

# History, hope and long-lasting beauty

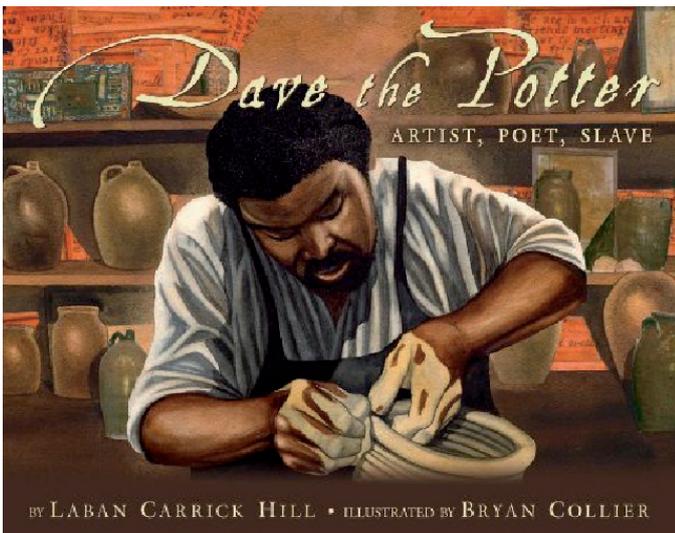
Di Smith, independent literacy consultant

Di Smith worked with two classes of Year 6 pupils and their teachers exploring the difficult issue of slavery through a quality picture book.

## **To us it is just dirt, the ground we walk on...**

How can difficult concepts be sensitively introduced, especially when those concepts may have personal and social significance for children? How can you give Y5/6 children the opportunity to gain an understanding of slavery that also recognises the humanity and qualities of the people involved?

The use of a quality picture book may be one route. Such a book could be *Dave the Potter Artist, Poet, Slave* by Laban Carrick Hill and illustrated by Bryan Collier.



This was an Honour Book (runner up) for the Caldecot Medal in 2011, an American award for the best children's book illustrator of the year. Dave was born into slavery in South Carolina around the turn of the nineteenth century. What is known about him suggests that his life as a slave mirrored the major upheavals of the next 70 years of USA history. Having learnt his craft, he worked as a potter, was sold to several different owners, survived the civil war and eventually obtained his freedom.

The written text describes the different stages in the process that Dave went through to produce pots, some of them:

*'large enough to store  
a season's grain harvest,  
to put up salted meat,  
to hold memories.'*

The words emphasise Dave's physical strength, skill and knowledge whilst also suggesting the mystery and magic of what is happening:

*'as the jar took the shape  
Dave knew was there,  
even before he worked  
he raw mound on his wheel.'*

The final part of the text reveals another aspect of this talented man – the poet. It describes how Dave uses a stick to inscribe the jar with his poem:

*'I wonder where is all my relation  
Friendship and, every nation.'*

August 16, 1857

## **Words and artistry combined**

The character that the author portrays is powerful and talented with very little reference to his wider context; that is left to the illustrator. Bryan Collier (2010) argues that, 'the goal of the illustrator is to expand the text' and he does this through watercolour illustrations and multimedia collages. The watercolour illustrations use posture and viewpoint to expand the reader's understanding of Dave. Close-ups of his hands mixing the clay with water, throwing the clay, pulling out the shape of the pot, coiling clay around the rim and finally writing the poem with a stick, illustrate the qualities described in the text. Broader watercolour scenes also use the postures of Dave's body to illustrate the focus he gives to the task and the satisfaction he derives from a job well done. However it is the multimedia collages made from old magazines that give clues to Dave's situation: a sailing ship on the horizon, a wooden shack through the window of the pottery, a leafless tree with closed-eyed African faces as the bark and again through the pottery window a large, white columned plantation house.

*'I just tear out the images or patterns that I need for the collage, that lends itself well to the story that I'm doing ... gluing and sticking, taking away and adding to the image.'*

Collier (2010)

The multimodal collages also use posture to illustrate the emotion of joy that Dave feels in his craft despite

the context of slavery. It is a similar technique to that of William Blake who used 'curved and rising lines' to express joy in his illustrations (Crandall in Joosen and Vloeberghs 2008 p. 112), a technique that Collier also employs in the collage background of the tree with African faces as Dave's arms spread and his face with eyes closed tilts upwards. In this way, Collier uses multimodal techniques to give children a more complex view of the possibly difficult theme of resilience – how someone can maintain their humanity and dignity despite being the property of another person.

### **I wonder why...?**

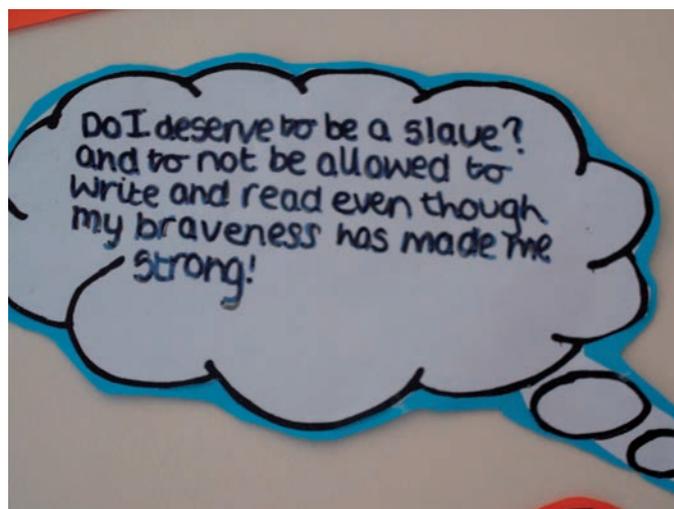
I used *Dave the Potter Artist, Poet, Slave* as part of Arboretum Primary School's Book Week, working with a group of 48 Year 6 pupils and their teachers. Most of the children (95%) were bilingual or multilingual. After looking at examples of Dave's poems to engage their interest, the children were shown an e-mail from the International Museum of Slavery in Liverpool requesting their help in designing an exhibition to inform other Year 5/6 pupils about *Dave the Potter*. A shared reading of the book followed with discussion around points such as 'Tell us what you have learned about Dave so far?'; 'What questions would you like to ask Dave now?'; 'What do you think Dave is going to do next?' and 'How do you think Dave felt when he had finished a pot?' During the discussions it became apparent that the children were using the pictures as well as the text as further points of understanding, for example, Amaan asked why the ship was there and a group of children noticed and compared the different houses that appeared in the pottery workshop window.

### **Transcending the limitations of slavery**

Working in the teams who would devise and produce the exhibitions, pupils had further experiences to increase their empathy with Dave. They also had opportunities to reflect and record their team's reactions in a writing journal. They spent time using selected websites to research and increase their knowledge and understanding of slavery and of Dave. They were given the opportunity to find the answers to some of the questions that emerged during the shared reading session. For example, they were able to discover who had taught Dave to make pots and also the possibility that it was his owner Harvey Drake who had taught him to read and write. Making a clay coil pot themselves and collecting the wider vocabulary to describe the experience was particularly important for EAL children. The use of drama techniques such as conscience alley offered further authentic opportunities to explore the dilemmas of Dave's life. Should he or should he not continue to attempt to communicate with an unknown audience when the very act might endanger his life? The genuine purpose and audience of the final task also gave them focus as they worked enthusiastically to produce their exhibitions.

The final outcome – exhibitions for children of their own age – gave them the platform to share their amazed reactions to the difficulties of Dave's situation; he was not paid for his work, he lived with the possibility that at any time he could

have been severely punished for displaying his writing skills so openly and at the same time his skill, strength and dignity were very evident.



However it was also apparent that the quality of the text could have offered other learning opportunities, for example, into poetry and the effect different contexts and surfaces for writing might have on a reader and writer. A visit to the International Museum of Slavery in Liverpool or the Wilberforce House Museum in Hull could support a deeper investigation into where Dave and his relatives had come from and how they had arrived at the plantation, offering another approach to exploring this powerful multimodal text.

**'Picture books can be deceptive. There may be more to them than first meets the eye.'**

Baddley and Eddershaw (1994)

The reading of the text alongside the reading of the pictures in *Dave the Potter* gave the children the opportunity to explore the difficult issue of slavery in a positive, personalised context. The two modes together, it could be argued, provided an opportunity for acquiring understanding about complex ideas within an important human issue – the power of a quality picture book.

### **Children's books**

Carrick Hill, L. (2010 illus. Bryan Collier) *Dave the Potter Artist, Poet, Slave*. Little, Brown Book Group. ISBN 9780316107310.

### **References**

- Bradley, P. and Eddershaw, C. (1994) *Not So Simple Picture Books. Developing Responses to Literature with 4 – 12 Year Olds*. Trentham Books.
- Collier, B. (2010) A video interview at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzPEJkadKy4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzPEJkadKy4).
- Crandall, N. (2008) 'Image and Ideology: Narrative Techniques in Blake and Sendak' in Joosen, V and Vloeberghs, K. (eds.) *Changing Concepts of Childhood and Children's Literature*. Cambridge Scholars Press.