

MINI-INQUIRY

Kids' Choice Topics: *The Lotus Seed*

—Debbie Miller, Slavens Elementary, Denver, Colorado

As kids dig into texts or websites looking for information, we offer lessons that model how we keep our questions in mind so we can find answers. In an effort to show her kids how to notice and think about their questions when they read, author and former first-grade teacher Debbie Miller modeled her own questions with a picture book, Sherry Garland's *The Lotus Seed*. The book tells the story of a young girl who endures a perilous journey as she flees war-torn Vietnam. She carries a lotus seed with her as a remembrance of the life she left behind and the importance of tradition and family.

Debbie understood that *The Lotus Seed*, with its powerful yet unfamiliar themes, would present a challenge to many of her first graders. Yet in the belief that kids need books they can sink their teeth into, Debbie refused to shy away from reading it to them. To help them get the most out of the book, she chose to read the story out loud several times, knowing that although they were bursting with questions, many would be answered during the first read of the book. Once they got the more easily answered questions out of the way, they could focus on the deeper, more complex issues during subsequent readings.

On the first read of the book, Debbie shared and recorded some of her own questions and then solicited and recorded kids' questions on an anchor chart—questions they asked before and during Debbie's reading. On the second day, they reviewed their original questions and marked with an A those that were answered. Many had been answered by reading on in the text, particularly the *what*, *when*, and *where* questions: Where did the story take place? What is a lotus seed? When did this story happen? What's a dragon throne? What's an altar? What was her job? Why does she care about the lotus seed so much? However, the *why* questions were more of a puzzle.

Debbie pointed out that *what*, *when*, and *where* questions are frequently answered right in a text, but the *why* questions are not always answered so directly.

In fact, *what*, *when*, and *where* are often Quick Find questions, whereas *why* questions may take a little more time and effort to figure out. She shared that she had a lingering *why* question—Why was the lotus seed so important to the little girl?—that she would keep in mind as she read the

book a second time. She also explained that rereading may help us figure out the more interesting and harder *why* questions.

“I know that this lotus seed reminds her of the emperor, but she also said that the lotus seed makes her feel better when she is sad and lonely and I wonder why exactly. I’m thinking it is more than a memory of the emperor,” Debbie thought out loud. Tate raised her hand.

“What are you thinking, Tate?” Debbie asked.

“I’m thinking it is like a piece of her heart now,” Tate answered. “And that if she lost the lotus seed, she might feel that part of her life is gone.”

“Wow, that really helps me, Tate,” said Debbie. “I will keep that idea in mind as I read the story again and try to answer my question.”

Debbie began rereading the story and stopped when she came to the following part: “‘The lotus seed is the flower of life and hope,’ my grandmother said. ‘No matter how ugly the mud or how long this little seed lies dormant, the bloom will be beautiful. It is the flower of my country.’”

“I think I might be getting an answer to my question here. Sometimes when we read something a second time, we can get answers to our bigger questions. Our *who*, *what*, and *when* questions often get answered easily the first time we read, so we can focus on the bigger *why* questions when we read the story again. Now this part makes me realize that the lotus seed is bigger than just a memory of the emperor. I am now understanding that the lotus seed is a part of who she is, a part of her life in Vietnam, a part of her family here in the United States, a part of her that she will always have. Tate’s great thinking along with the words in the text helped me to understand the story better and answer my lingering question. Today as you go out and read, write down your questions and try to answer them. Remember that both rereading and reading on may help you find answers, especially to your *why* questions.”

Debbie sent the kids off to read and question while she moved around the room to confer with them. As she scanned the room, she noticed a group of four girls on the floor comparing witches and princesses in a passel of fairy-tale books. Another group of kids sat at a table poring over photographs of polar bears and ice caps. And in a far corner of the room, she saw three boys awash in books and magazines on tornadoes, hurricanes, avalanches, and other calamities. They were reading a Big Book titled *Disasters* and writing down questions on a large piece of lined chart paper.

Debbie checked in with them. “So what are you guys up to?”

“We are studying disasters and writing down all of our questions.”

“Sounds like a terrific idea. Why don’t you read your questions?” Debbie suggested.

In unison, the boys read: “How do avalanches start? How do earthquakes make fires? How do hurricanes cause floods? How do tornadoes attack in groups?”

“That’s interesting, I never knew tornadoes attack in groups,” Debbie commented.

Instantly one of the boys showed her text that read: “Sometimes tornadoes attack in groups.”

“Wow, such surprising information. How do they attack in groups, I wonder?”

“How could we find the answer?” Debbie asked.

Together the three disaster boys decided to continue reading with that question in mind. And sure enough, as they read on, they came to this text: “Sometimes tornadoes attack in groups because on days and places where the weather is just right for tornadoes, many tornadoes can form in the same area.”

“Just look at that,” Debbie said. “You found your answer just by continuing to read. That is so cool. Sometimes our questions get answered and sometimes they do not. But one way to try to answer them is to keep reading. You did your own mini-research right in the book and got your question answered. So what is your plan now?”

“To keep writing our questions. Some of these questions are from our head, some from the books. Our plan is to keep reading and asking questions and figuring out the answers,” Andrew said.

“So it’s kind of like the more you learn, the more questions you have,” Debbie added.

“Cause you can’t hold all this thinking in just one little brain. You need to get a little out on the chart paper or you would forget it,” Blake explained.

“It feels great to get your questions answered,” Trey said.

Debbie nodded her head and smiled as she left them oogling a giant photo of a slab avalanche.

To see more of Debbie’s classroom and her kids, check out Steph and Anne Goudvis’ DVD series *Strategy Instruction in Action* (2001).