a rhythm to the pages—a mix of full-page pictures, double-page spreads, and pages with multiple panels—to hopefully create a compelling reading experience. One of the most important parts of making a picturebook is planning what the reader experiences when they turn the page. It can be the climax of some action or the punch line to a joke. Nothing happens by chance in a picturebook. I choose everything deliberately.

Who, or what, are your artistic influences? For example, has film played a role in the development of your sequential art?

So many things influenced me—books, paintings, comic books, film.

As a kid, I was given a copy of the book *Hitchcock/Truffaut* by Francois Truffaut. It's a series of conversations between these two filmmakers. And it had pages and pages of sequences from Hitchcock's films showing his editing process. Hitchcock was talking about how he put together images, and it was absolutely captivating. Putting images together to tell stories—this is just what picturebooks do on a smaller scale.



Three-time Caldecott Award winner David Wiesner at work in his studio. Photo courtesy of David Wiesner.

I saw *2001: A Space Odyssey* when it came out in 1968. I was eleven. It changed my life—no kidding. One of the many things I took from it was the importance of the juxtaposition of images—how they affect each other.

I considered going to film school, but was really drawn to the form of the book, especially wordless books. Wordless books have this rich history that is somewhat below the commercial radar. Raymond Briggs's *The Snowman* is an early example of a wordless book breaking into the mainstream. (I'm curious as to whether it was after the short film version that the book became really popular).

And comic books were the first place I saw visual storytelling. The unique thing about comics is the space in between the panels. The reader has to fill in that information themselves, in their mind. Just how much the reader has to fill in is important. If the changes from panel to panel are too small, the experience becomes boring. If the leap is too great, you lose the reader. Finding that right balance, and mixing up the degree of the cognitive leap, makes for an engaging reading experience.

And what do you think the future holds for wordless books?

Certainly the awareness seems to have taken a big leap over the past ten years. I hope it continues. I would love to see what others do with the genre. As more young kids are exposed to them, the genre will not seem so exotic. Maybe some of those kids will go on to create them, too.

What makes a good wordless picture book, in your opinion?

The avoidance of the repetition, unless you are Chris Ware, who did *Jimmy Corrigan's Smartest Kid on Earth*. He will do a giant page of images of a character that barely change to make a point, which is a device that can be used, like I did a mini version where the boy waits for the pictures to be developed in *Flotsam*. But that is one of the decisions in a picturebook where I cannot give up too much space to that, so I did an abbreviated version of that.

Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* explores an idea at length, lots of double-page spreads; he broke it down based on a template of *The Snowman* by Briggs. So everybody reflects off everybody else. To take something at that length, it's a different way of thinking.

World-building seems to be an important element of your visual storytelling. Whether it is an alien language in *Mr. Wuffles* or flying animals in *Tuesday*, the worlds you create are familiar yet full of fantasy. Does this characteristic come easily to you? Is it part of your way of seeing the world?

Building the world of a story is great fun. As I said, this happens in the third stage of my process, where I am deciding on the look of everything you'll see in the book.

In the case of *Tuesday*, I knew there would be frogs flying around a town. This story could have taken place anywhere—it's up to me to decide. I wanted to create an environment that felt like it could be a real place, not a generic place. I found a book of old photos from the 1800s of Provincetown, Massachusetts. I really like the look of the houses, their feel. So I used them as the model for the architecture.

When I am working, I draw tons and tons of stuff, brainstorming the world and characters. A lot of it doesn't make it into the book, but I need to get a feel for the world first. Then I can decide what to use.

In *Flotsam*, I had the camera have a roll of film with eight shots—that's all you see in the book. But I drew at least fifty different photos. I didn't stop at the first eight—I wanted to really explore all the possible sights the camera could have recorded. I then chose the eight that felt like they worked together.

A world has to have its own consistent logic. Kids will know if you are just randomly making stuff up, if it doesn't adhere to some set of laws.

In *The Three Pigs*, there are several planes of reality—the story inside the story of *The Three Little Pigs*, the worlds inside each of the other stories, and the world in between all those stories. Each reality has a different look. For example, in the in-between world the characters speak in comic word balloons, they are rendered more three dimensionally, and there is a consistent light source coming from the upper right. Each world is identifiable from its visual characteristics.

You have won three Caldecott medals for your work. Do you believe these honors have elevated the genre of wordless books?

Interesting. I don't know, I guess I would have to say it has to some extent. Over time the general public has become more aware of the Caldecott. With recent wins by wordless books, the form hopefully gains more acceptance.

Research on wordless books often credits them as successful classroom strategies for beginning language learners and emergent readers. After having read your books, however, there is something of another level on which to view them that speaks to me as an adult reader, such as the conformity vs. creativity of the cloud creations in *Sector 7*. Do you feel wordless books are for adults as well?

The way that books are being used in classes, therapy, creative writing—none of that was on my radar. I was simply drawn to it as an art form, but am thrilled as to how the books are being used!

There are obviously books done specifically for adults—the Lynd Ward books, in part, were done for an adult audience in the 1930s. There are quite a number of people doing wordless for the adult market. Anyone interested in visual storytelling would be missing something important by not looking at the work being done today.