Every picture tells a story

The Matchbox Diary

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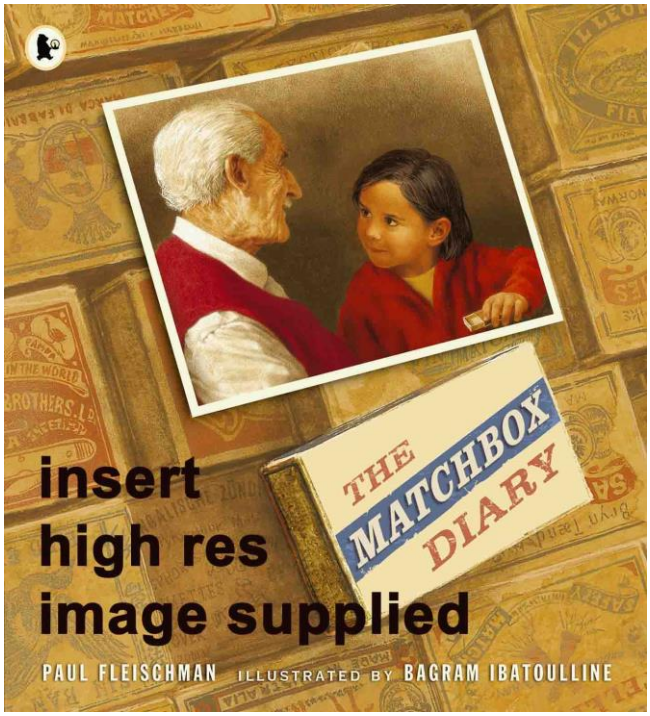
Many children love collecting, and this book suggests a fun way of keeping a diary without words. It's based on the idea of selecting things to put into matchboxes to help remember important parts of a person's life. The items themselves have no value, but as a way to bring memories to life, they are invaluable. Whilst this is a diary without words, it still provides lots of opportunities for writing and telling stories, and as always, this picture book allows plenty of potential for research.

There's much talk about the importance of literacy and improving standards amongst the children we teach. However, it's not that long ago since illiteracy was for many people something that would not have been questioned. In this article, I've come across a book which demonstrates that - along with our desire to tell a story and to record what happens to us on our journey through life. So, if you couldn't read or write, how might you be able to do that? Allow me to introduce you to *The Matchbox Diary*…



Introducing the book

This is the story of a little girl visiting her great-grandfather, for the first time. Browsing in his room, a treasure trove of items, the old man asks her to pick something she likes, and then he will tell her its story. There's an added bonus for her great-grandfather: he'll learn something about her by what she chooses.

Her choice, despite the array of fine things in the room, is an old cigar box. She, like her elderly relative, does not smoke cigars of course, but rather was drawn to the box itself. The box contains stories, rather than cigars. It's filled with matchboxes, and these are the old man's childhood diary.

He explains that a diary is a way to remember what happens to you and that usually it's a book people write in. When he was the age of his great-granddaughter there was much he wanted to remember, but he couldn't read or write, so instead he placed an item into a matchbox to help him remember. He invites the little girl to open the first one, and so he begins to share the contents of his diary with her…

The first box contains an olive pit. It reminds him of when as a young boy growing up in Italy, life was hard. Sometimes there was not enough food, so his mother would give him an olive pit to suck on when he told her he was hungry: 'It helped'.

The start of a journey

Inside the second box is a photo of his father. His father left Italy to go and find work in America, and left when the old man was just a baby. His father never went to school, so his letters home were written by other people. No one in the old man's family could read or write, so they had to take his letters to the schoolmaster: 'he had a son, older than me, who could read and write'.

The schoolmaster's son wrote down was happened in a diary every day. And every year, he got a new one: 'I had no idea how to write, but I was wild to have my own diary'. The third matchbox contains a fountain pen nib.

Then came a year with no rain and a shortage of food. A letter arrived from his father with tickets to sail to America. And so the journey begins.

Travelling begins

Arriving by horse-drawn carriage in Naples, the boy saw a car for the first time. And drinks in bottles. And the ocean. At the steamship station, the boy found the matchboxes, and so starts his diary: box number four contains the cap from a glass bottle.

On the ship, a hatpin that fell from the rich ladies on the deck above became the contents for the fifth matchbox: 'I thought my mother and sisters would look like those

women soon'. After all, he remembers that the people on the boat said that there was gold lying on the ground in America.

The ship was heading for Ellis Island in New York. The old man recalls how he was told that someone would stick buttonhooks in his eyes when they arrive, buttonhooks being metal tools for closing up shoes before there were laces. But then a storm hit the ship, and even sailors start praying together, and suddenly fears of buttonhooks didn't seem so important. People even threw medallions of St. Christopher into the sea for protection (one found its way into the sixth matchbox), and eventually after three days the water calmed.

Back in the present, the old man asks his great-granddaughter how long it took her to fly to visit him, about 5 hours? His journey as a young boy from Italy to New York took nineteen days. How can he remember so accurately? Because each morning he was on the ship, he put a sunflower seed shell in a matchbox. So matchbox number seven contains nineteen sunflower seed shells. When the ship did reach New York, and the Statue of Liberty finally appeared, a boat selling food pulled alongside the ship. The old man remembers how he was given a banana: 'I bit into it and spat it out. I didn't know you're supposed to peel it'.

New York

The little girl notices the next matchbox is empty and asks why. Her great-grandfather explains that at Ellis Island, when they left the ship, they didn't let anyone who was sick - especially with eye diseases - into the country. He'd been crying because of the 'buttonhook' man. When it was his turn to be checked, the buttonhook man saw his eye was red : 'He can't come in'. However, a new doctor checked him and he was allowed through. And the matchbox? Number eight is empty: 'I put a candy in the box. Then the next week, I ate it'.

The family was met by the little boy's father and together they took another boat to New York, and then they travelled further still by train. The family found work in the canneries, gutting fish. They lived in crowded sheds, with the other workers. Matchbox number nine contains some fish bones.

Heading south

The family continued moving, heading south. They canned fish, sorted peaches, shelled peas, peeled shrimps and opened oyster shells. The next matchbox contains part of a newspaper showing the date and location: they moved so often that the old man said as a boy he saved parts of newspapers so he could look back and know exactly where he had been on a certain day: 'I still love newspapers today'.

Remember how on the boat, he thought his mother and sisters would look like the rich ladies on the deck above? Instead of jewels, his mother and sisters ended up with fish scales on their arms, from their work with the fish. In early 1900s New York, Italian immigrants weren't always popular, and sometimes boys threw rocks at the family. And that's how his tooth became the contents for the eleventh matchbox the little girl opens.

The next matchbox is the old man's favourite. It contains the ticket for the first baseball game he attended with his father. Under the grandstands, he found more matches, and although he didn't understand the game, he was delighted to find a quarter in the grass. It meant he could go again: 'To me, it seemed like one of the lumps of gold people said we'd find'.

Starting school and learning a trade

Matchbox number thirteen contains a piece of coal, which he used to start drawing letters on the pavements. When he was eight the family got an apartment and the family shelled nuts at a restaurant, before his father got a job in a foundry in Pittsburgh, and his sisters sewed in a factory. He was sent to school, and then taught his sisters how to read and write.

Leaning English made school hard, but he managed, and then went to a different sort of school to learn typesetting and so he became a printer. And the fourteenth matchbox contains some of the lead letters used in typesetting.

Did he stop the matchbox diary? Not really. After thirty years of printing, he opened a bookshop. And then he bought and sold antiques. So, he always dealt with stories: just those of other people. His great-granddaughter goes to kindergarten, but she wants to keep a diary, too. The final illustration in the book shows her flying home on an airplane, sitting next to the window with an empty chocolate box on her lap. It has a brooch and a typesetter's letter in it. She's starting her own diary, a chocolate box diary.

What next?

You can probably tell, this is a complex story. The illustrations perfectly mirror the text and are evocative of the time in which the story is set. There are a lot of themes here which can be drawn on with your class. Let's consider a few of them now.

Matchbox diary

Ask the pupils in your class to gather together a matchbox each and to bring them into school. Provide them with a long strip of paper that they can fold so that it will fit in their matchbox. Then, ask them to write things about themselves and their school on the paper. You might ask them to write down a memory from each year they have had in school. Or, their memories of last term. Or, you could link it to a topic you are studying as a class. They can decorate the piece of paper with pictures as they go along. Then, once it is finished, they can stick it into the matchbox, so that it will fold out, and then decorate the outside of the matchbox.

Top Tip: If you ask your class to write on their 'ribbons' of paper in portrait format (rather than landscape), you can stick them in the matchboxes so that if you where to attach the matchbox to the wall and open it, the ribbon of

paper would hang down from the matchbox and be readable. This way, you can create a wall of matchbox diaries for display in your classroom (or maybe even a local art gallery?).

The American Dream?

Ellis Island was for many immigrants to America the start of the American Dream, a country where gold lay on the ground. The American Dream itself was first defined in 1931 (after this book is set), but the notion of a better life there for the taking is still a large part of why the family in this story moved from Italy to America.

Ask your class to consider the different jobs that the family take to earn a living. Do they think that the family was right to move? How important is it that the little girl's great-grandfather went to school and learnt to read and write? The idea of moving away to other places to make your fortune is not a new one: perhaps you could remind your class of the story of Dick Whittington and the fact that the streets of London were said to be paved with gold. Is this similar to what the young boy hears about America?

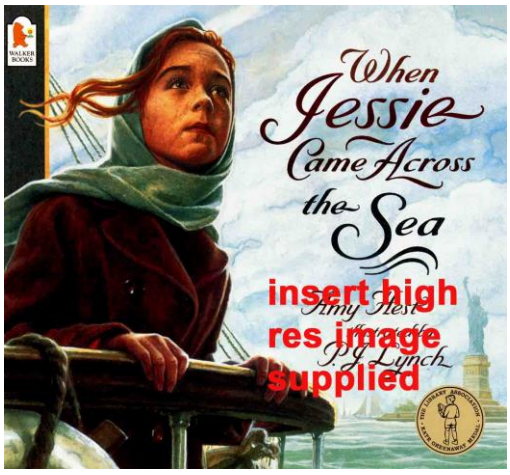
The great-grandfather becomes a printer and a bookseller, as well as an antiques dealer. What jobs would the children in your class like to do when they are older? Will they need to train for the jobs they would like to do? What sort of jobs might they need to do whilst they are training or trying to get the job they would like?

Immigration

In the story, the family are attacked by boys with rocks, just because they are different. There's also a telling comment the old man makes whilst telling his story:

> 'The strange thing was, when we walked down a street and maybe passed a grocery, the same people who bought our cans of sardines wouldn't look at us. Back then, some people didn't want Italians here.'

There's no doubt that this is a subject that covers some big and emotive themes. An interesting book to consider alongside this story is *When Jessie Came Across the Sea* by Amy Hest and illustrated by Patrick Lynch (1999).



It's the story of a young girl who leaves Poland and her grandmother to start a new life in America. Much of the themes are the same and the two books complement each other very well. It provides a strong foundation for discussions about whether it is best to stay or go, and also about the motivations for making the decision to leave something you know for the unknown.

With much in the news about immigration at the moment - and with many classes having children of immigrants in them - this is a striking way to help show the strong 'push-pull' factors in making a decision to leave your home for the promise of a better life. It's a sensitive subject, but the same issues can be considered in relation to the Industrial Revolution in Britain, when people left the countryside to work in factories. It's a good way to demonstrate what people will do to find a better life, both for themselves and their families.

In looking at this issue you may also like to consider the first book covered in the 'Every Picture' series, *The Silence Seeker* (Morley 2009). This book looks at the story of a young boy and an asylum seeker, which may be helpful in considering another side of the story.

A poetic angle

In many ways, this links with immigration, but can also be used as a stand-alone way of considering this story. When the family arrive at New York, the Statue of Liberty (La Statua della Libertà) signifies the end of their passage across the ocean, and also of great hope.

The Statue of Liberty was a present from the people of France in 1886 to America, and as its name suggests is a symbol of freedom. Emma Lazarus wrote a poem, entitled *The New Colossus*, which is engraved on a tablet situated within the pedestal on which the statue stands. The town speaks of welcoming, '…your tired, your poor / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free'.

Share the poem with your class and ask them to think about what it means (it includes a reference to The Colossus of Rhodes, one of the ancient Wonders of the World), and then consider how powerful it must have been to have seen the beautiful statue after the nineteen days at sea described in the book.

The final line of the poem says, 'I lift my lamp beside the golden door'. The 'golden door' was Ellis Island. Can you class think why it might have been called this? If the boy in the story had been found to have an eye infection (his eyes were red from crying in actual fact) what might have happened to him?

You can download a colouring sheet from the internet which includes a picture of the statue along with the text of the poem. It can be downloaded, along with other colouring sheets, from: www.raisingourkids.com/coloring-pages/patriotic/statue-of-liberty/References.

Matchbox games

The idea of keeping things in matchboxes is nothing new and reminds me of something we did when I was at primary school. We were each asked to collect as many things as possible to put into our matchboxes, with a prize for the child who had the most items in theirs. I remember a neighbour giving my mum a grain of rice to put in mine!

So, how about asking your class to do something similar. You could still offer a prize for the person with the most contents, but when the matchboxes are full, why not use them for story-writing inspiration? There are two ways you could do this:

1. Ask the children in your class to pick five items from their matchbox, and to write a short story about each of the items. Or they could combine the five items into one story. Their story should be creative and based around a journey.

2. Ask them to pick their favourite thing from out of the matchbox. The one thing they would like to keep or that they think has value (to them or to someone else). Ask them to write about what makes that item so special.

Family histories

As the little girl is hearing the tales of her great-grandfather, she is learning of her family history. Had she not selected the matchbox diary, she may not have found out this information about where her family came from.

Ask the children in your class to speak to their parents or carers, grandparents or other relatives to see what they can find out. If you are aware this may be problematic for some of the children in your class, you could instead research the meaning of the surnames of the children in your class.

A good place to start is ancestry.co.uk (although it does attract charges for more information). It may be worth contacting your local archives service. Perhaps they could help trace the history of your school or important people in the local area? They may also be happy to welcome your class on a fact finding mission to see original documents about the local area. Some Archives services will also be able to offer free onsite access to ancestry.co.uk as well (perhaps you could research the first head teacher of your school - assuming your school is suitably old!).

If the children in your class are able to ask parents or other relatives of their past, perhaps each child could do their own family tree? Some may be able to find out from where in the country their family came from: some are likely to be very recent arrivals to your local area. What might have made their families move: work, a desire to be close to elderly relatives, or perhaps a better quality of life? How are their reasons for moving similar or different from those of the Italian family in the book?

Geography

As a class, why not research Italy and America? You could plot the two countries on a map and look at the likely route the steamship would have taken to reach New York. How quickly might a modern ship be able to do that same journey now?

There's a lot of detail in the book to help plot the journey. The great-grandfather is from an olive-growing area of Italy, and they sail from Naples. They arrive at Ellis Island (with likely stops en-route to refuel: both for the ship and for food for the passengers). From Ellis Island they sail to New York and then begin to head south. Shrimp and oyster shells suggest the coast, and a newspaper heading in the illustrations shows 'Brunswick, Georgia' ('Shrimp Capital of the World' being one of its nicknames). The illustration for the baseball ticket shows that the game was in South Philadelphia, and we then find the family is in Pittsburgh. I think this is where the old man settled - the flight time of about five hours from the west coast would suggest this.

Once the likely journey is plotted, why not research the places along the way: you could find a landmark and an interesting fact about some of the places. You'll need to 'best guess' some of the journey, but it'll be interesting for you all as a class to see what a long journey it would have been - especially without the speed of modern day vehicles.

Right back at the beginning

So that's our journey of this story completed and how you might be able to use it with your class. Oh wait, there's one more way you can use this story (but it means collecting matchboxes again!). Collect enough matchboxes for every week in the school term (or maybe even the school year) and find a box big enough to hold them all. Each week, ask the class the vote for a 'stand out moment'. This could be a fact you have learnt together, an act of good will, or an achievement. Write it down, put it in a matchbox and then place the matchbox in the big box. Then, at the end of the term/school year, have a look back over all the things that you as a class have recorded. Your very own matchbox diary!

Children's books

Fleischmann, P. (2014, illus. Bagram Ibatoulline) *The Matchbox Diary.* Walker Books. ISBN 9781406355352.

Hest, A. (1999, illus. Patrick Lynch) *When Jessie Came Across the Sea*. Walker Books. ISBN 9780439137027.

Morley, B. (2009, illus. Carl Pearce) *The Silence Seeker*. Tamarind. ISBN 9781848530034.