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An Invitation to My Library

The Craft of Text Structure

I would like to invite you into my library. It's kind of crowded in here—more bookshelves than open space—but I'll try and make room for us. You should know that you being here makes me a little nervous because I know you will be able to tell all about me by my books. I feel a little exposed, *but come on in anyway. I know, I know, there* are *a lot of Cynthia Rylant books, but I really* like *her. . . .*

So many times, as I have worked alongside teachers in their classrooms, they have said to me, "I just wish you would tell me what books you have and how they help you teach." And I have been reluctant just to hand out a list and say, "Here, have at it." I am reluctant because there is so much to understand behind a list like that. It has taken years of thinking and inquiry alongside students and teachers for me to understand, as a teacher of writing, what's in my library. And when it comes to teaching, the understandings are as important as the books themselves. So it's not that I haven't wanted to share my books—it's just that I have wanted to share *a lot more* than my books. Now that *Wondrous Words* is written, now that I have been able to lay out some understandings about learning to write from writers, I am finally free to say, "Here are the books I have, and here are some ways the authors of them help me teach."

As I've pointed out several times throughout *Wondrous Words*, there are two primary ways in which writers help me to teach students about texts: They offer possibilities for ways to structure texts, and they offer possibilities for ways with words. I can show you my library using either one of these as a focus, and I will pull my books in different ways, depending on the focus we choose. In this chapter I will use the first focal point—the craft of text structures. When I want to offer students curriculum about structural possibilities, I organize my library by gathering stacks of similarly structured texts. As I assemble the stacks, I am looking for writers who have made similar structural decisions.

When I organize my entire library in this manner I have more than thirty stacks. Try and imagine that you really are in my crowded, tiny library and that I really am sitting there with all these stacks around me. I want to show them all to you, talk you through each stack one at a time and tell you what each one means. But first, let me tell you a little about what you will see.

TYPES OF TEXTS

In my stacks assembled by structure, you will see mostly picture books, with a few chapter books scattered throughout. The reason for this is simple. Picture book texts are *short*, and so considering a structure at work in a shorter text is much easier than in a longer text. But remember—that doesn't mean that understanding these structures will only help you if you plan to write picture books. As I've mentioned again and again in this book, craft crosses all genres, all types of texts, and writing for all kinds of audiences. On top of the stack of picture books that are structured with repeating lines you might find I've stuck John Grisham's mystery *The Partner* (1997). The beginning paragraphs of this novel all start with a repeating phrase: "They found him. . .", just as Cynthia Rylant structures her picture book text *When I Was Young in the Mountains* (1982) by repeating and completing the same phrase eight times. And many, many essays and editorials and newspaper articles will use this same technique to structure a series of related sentences or paragraphs within a longer text.

So I pull a lot of picture books when I organize my library by structure because they provide easily accessible examples of crafted structures in use.

The accessibility of these texts to those just beginning to learn to write from writers makes them very useful to my teaching. Once writers get an initial understanding of a certain crafted text structure, they will recognize the structure in many other texts. I fully expect that as I show you my stacks and explain them to you, you will quickly think of other texts that are already in your library which you could add to my stacks.

Finding and making your own text stacks will be important to your teaching. The bigger you can make a "stack" of texts in which writers are using similar craft structures—adding in examples from genres such as magazines, newspapers, and novels—the more easily your students will understand the structures as separate from the topics of particular texts, and the better they will be able to envision using the structures someday in their own writing with their own topics. To make my stacks even bigger I keep newspaper clippings and copies from magazine articles and novels tucked inside many of my picture books; items I've selected because I find writing in them that matches the writing in the picture book. In any given stack of texts using the same structural crafting technique, students will see writing about different topics and in different genres, and seeing this they will continue to develop their very sophisticated understanding of writing being individual but not unique, an understanding so critical to their being able to learn to write from writers.

Books That Belong in More Than One Stack

As I show you my stacks I will, from time to time, have to move a book from one stack to another because it is an example of several crafted structures. This shouldn't be surprising. Many well-written texts have several structures working in them at once. *Raven and River* (1997), by Nancy White Carlstrom, will have to go in four different stacks, and of course one of the great beauties of this short text is the way in which all the parts of it work so well together structurally. These "multistack" books are so important to my library. Writers who have crafted short texts with such a strong sense of structure help to lead my students' development into more and more sophisticated kinds of texts for which they will need to manage several structures at once.

This is a good place to remind ourselves again that many of the structures that govern all of a short-text picture book can be used to write a single paragraph, or a single series of paragraphs in a longer text such as an article, an essay, or a novel. Here's another good example. During the 1997 football season, an article by Keith Jarrett appeared in our local paper, *The Asheville Citizen-Times*. The article was about Florida State quarterback Thad Busby. The article begins with a framing question, "What are you looking for in a quarterback?" just as the picture book *I Want to Be* (1993), by Thylias Moss, is organized out of a framing question. Then the next six paragraphs of the article are written in a question-and-answer, seesaw fashion with questions such as "Wins?" and "Production?" and answers such as "Wins? Thad Busby is 18–1 as a starter for Florida State and hasn't lost a regular-season game the past two years" (D-1). This seesaw of questions and answers is the same structure Harley Jessup uses in the picture book *What's Alice Up To?* (1997). Only the beginning paragraphs of Jarrett's article use this structural device, creating an attention-getting lead-in for his editorial. So keep in mind as I show you my stacks of different structural possibilities the potentials they have not just for whole texts, but for writing well in small portions of longer texts.

ENVISIONING NEW TEXTS

I'm almost ready to show you my stacks of books, but first I need to tell you about one more thing. It's an invisible thing, so you'll have to use your imagination to see it. Sitting on top of each of these stacks of similarly structured texts is another, much taller, invisible stack of texts that reaches almost to the ceiling. I can't put the texts in this stack into your hands. I can't let you touch them, but I can describe them to you. The texts in this stack are the ones I can *envision* my students and myself writing. You see, it doesn't help me in my teaching to know five different real texts that use the same crafted structure if I can't envision that structure as a possibility for other pieces of writing. I have to lead my students in coming to know more than structural possibilities. I have to lead them in thinking about how they might use these possibilities in their own writing.

So for every stack of real texts I assemble from my library, I take the time to make another invisible stack to go with each one. It's an invisible stack of

texts I've written in my mind that helps me make sure I know the structure as a writing possibility for my students and me. It's a stack that transforms the real texts underneath it into curriculum I can offer my students. Let me show you an example.

One of the stacks I will show you has books in it structured according to time being constant but settings changing continuously. There are three books in this stack, all of them picture books:

Somewhere in the World Right Now (1995) by Stacy Shuett

Your First Step (1996) by Henry Sorensen

On the Day You Were Born (1991) by Debra Frasier

Each of these writers holds still a moment or a period in time, using a repeating line to anchor the time, and then they move about in various locations to see what is happening at that specific time in different places. This structure can be used to show contrasts in place or to show many different things happening at once. On top of these three books I can envision other texts that my students might write and structure in similar ways. Let me describe three texts for you from this "invisible" stack:

- Robert, a fourth grader, is writing about his mother's sadness that his large family will be scattered in different parts of the country during the Thanksgiving holidays. Brothers and sisters at far-off colleges, aunts and uncles in distant towns, a grandfather who has to work. Robert could write a piece using this structure in which he captures each family member in his or her activities in all their various locations at the moment the Thanksgiving meal is served. Robert could write it so that in the descriptions of the family members' activities at that moment, each one sends special thoughts to his mother, whom they are missing as well. One piece of it might go something like this: "And at the same time that we sat down to have our Thanksgiving meal, my sister Sara was meeting her fiancee's parents for the very first time. Smiling and telling them how glad she was to be there, and she was glad, but a part of her wished to be with her own parents, at her own table, at this moment."
- Marinel, a high school sophomore, is writing a piece about the injustices she sees in the ways schools are funded. Marinel might write the

opening for this piece using this structure. She could hold time constant at 8:30 in the morning, say, and show students entering different schools in many different locations, contrasting the differences in the schools as she moves to each new location. She would show how the ritual of going to school is common to all the situations, but the experience once you get at each location can be quite different. She might use a repeating line like: "And at 8:30 the school day begins for students in . . .", weaving in her place descriptors to make the location changes quite obvious.

- Alex, a seventh grader, has been studying what happens to living things when the first signs of spring appear and wants to write about what he has learned. One way he might do this is to use this structure. He might have a framing line that holds time in its place, something like: "On a Tuesday afternoon in March, when the temperature has climbed past 60 for the fourth straight day, tiny leaves and tiny buds begin to take notice. . . ." And then he could move from living thing to living thing, telling how each one responds to that Tuesday afternoon temperature at the same time.

Now this might seem like some fairly elaborate thinking by someone who leads a fairly active fantasy life, but the fact of the matter is that if I can't push my thinking to this point, if I can't actually "write" some actual text using a structure I've seen, then I don't really know for sure whether I own an understanding of that structure. I can see a structure used in several different texts, understand it as separate from any one of the topics in those texts, but until I write a little bit of it myself, I only know it as a reader. I haven't pushed myself to know it as a writer. So for every stack of texts with similar structures I have in my library, I have taken the time to push myself as a writer, to make another invisible stack of texts I can envision which use that structure.

I make these stacks because I know I will need to demonstrate this kind of thinking again and again to my students. I want them to see the techniques we find as possibilities for their own writing, so we will all have to develop the ability to see what hasn't been written yet. Let me encourage you to envision your own possibilities for other writing as I show you my stacks of texts.

So here we go. I'll show you now the writers and texts I use to help me teach writing. Remember that these stacks of texts represent only the books I am lucky enough to have in my library and only the text structures I am

lucky enough to know. I hope that they will help you *define* some crafted text structures, but they are by no means *definitive* lists:

Circular Texts

Night of the Gargoyles (1994) by Eve Bunting

House on Mango Street (1991) by Sandra Cisneros

My Mama Had a Dancing Heart (1995) by Libba Moore Gray

What's Alice Up To? (1997) by Harley Jessup

The Sunsets of Miss Olivia Wiggins (1998) by Lester L. Laminack

The Relatives Came (1985) by Cynthia Rylant

Grandpa Was a Cowboy (1996) by Silky Sullivan

Miz Berlin Walks (1997) by Jane Yolen

Home Run (1998) by Robert Burleigh

These circular texts have beginnings and endings that match. Typically, many of the same words are used to make this match with some small change to the ending which shows that the text has progressed. Some young students I once worked with called this "going out the same door you came in."

Texts with Thread-backs

Raven and River (1997) by Nancy White Carlstrom

On the Day You Were Born (1991) by Debra Frasier

The Squiggle (1996) by Carol Lexa Schaefer

Your First Step (1996) by Henry Sorensen

These texts use a structural technique near their endings that threads back through many of the details of the text, mentioning them again in a very compressed fashion, often in a single sentence.

Seesaw Texts

It's Going to Be Perfect (1998) by Nancy L. Carlson

No One Told the Aardvark (1997) by Deborah Eaton and Susan Halter

Tough Boris (1994) by Mem Fox

The Seasons and Someone (1994) by Virginia Kroll

Say Something (1993) by Mary Stolz

Do Cowboys Ride Bikes? (1997) by Kathy Tucker

The World Is Full of Babies (1996) by Mick Manning and Brita Granstorm

When I Was Little Like You (1997) by Jill Payton Walsh and Stephen Lambert

Lost (1996) by Paul Brett Johnson and Celeste Lewis

What's Alice Up To? (1997) by Harley Jessup

Grandad Bill's Song (1994) by Jane Yolen

The seesaw structure is one that sets up a predictable balance of information that moves back and forth, back and forth, between chunks that work together in some way. The back-and-forth pieces have some kind of relationship, and what's key is, when you get one side of the relationship, you come to expect that the other side will follow directly. The pairs might be comparisons, questions and answers, statements and generalizations, commands and responses—any kind of back-and-forth relationship. Often, even the sentence structures of the corresponding pieces are similar, signaling the back-and-forth movement. The structure can be used for a whole text, short or long, or for a paragraph or section within a longer text.

Framing-Question Texts

The Moon Was the Best (1993) by Charlotte Zolotow

I Want to Be (1993) by Thylias Moss

The Other Way to Listen (1978) by Byrd Baylor and Peter Parnell

The Seashore Book (1992) by Charlotte Zolotow

Cat's Colors (1997) by Jane Cabrera

With this text structure, writers work off a central question at the beginning of the text and then make the rest of the text a series of responses to that question. Often, there is some scene that is set up at the beginning in

which the framing question is situated. The main body of the text is written as a succession of responses, all of which answer the question in another way, revealing another facet of the information, description, or storyline being presented. Often, when this text structure is used you will see that the responses will include the repetition of key words from the framing question. The length of the responses may vary significantly, from one word to several paragraphs, but keep in mind that the more structurally similar the responses are, the better the text works together. The structure can be used for a whole text, short or long, or for a paragraph or section within a longer text.

Conversation Texts

Yo! Yes? (1993) by Chris Rashka

What Is the Sun? (1996) by Reeve Lindbergh

I Am the Dog, I Am the Cat (1994) by Donald Hall

In a conversation text structure there is no commentary and no narrative. The entire text is fashioned as a conversation. Usually, the text moves back and forth between just two characters or speakers, and the conversation tells the story or conveys the information. The conversation may happen through actual spoken words, or may be captured in a series of letters. This is typically a whole-text structure and can be used for short or long texts.

Texts Embedded with Quotations or Song Lyrics

But I'll Be Back Again (1989) by Cynthia Rylant (Beatles' songs)

Silent Night (1997) by Will Moses (famous Christmas carol)

The Tent (1995) by Gary Paulsen (quotes from the Bible)

Writers will sometimes create an organizing thread in a text by embedding quotations or song lyrics between sections of the text. The embedded quotations are connected in some way to the text or illuminate the story or ideas presented in the text.

Texts Embedded with Response

Nappy Hair (1997) by Carolivia Herron

Cinderelli (1994) by Frances Minters

In these types of texts writers will surround the story or the information with characters' comments and responses on what is happening or being presented in the text. The comments are like asides, and they create an interactive, parallel text. Essentially, writers create a character to read along with you, the reader, and converse with you about the text, adding additional perspective. In nonpicture-book texts you will often see the responses in parentheses.

Time Flies Texts

Homeplace (1995) by Ann Shelby

In My Own Backyard (1993) by Judy Kurijan

The Blue and the Gray (1996) by Eve Bunting

The Rifle (1995) by Gary Paulsen

This Is the Bird (1997) by George Shannon

In this text structure writers use one setting or one object as a focal point and have a great deal of time pass while this focal point remains constant. In other words, time moves while place stands still. Often, this structure is used to show changes occurring in the place that are brought on by the natural movement and changes of time. Throughout the text the writer brings you back again and again to the focal point. This is often achieved by also focusing the details and keeping them of one kind. For example, in *Homeplace* Ann Shelby looks specifically at the daily activities people are doing as each period of time passes, and so the sections of new time are matched in this way as they pass across the backdrop of the family "homeplace." Sometimes this structure is used to simply move time back and forth in a particular place, as Eve Bunting does in *The Blue and the Gray*, moving between contemporary time and the era of the American Civil War.

Texts Where Time Is Constant, but Settings Change

Somewhere in the World Right Now (1995) by Stacy Shuett

Your First Step (1996) by Henry Sorensen

On the Day You Were Born (1991) by Debra Frasier

This type of text is a reverse of the "time flies text." Using this text structure, writers will hold a moment or a period of time still, often using a repeating

line to do so, and will move about in various locations to see what is happening at that specific time in different places. This structure can be used to show contrasts in place or to show many different things happening at the same moment.

Narrative Poem Texts

Mississippi Mud: Three Prairie Journals (1997) by Ann Turner

Been to Yesterdays (1995) by Lee Bennett Hopkins

Soda Jerk (1990) by Cynthia Rylant

Nathaniel Talking (1988) by Eloise Greenfield

Meet Danitra Brown (1994) by Nikki Grimes

Out of the Dust (1997) by Karen Hesse (chapter book)

Santa's Time Off (1997) by Bill Maynard

Family Reunion (1994) by Marilyn Singer

These texts are actually structured as a series of separate poems that can be read individually, but when they are read together they have narrative or expository elements that tie them together—characters, setting, plot, information. Basically this is a cross-genre text structure where poetry is used to write memoir, fiction, nonfiction, or any other genre.

Thematic Poem Texts

That Sweet Diamond (1998) by Paul B. Janeczko

It's Raining Laughter (1997) by Nikki Grimes

Sky Words (1994) by Marilyn Singer

This Big Sky (1998) by Pat Mora

Cactus Poems (1998) by Frank Asch and Ted Levin

Water Music (1995) by Jane Yolen

Sacred Places (1996) by Jane Yolen

Come Sunday (1996) by Nikki Grimes

Lunch Money and Other Poems About School (1995) by Carol Diggory Shields

Insectlopedia (1998) by Douglas Florian

These texts are written as a series of poems about a single topic. Significantly, each of these texts is by a single poet (or in one case, two poets). They are not collections of poems by various poets writing on the same topic. The reason this is significant is that these texts can show writers a way of using poetry to write about many aspects of a single topic, as a single author.

Lyrical Fact Texts

On the Day You Were Born (1991) by Debra Frasier

Out of the Ocean (1998) by Debra Frasier

Cactus Poems (1998) by Frank Asch and Ted Levin

Moonflower (1997) by Peter and Jean Loewer

All Pigs Are Beautiful (1993) by Dick King-Smith

Big Blue Whale (1997) by Nicola Davies

The World Is Full of Babies (1996) by Mick Manning and Brita Granstorm

Sky Tree (1995) by Thomas Locker

Welcome to the Ice House (1998) by Jane Yolen

Where Once There Was a Wood (1996) by Denise Fleming

Dream Weaver (1998) by Jonathan London

Lewis and Papa: Adventure on the Sante Fe Trail (1998) by Barbara Joosse

In these texts writers pay some sort of lyrical tribute to their subjects, either through story or poetry or beautiful description, and then somewhere in the text (often at the end, but sometimes to the side or in the pictures) facts that support the tribute are pulled out and explained, much as they might be in an encyclopedia or reference book. Writers of these texts are able to address nonfiction subjects in compelling ways for readers.

Alphabet Texts

A Is for Africa (1993) by Ifeoma Onyefulu

A Mountain Alphabet (1996) by Margriet Ruurs

Autumn Acrostics (1997) by Steven Schnur

ABC I Like Me! (1997) by Nancy L. Carlson

The Desert Alphabet Book (1994) by Jerry Pallotta

Many Nations: An Alphabet of Native America (1997) by Joseph Bruchac

On the River ABC (1993) by Caroline Stutson

Alphabetical structure is no longer reserved just for label books that teach the alphabet. Writers are using alphabet structures to write nonfiction, fiction, poetry, description, memoir. Basically any genre can adopt this structure. You will find great variety in the different ways writers incorporate the letters into the twenty-six text sections, ranging from the simple label format to more sophisticated weaving of letters into sentences or longer narrative passages.

Vignette Texts with Repeating Lines or Phrases

I Love Animals (1994) by Flora McDonnell

I Love Boats (1995) by Flora McDonnell

The Someday House (1996) by Anne Shelby

When I Was Young in the Mountains (1982) by Cynthia Rylant

When I Was Little (1993) by Jamie Lee Curtis

Nocturne (1997) by Jane Yolen

The World Is Full of Babies (1996) by Mick Manning and Brita Granstorm

When Hunger Calls (1994) by Bert Kitchen

Somewhere Today (1992) by Bert Kitchen

The Sunsets of Miss Olivia Wiggins (1998) by Lester L. Laminack

High in the Mountains (1989) by Ruth Yaffe Radin

This is a very common text structure, appearing as a whole-text structure in many short texts and as a section structure in many long texts. The text moves from vignette to vignette with the help of a repeating line or phrase that either begins or ends each vignette. The vignettes may be chunks of information, description, or narration. The repeating line or phrase is generally a statement that captures the connection common to all the vignettes.

Texts Fashioned as a Series of Short Memoirs

Childtimes (1993) by Eloise Greenfield

Walking the Log: Memories of a Southern Childhood (1994) by Bessie Nickens

House on Mango Street (1991) by Sandra Cisneros

Writers of memoir sometimes structure their texts by writing a series of short memoir pieces that can each stand alone as single narrative units. The short pieces appear essentially without transitions between them, just as a collection of short stories would be assembled, with titles between each story. The difference in the structure of a short story collection and in this memoir structure, however, is that characters, settings, and some plots travel across the stories as they are written to illuminate a specific life.

Journal or Diary Texts

Mississippi Mud: Three Prairie Journals (1997) by Ann Turner

Starry Messenger (1996) by Peter Sis

Searching for Laura Ingalls (1995) by Kathryn Lasky and Meribah Knight

Catherine, Called Birdy (1994) by Karen Cushman

Celia's Island Journal (1992) by Loretta Krupinski

Sometimes writers will structure a text around diary or journal entries. The text may be made up of *only* the entries in the journal or diary, without any parallel text. In these cases the entries are usually dated, and sometimes they may be titled or sectioned off as well. A variation of this structure is to weave together journal or diary entries with commentary or narration, creating parallel or interactive texts. The journal/diary entries may have the same speaker as the accompanying text, or the speakers may be different. In either case the journal/diary entries may be excerpts from journals and diaries of real people, but writers may, for a variety of purposes, also create entries for fictional characters to either tell a story or present nonfictional information through a character.

Letter Texts

Dear Mr. Blueberry (1991) by Simon James

Dear Rebecca, Winter Is Here (1993) by Jean Craighead George

Nettie's Trip South (1987) by Ann Turner

The Gardener (1997) by Sarah Stewart

Writers will sometimes choose to structure a text as a letter (when it is actually not a letter, of course). The text might be a single letter, or a series of letters either back and forth among two or more characters or over time from only one character. While maintaining all the genre aspects of letter writing, the content of the letter(s) can help writers with almost any purpose, from telling a fictional story to conveying important information in a professional nonfiction article. The letters may be embedded in commentary or narration, or they may stand alone in the text.

Two-Part Texts—Changing Situation

Night in the Country (1986) by Cynthia Rylant

Rainflowers (1992) by Ann Turner

Sophie (1994) by Mem Fox

Underground Train (1997) by Mary Quattlebaum

Raven and River (1997) by Nancy White Carlstrom

When you read a text structured in this way, you feel as if the text clearly has two parts to it. Writers write the first part of the text with the content strongly influenced by some situational factor, and then in the second part of the text that factor changes and its influence on the text is clear. Everything is one way, and then it changes and everything is another way. For example, in *Sophie*, the grandfather first takes care of Sophie, and then as he ages, Sophie takes care of him. In *Rainflowers*, in the first half of the text a storm is building, and in the second half the sun returns and the storm goes away. Generally, this type of text is used to show some kind of contrast, and it is a common paragraph or section structure used in longer texts. The shift doesn't have to come in the middle of the text; it can come at any point.

Two-Part Texts—Shifting Focus or Perspective

For the Love of the Game: Michael Jordan and Me (1997) by Eloise Greenfield

Whoever You Are (1997) by Mem Fox

This structure is quite similar to the preceding one. Just as with changing situations, there is a clear place in the text where the second half of the content is contrasted to the first half. The difference is that in these texts, the contrast comes about not because of a changed situation that is part of the narrative, but because the writer simply shifts the focus or perspective and takes the reader in another direction. In other words, the shift is not embedded in a situation in a story—it simply happens. Often, in this text structure writers will bring the two parts of the text together in some way as an ending.

Story within a Story

We Got Here Together (1994) by Kim Stafford

Knots on a Counting Rope (1987) by Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault

Everglades (1995) by Jean Craighead George

The Seashore Book (1992) by Charlotte Zolotow

The First Song Ever Sung (1993) by Laura Krauss Melmed

When writers use this structure, they use one story to tell another story or to present information, memoir, or description. The structure has a framing story which generally has some sort of "trigger" in it that moves the text to the inside story. The trigger may be another character asking a question, or some other stimulus in the frame story's setting that takes the text to the inside story. Often, the text moves between the two stories as characters from the frame story interact by commenting on the inside story being revealed.

Inanimate Voice Text

Cry Me a River (1991) by Rodney McRae

Mojave (1988) by Diane Seibert

Water Dance (1997) by Thomas Locker

North Country Spring (1997) by Reeve Lindbergh

In this way of writing a text, an inanimate "character" has the speaking role that narrates the text. The decision to fashion a text in this way allows the writer to shift readers' attention to an unusual, unexpected perspective. The effect is surprising because it truly "brings to life" something that is lifeless, something that we do not expect to speak.

Photo-Poetry

Brown Angels (1993) by Walter Dean Myers

Something Permanent (1994) by Cynthia Rylant and Walker Evans

Water Music (1995) by Jane Yolen

Sometimes writers will structure a text as a series of poems that accompany photographs which interest them. Usually the photos are connected to a central idea, making the collection thematic rather than random.

Photo-Narratives

In My Family/En Mi Familia (1996) by Carmen Lomas Garza

Snapshots from the Wedding (1997) by Gary Soto

Texts written in this way are fashioned to sound like someone is showing the reader a photo album and narrating the story of each picture. As each new page is turned and a new photo or picture is revealed, it is accompanied by narration such as, "This is my sister Mary Jane's birthday party" (*In My Family*); again, so it sounds like someone showing the reader a photo album. In the case of *In My Family*, Carmen Lomas Garza actually was telling Harriet Rohmer the story of each picture, and they decided to retain that show-the-picture, tell-the-story voice rather than change it. Gary Soto uses the same voice—only fictionalized—in *Snapshots.*

Narratives Sequenced by a Series of Objects, People, or Animals

We Had a Picnic This Sunday Past (1997) by Jacqueline Woodson

Aunt Flossie's Hats (and Crabcakes Later) (1991) by Elizabeth F. Howard

So Much (1994) by Trish Cooke

Wilford Gordon McDonald Partridge (1985) by Mem Fox
All the Places to Love (1994) by Patricia MacLachlan
A Street Called Home (1997) by Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson
The Very Hungry Caterpillar (1987) by Eric Carle
Raven and River (1997) by Nancy White Carlstrom
Grandad Bill's Song (1994) by Jane Yolen

Texts structured in this way tell stories that are sequenced primarily by moving through various objects, people, or animals, rather than the more traditional event sequencing of many narrative texts. These texts move the narrative along by moving from object to object, person to person, or animal to animal and the reader comes to expect that the next part of the story will be connected to the next object, animal, or person.

Idea Texts Sequenced by a Series of Objects, People, Animals, or Concepts

In the Wild (1997) by Nora Leigh Ryder
Do They Scare You? (1992) by Sneed B. Collard
If You Want to Find Golden (1993) by Eileen Spinelli
Families of the Deep Blue Sea (1995) by Kenneth Mallory
Water Dance (1997) by Thomas Locker
Rough Sketch Beginning (1996) by James Berry
Chidi Only Likes Blue (1997) by Ifeoma Onyefulu

These texts are very similar to those above, the difference being that these texts are not storytelling narratives, so the movement through the series of objects, people, animals, or concepts doesn't work to tell a single story. Instead, these texts follow an idea through these various things. For example, *Do They Scare You?* looks at the idea of very unusual, some might say scary, animals and why they look the way they do. This structure is quite common and very useful for many types of informational writing, but can also be used for descriptive texts.

Handbook or Guide Texts

Tomorrow on Rocky Pond (1993) by Lynn Reiser

The Pirate's Handbook (1995) by Margaret Lincoln

The Knight's Handbook (1997) by Christopher Gravett

These texts, which aren't really intended as real handbooks or guides, use this familiar structure to tell a story or present information. The texts have sections of explanations, lists of advice, diagrams on how to do things, and so forth, just as a real handbook or guide would, but they are actually parodies of that genre, using it to achieve some other purpose.

Cumulative Texts

Here Is the Southwestern Desert (1995) by Madeleine Dunphy

Bringing the Rain to Kipiti Plain (1981) by Verna Aardema

This Is the Bird (1997) by George Shannon

This Is the Star (1996) by Joyce Dunbar and Gary Blythe

These are "The house that Jack built" texts, very complicated structurally. Using lots of repetition, they add layers of new details to previous ones, and each text section repeats all the previous details. Often, the texts turn in the middle and take layers away until the text is stripped back to the original, single detail. This is not a text structure you will find often in writing for adults, unless it is used as parody. You might be surprised, however, that the structure is used in some texts such as *Here is the Southwestern Desert* and *Bringing the Rain to Kipiti Plain*, that are not simply fun, silly texts. Each of these conveys a lot of nonfiction information using the cumulative structure. For a writer to choose this text structure, he or she needs to be working with information or a storyline that is clearly cause-effect in nature, and to be writing for an audience who will not be distracted by the excessive repetition in the text.

Multigenre Texts

Our House: Stories of Levittown (1995) by Pam Conrad

Tears of a Tiger (1996) by Sharon Draper

Katja's Book of Mushrooms (1997) by Katja Arnold with Sam Swope

These texts are structured in sections written in different genres. In a single text, writers may combine sections written as letters, journal entries, interview transcripts, memoirs, phone conversation transcripts, homework assignments, encyclopedia entries, newspaper articles, refrigerator notes, poems, short stories, etc., etc. These texts read like a menagerie of writing, but together the various genres tell a single story or build a single idea.

Participation Texts

Shark in the Sea (1997) by Joanne Ryder

Winter Whale (1991) by Joanne Ryder

Families of the Deep Blue Sea (1995) by Kenneth Mallory

The Seashore Book (1992) by Charlotte Zolotow

These texts use a second-person "you" to address readers directly and invite them to participate in the text. The effect of this is that it makes readers feel as if they are experiencing what the "characters" are experiencing.

Geographical Texts

Tulip Sees America (1998) by Cynthia Rylant

How to Make an Apple Pie and See the World (1994) by Marjorie Priceman

These texts borrow specific geographical structures to help them move their narratives along. The pieces of text work together to create a story that follows a real map from place to place. Often, each "stop" on the map in the text will be written in a similar way, with corresponding kinds of details and sometimes even similar sentence structures.

Texts That Borrow a Structure from Nature

My Mama Had a Dancing Heart (1995) by Libba Moore Gray

Pond Year (1995) by Kathryn Lasky

Let's Eat (1996) by Ana Zamorano

Trevor's Wiggly Wobbly Tooth (1998) by Lester L. Laminack

Water Dance (1997) by Thomas Locker

Look to the North: A Wolf Pup Diary (1997) by Jean Craighead George

Snow Toward Evening (1990) by Thomas Locker

Moonstick: The Seasons of the Sioux (1997) by Eve Bunting

Texts like these are written to follow some natural structure that exists in the universe. Often, these universal structures are chronological in nature, so they help establish time movement in the texts—days of the week, months of the year, seasons, etc.—but not always. Writers may also borrow stages of a cycle for text structures, as Locker did in *Water Dance*.

Repeated, Wraparound Paragraph Structure

Tulip Sees America (1998) by Cynthia Rylant

The Important Book (1949) by Margaret Wise Brown

If You're Not From the Prairie (1995) by David Bouchard

Raven and River (1997) by Nancy White Carlstrom

Sometimes writers will construct a very sophisticated text in which a long series of paragraphs (sometimes the whole text) is structured repeatedly in the same exact way. In the four example texts above, each writer uses a similar wraparound structure for paragraphs in which a beginning and an ending sentence, the first a statement, the last a clarification of that statement, wrap themselves around a body of details in the middle sentences.

References

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Jarrett, Keith, "He's lost just once, but Busby still criticized," *Asheville Citizen-Times,* 6 November 1997, D-1.