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Warning: This Book is a Time Machine

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These words of caution on the back cover are the first clue that this is not a typical history book. Instead of encouraging readers to take a nap, My Place invites readers on a journey. Children's author and historian Nadia Wheatley combined forces with illustrator Donna Rawlins to create a book that flips us back into the past to meet girls and boys who tell about one particular place in Australia. Starting in 1988 and going back to 1788, a child from each decade shares his or her stories. They discuss their families, pets, hobbies, and celebrations. Each of the children also leads guided tours of their places through colorfully illustrated maps. As the children point out their schools, friends' houses, restaurants, churches, factories, warehouses, farms, streets, a swimming hole, swampy land, huts, and the big tree, the reader takes a leisurely stroll through each child's world.

From the moment I laid my eyes on My Place at a Friends of the Library book sale, I began dreaming of its exciting possibilities in the classroom. Interesting narratives, lively illustrations, and detailed maps would appeal to confident readers as well as reluctant readers. There is so much visual information that every student would be successful gathering information. As they learned to take notes, students would see relationships and connections between the information in each decade. If students who read this book can identify with the boys and girls telling the stories, they would think about history in the context of the children's lives. With references to immigration, economic depression, wars, employment opportunities, environmental concerns, and pop culture, My Place would certainly be a springboard for lively discussion and further inquiry.

Could one book do all that? Was it too good to be true? When I started my semester of student teaching last January, I knew I would have a chance to find out. For weeks I observed social studies lessons taught out of a textbook. The cycle was predictable: read the section, answer the questions, check the papers.

While watching all of this, my mind raced through the possibility for an integrated unit that started with reading and discussing the book. From there we would start thinking about our own places. Like the children in the book, we would tell the story of our own places through writing and drawing. I would bring in a guest speaker who would be able to tell stories about what Kalamazoo had been like generations ago. In math, we would study area, measuring our places and drawing them to scale. We could read literature and poetry that focused on a sense of place. Science investigations might involve the ways we alter our places, our environment. I could take photographs of students' houses and families. Maybe I could convince the art teacher to work on self-portraits. Entire days would be spent immersing ourselves in an intense exploration of our places. All of our learning would be compiled into a class book, each person constructing a two-
My mentor teacher liked my ideas, but district curriculum restraints made it impossible to include reading and math. I settled for using only social studies and writing time, excited that we would be able to get our feet wet.

The first task was to gather enough copies of My Place so that no more than three students shared each book. In order for them to appreciate and enjoy the book, they had to be able to look at it closely; they needed freedom to flip back and ahead. I put them into groups of three, grouping reluctant readers with encouraging, confident readers. As the class settled into groups, I passed out books and asked the class to open to 1988.

"Look closely at the pictures and map while I read." While I read, I walked around the room and noticed students reading along, reading the maps, and quietly pointing things out to each other. When I finished reading the first decade, we shared some of the things we had learned from the words and pictures. I read a few more decades, then I asked the students to read in their groups. When they had finished, I asked them not to look ahead, but to look back on other maps to see if they could find similarities. Never in any of the basal reading lessons had I seen every group on task. And when I asked them to share what they had learned, I was amazed to see so many hands waving wildly; it looked like the students' arms were going to detach from their bodies and fly away.

"What did we learn in 1958?" I asked.
"The boy's name is Michaelis."
"He's eleven."
"He was born on Kalymnos."
"Where's that?" I asked as I unrolled the world map. When we found Greece, I asked, "What did Mick's father used to do in Greece?"
"He used to dive for sponges."
"What does he do now?"
"He's a taxi driver."
"The kids at school call him Mick."
"His neighbor lets him watch their TV."
"Mick's school is right next to the police station."
"He just got a new baby sister, but he wanted a brother."
"They had a party for Sophia's christening."
"Sophia is the one from the last page!"
"And her brother Michael is the one who went to Vietnam."
"His mother doesn't speak much English."
"She stays home and sews shirts."
"Mick plays Tarzan in the same tree that his sister Sophia plays in."
"They take walks by the canal."
"The canal is dirty."
"He has silkworms for pets."

On and on we went, reading words and pictures, discovering each decade. As we went back in time, we noticed that the canal used to be a creek where people actually swam. Deserted factories were once in production, and before that, they were farmland. We talked about how every child loved the big tree that was featured on each character's map.

After reading the book, we thought about what we had learned from the children. I made a list on the board while we brainstormed. The children in the book told us:

- how old they are
- about their families
- about their pets
- about their hobbies
- about a celebration

Pictures showed us what the child and his or her place looked like. The children also included a map where they gave even more information about their place. I told the students that we would be making a class book of our places as I handed out a checklist of things they would have to include in their two-page spreads.

I asked the students to write about all the things the children in the book wrote about: themselves, their families, their pets, their hobbies, and a celebration. They would draw maps of their places showing at least ten different things. They could
show houses, businesses, parks, schools, churches, streets, restaurants, rivers, streams, lakes, trees, sports fields, and whatever else makes up their places. The third requirement was a picture of the place. If students turned in permission slips, I took photographs of their places; if not, they had to draw pictures.

While students were busy thinking about their places, I asked them to think about what their places were like ten years ago, fifty years ago, and a hundred years ago. They started becoming curious about the history of their places and wrote down questions. The next day, we had a guest speaker whose family has lived in Kalamazoo for five generations. Putting us in a trance, she told stories and read poems about a Kalamazoo that was unknown to us. Our imaginations took a trip back in time as she provided us with every detail of the circus that had paraded down her street, and the red bike she used to ride up to the ice cream shop. She showed pictures and artifacts while answering every student's questions. We thanked our visitor graciously for giving us a new perspective on our own places by sharing stories about her place. Vivid images of Kalamazoo through the years floated through our heads as we continued working on our class book. Using My Place as a model, students were busy writing, drawing, and mapping for two weeks.

I asked them to show me rough drafts before making final copies. In most cases, I encouraged students to add more details to their writings and drawings. Keeping track of all the papers was a challenge. Typing out their stories and scanning photos, drawings, and maps was a time-consuming process, but the product was well worth the effort. Ideally, I would have involved students more in the publishing process, but time was limited. After two weeks of drafting, revising, and editing, the book was ready to be published. They named their successful endeavor Fifth Grade 'Bout it 'Bout it Places.

I will never forget the excitement in their eyes when I passed out the class books. They saw their writing, drawing, and photographs in print for everyone to see. All of our hard work turned out to be a worthwhile journey into the discovery of place where we learned "that everyone is part of History, and every place has a story as old as the earth" (Wheatley 1989).

Works Cited

About the Author
Hether Jonna, a Third Coast Writing Project participant, teaches writing and global awareness at Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse of Detroit.