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Talking with David Macaulay



One year ago, the David Macaulay Studio was launched as an imprint of Macmillan Children's Publishing Group. The intent of this imprint is to offer a series of leveled beginning readers, part of the My Readers series, that will "satisfy children's curiosity about the world and guide them on their way to reading independently." Created with coauthor Sheila Keenan, each title is designed to provide information about how things work, from machines to buildings to body parts. Macaulay has long been known for his work in nonfiction through books such as *Cathedral* (1973), *Castle* (1977), *The Way Things Work* (1988), and *The Way We Work* (2008)—each title containing 80 to more than 300 pages that explore a variety of subjects in great detail. The award-winning author and illustrator spoke with us about focusing his talents on writing and illustrating—and reworking some of his previous books—for a new audience.

BKL: You have previously commented that your process of illustrating begins with reading. As you began working on nonfiction for beginning readers, did you read books in this format?

MACAULAY: I looked at approximately a dozen books in this genre. What I found was that the art in many of the books was lifted from other things or there were photographs used from a source to fill the visual spaces and tie the words together. What I want to do is make sure that the art is as good as it can be. It cannot be second-rate, and it has to be art created for the story you are telling, even if it is a very simple story. This is how you engage potential readers. And you don't speak down to them with the visual material.

BKL: Beginning readers often need visual clues to aid in vocabulary and comprehension. How do you support these new readers through text and illustration?

MACAULAY: I want to create art that makes kids want to read the words. There are ideas and questions posed in the illustrations that need the backup of text. I don't expect kids to necessarily always read the words first and then see what the picture says. I'm perfectly happy to have them read the pictures first, and, hopefully, if I've done my job, then they will be curious enough to want to know what the words say.

BKL: Do you find this genre restrictive in any way?

MACAULAY: Not at all. Sheila Keenan has written a lot of books in this format and was very helpful in getting me started. In *Castle: How It Works*, the friend-and-foe approach to presenting the information really worked for me, and it gave me an opportunity to have fun with the art. I approach illustrating these books the same as I always approach all illustration, which is to try and get inside the subject matter—to be playful with it, to be clear, and to be informative.

BKL: The topics of jet planes, castles, and toilets are things that kids will be interested in, and they are also subjects that you have written about in the past.

MACAULAY: Information about jets and toilets appeared in *The Way Things Work*. If there is a unifying element with toilets and jet planes, it is that they are common things. They are so common, in fact, that we take them for granted. That is the unifier for the subjects I choose. They have to be interesting, but they also have to be a reminder that we are surrounded by stuff that is interesting. We get so used to it that we don't see it anymore. We need to stop, look at it, think about it, and question it. Encouraging readers to do that is a goal of all my books, regardless of the age of the audience.

BKL: Your book *Castle* was 80 pages, and now you and Keenan have coauthored *Castle: How It Works*, part of the My Readers series. How did you condense that information into 32 pages and determine what would be appropriate for beginning readers?

MACAULAY: Sheila came up with the story of life inside and outside the castle. I used the illustrations to present technical information like the cross section through the tower, or a cutaway showing the chapel, or an aerial view of the walls and courtyard. We didn't describe it, because I could show it. I can provide more information in the illustrations than I can talk about in the text. The story draws the reader into the book, and the illustrations flesh out the nonfiction aspect of it.

BKL: Was there a word count that you needed to adhere to?

MACAULAY: It was approximately 75 words maximum per page spread.

BKL: You included a number of technical terms in *Jet Plane: How It Works*, such as fuselage, turbine, and combustion chamber.

MACAULAY: A lot of my readers will already know how to say a seven-syllable dinosaur name, so I'm not worried about using words like *combustion chamber*. We have to give readers credit for learning what they are interested in. And my job, indirectly, is to get them interested in reading.

BKL: *The illustrations in beginning readers don't always extend the text well.*

MACAULAY: I agree. They can just fill the space, but illustrations have their own job to do. My books attempt to encourage both verbal and visual literacy. I am committed to try and build a more visually literate readership. There are lots of us working on the verbal, and the authors who are writing books for this imprint are committed to the visual-literacy aspect as well. It's important to notice what is going on and to pay attention to the world around you. Why shouldn't that start with the youngest readers?

BKL: *As you engage in your process of creating these books, do you start with the text and then try to pare it down to determine what to include in the illustrations?*

MACAULAY: I don't like to have all the text done and then try to figure out what the art is going to be. It's helpful to have some words and thoughts, but the last thing you want is finished text. It would be equally ridiculous for me to complete all the illustrations and then have to twist and torture the text so that it works with the finished art. You have to build these things simultaneously—it's ultimately part of the same performance.

BKL: *How many books do you envision a year in this series?*

MACAULAY: Theoretically, four a year. They are hard because you have restrictions, and you have to make sense for 32 pages. There has to be logic to the book, there has to be charm, and there has to be a reason to open it and turn the pages. That is what every book demands of its creator. These beginning readers are not lesser in any way; they are simply smaller.

BKL: *What do you see as the place of these beginning readers in the field of nonfiction?*

MACAULAY: Potentially, nonfiction can present exciting stuff. However, it's possible to take informational text and accompany it with nonengaging illustrations or images that are hard to read. When that happens, you have done a disservice to both the subject and to the reader.

BKL: *You have stated that you write for yourself. Is there a part of you that wishes you had these books when you were a child?*

MACAULAY: I'm still writing for myself. If I had these books as a kid, I would have been delighted. The key is to take these books seriously and to take kids seriously and expect them to stretch a little bit, not just in having them read words that might be a little difficult but by giving them illustrations to help them understand stuff.

BKL: *What do you envision as the role these books will play in readers' literary lives?*

MACAULAY: I'm hoping these books create a sense of story that goes beyond the information and engages readers in a way that extends beyond facts. You have to go back to that notion of being curious about things—realizing that it's actually fun

to be curious and to ask questions. And it's fun when you don't know the answers because you can still keep asking until you get the answers. I am hoping the books I am producing provide answers but also ask questions or suggest questions that aren't actually explored directly in the book. I envision a curious, thinking, inquisitive, and imaginative reader. I believe that curiosity will ultimately save the day.

Sampling Macaulay

Built to Last. Illus. by the author. 2010. 272p. Houghton, \$24.99 (9780547505688). 720. Gr. 6–12.

Castle. Illus. by the author. 1977. 80p. Houghton, \$20 (9780395257845); paper, \$9.95 (9780395329207); rev. ed., \$19.95 (9780544102262). 623.19. Gr. 5–9.

Castle: How It Works. By David Macaulay and Sheila Keenan. Illus. by David Macaulay. 2012. 32p. Roaring Brook/David Macaulay Studio, \$15.99 (9781596437449); paper, \$3.99 (9781596437661). 623. K–Gr. 3.

Cathedral. Illus. by the author. 1973. 80p. Houghton, \$18 (9780395175132); paper, \$9.95 (9780395316689); e-book, \$9.95 (9780547348223); rev. ed., \$19.95 (9780544100008). 726.6. Gr. 5–9.

Eye: How It Works. By David Macaulay and Sheila Keenan. Illus. by David Macaulay. 2013. 32p. Roaring Brook/David Macaulay Studio, \$15.99 (9781596437814); paper, \$3.99 (9781596437821). 610. PreS–Gr. 1.

Jet Plane: How It Works. By David Macaulay and Sheila Keenan. Illus. by David Macaulay. 2012. 32p. Roaring Brook/David Macaulay Studio, \$15.99 (9781596437647); paper, \$3.99 (9781596437678). 629.133. K–Gr. 2.

Mosque. Illus. by the author. 2003. 96p. Houghton, \$19 (9780618240340); paper, \$9.95 (9780547015477). 726. Gr. 6–12.

The New Way Things Work. Illus. by the author. 1998. 400p. Houghton, \$35 (9780395938478). 600. Gr. 6–10.

Toilet: How It Works. By David Macaulay and Sheila Keenan. Illus. by David Macaulay. 2013. 32p. Roaring Brook/David Macaulay Studio, \$15.99 (9781596437791); paper, \$3.99 (9781596437807). 696. K–Gr. 3.

The Way We Work: Getting to Know the Amazing Human Body. Illus. by the author. 2008. 336p. Houghton, \$35 (9780618233786). 610. Gr. 7–10.

STEM for Beginning Readers

The following titles, all designed specifically for emerging readers, offer more STEM-themed, nonfiction choices to pair with titles from the David Macaulay Studio beginning reader series.

A Butterfly Grows. By Stephen Swinburne. 2009. 24p. illus. Houghton/Sandpiper, \$12.99 (9780152064228). 595.78. PreS–Gr. 1.

From the Green Light Readers series, this book's clearly written introduction to butterflies features excellent color photos of the insects in three stages of their lives.

Caterpillar to Butterfly. By Laura Marsh. 2012. 32p. illus. National Geographic, lib. ed., \$13.90 (9781426309212); paper, \$3.99 (9781426309205). 595.789. K–Gr. 2.

This brightly illustrated book explains the stages of a butterfly's life as it transforms from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis to adult, and clearly reproduced, enlarged photos make it easy to see details mentioned in the text.

Dinosaurs. By Kathleen Weidner Zoehfeld. 2011. 32p. illus. National Geographic, lib. ed., \$12.99 (9781426307768); paper, \$3.99 (9781426307751). 567.9. PreS–Gr. 1.

Even the youngest children often eagerly tackle complex dinosaur names. In this dramatically illustrated early reader, kids will learn about the giants that once roamed the earth.

Fly Guy Presents Sharks. By Tedd Arnold. Illus. by the author. 2013. 32p. Scholastic, paper, \$3.99 (9780545507714); e-book, \$3.99 (9780545600408). 597.3. PreS–Gr. 2.

In this entertaining, amply illustrated volume in the popular Fly Guy series, the insect and his owner, Buzz, go on a field trip to the aquarium and introduce new readers to more than 400 types of sharks along the way.

Look! By Ted Lewin. Illus. by the author. 2013. 32p. Holiday, \$14.95 (9780823426072). 590.22. PreS–Gr. 1.

In this latest entry in the I Like to Read series, those just beginning to practice literacy skills are entreated to "look!" at full-page spreads of the activities of some African animals, such as an elephant eating, wild dogs listening, and rhinos napping. *What Am I? Where Am I?*, also by Lewin, is another notable title from the series.

Saving Baby Animals. By Amy Shields. 2013. 32p. illus. National Geographic, lib. ed., \$13.90 (9781426310416); paper, \$3.99 (9781426310409). 591.3. K–Gr. 2.

With the double appeal of animal babies and animal rescue, this volume from the National Geographic Readers series will find a ready audience among new readers. Other recent books in the series include *Polar Bears* and *Monkeys*.

Sharks! By Sindy McKay. Illus. by Judith Hunt and Wendy Smith. 2012. 44p. Treasure Bay, \$9.95 (9781601152619); paper, \$4.99 (9781601152626). 597.3. Gr. 1–2.

An informative book on an ever-popular topic, *Sharks!* is a high-interest addition to the We Both Read series, which features two parallel texts: one with smaller type, longer sentences, and more multisyllabic words, and another with large-print text that uses shorter words and sentences for new readers.

Spiders. By Nic Bishop. 2012. 32p. illus. Scholastic, paper, \$3.99 (9780545237574). 596. PreS–Gr. 2.

Designed for independent readers in first and second grades, this title, which draws some visual material from *Nic Bishop Spiders* (2007), offers a completely new text that is shorter, simpler, and printed in larger type. An excellent choice for junior naturalists. Also in Bishop's Scholastic Reader series: *Butterflies* (2011).

Veterinarians. By JoAnne Early Macken. 2010. 24p. illus. Gareth Stevens, lib. ed., \$22.60 (9781433938122). 636.089092. K–Gr. 2.

Part of the People in My Community series, which supplies a basic, friendly introduction to popular social-studies topics for early-elementary children, this entry explores animal care in both zoo and farm settings. Especially attractive for beginning readers, the one short paragraph of text on each spread is printed in a large, easy-to-read font.

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Common Core Connections: David Macaulay's Early Readers

The following are suggestions for implementing the Common Core State Standards with beginning readers from the David Macaulay Studio imprint by David Macaulay and Sheila Keenan.

In the Classroom: Watercolor illustrations provide interior and exterior views of an amazing fortress in *Castle: How It Works*. Inside, there are horses eating, children playing, and servants using thick slices of stale bread for plates. Outside the castle walls, there is an army of men using a battering ram to make a hole in the wall to gain entrance inside. Throughout the book, the authors introduce many terms, such as *catapult*, *drawbridge*, *moat*, and *spiral*. Have students identify five words from their reading and then create an entry in their writing journals for each one using the following format:

- **Word:** Write down the word and the page number where it is located.
- **Meaning:** Write down the meaning of the word, either by using context clues, visual images, or the glossary at the end of the book.
- **Sketch:** Have students draw a sketch of the idea, concept, or term by referring back to Macaulay's illustrations. Bring in Macaulay's longer text of *Castle* for additional visual aids to assist readers in drawing. Be sure that they also label the components of their sketch.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy RI 2.3.** Describe the connection between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text.

In the Classroom: Ready for takeoff! *Jet Plane: How It Works* introduces young readers to all aspects of jets and the elements necessary for flight, from the pilot to the engine to the landing. Labeled illustrations and challenging technical terms make this a perfect book for beginning readers interested in learning detailed specifics about these aircraft. The text uses a variety of text features, including labels, speech bubbles, diagrams, cutaways, a glossary, and an index. Have students create an anchor chart of the different text features they locate in *Jet Plane* as well as the authors' additional beginning readers. These text features, which are emphasized in the CCSS "Craft and Structure" standards, support readers and add layers to learning by helping to shift focus on different types of information presented in a variety of ways; breaking up text on a page and providing visually appealing components—thereby creating a more accessible format that can help entice English-language learners and struggling readers.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.1.4.** Ask and answer questions to help determine or clarify the meaning of words and phrases in a text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy RI 2.5.** Know and use various text features (e.g., captions, bold print, subheadings, glossaries, indexes, electronic menus, icons) to locate key facts or information in a text efficiently.

In the Classroom: Ordinary objects, such as the toilet, will be viewed in a completely different way after reading *Toilet: How It Works*, the third book in David Macaulay's series of beginning readers. What happens when you flush a toilet? The authors take readers on an informative tour of the bathroom, sewer system, and water-treatment plant. Have students research a common object in the classroom or in their home. Assist them in compiling and mapping out their information by using the following format: introduction to topic (What did they select to write about? What is its main purpose?); details, facts, and definitions (Which facts should they include in their information? What makes this object interesting? What technical terms did they locate and what do they mean?); and conclusion, which could be a final question rather than a statement. Finally, have students draft a report about the object and include a drawing of their subject.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.3.** Describe the relationship between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text, using language that pertains to time, sequence, and cause/effect.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.2.** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

In the Classroom: Did you know that the surface at the back of the eye is called the retina? Did you know that the reason why you have two eyes is so you can see things in 3-D? The eye is one of the most important organs in the body, and *Eye: How It Works* explains its various functions through interesting text and labeled illustrations. When authors write nonfiction, their purpose is to present information in an engaging manner through text and illustration. They use a variety of strategies to craft their writing in a way that presents a main idea through the following:

- Topic sentences
- Opinions and thoughts
- Anecdotes
- Vivid words

Have students work in small teams to go on a scavenger hunt through *Eye: How It Works* and other titles in Macaulay and Keenan's beginning reader series. Next, provide students with sticky notes, and have them post a blue note next to topic sentences, yellow next to sentences that present opinions and thoughts, pink to indicate anecdotes, and green to write down the vivid words they find on a page. Once the teams are finished, have them share their findings with the class.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy RI 3.2.** Determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.2.2.** Recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.