VALLEY KIDS INTERVIEW

Shake up your next storytime!

Tips from Carle storyteller on reading aloud the "whole book" way

By Maureen Turner
For Valley Kids

Megan Dowd Lambert is the author of two picture books, one of which received an Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Honor. She's a senior lecturer in the children's literature graduate program at Simmons College. She's the mom of six kids, the oldest in college, the youngest a toddler.

But to kids of a certain age across the Valley, she's perhaps best known as Megan from story hour at Amherst's Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art. For most of the 2000s, Lambert worked in the education department there, where her job included leading regular storytimes in the museum's library — work that informed her recently published book, "Reading Picture Books with Children: How to Shake Up Storytime and Get Kids Talking About What They See" (Charlesbridge Publishing).

The book offers parents, teachers and librarians an accessible guide to the "Whole Book" storytime model that Lambert developed while at the Carle. That model has two major features: it's interactive, inviting children to ask questions, share their thoughts, and otherwise help shape the reading. And, in keeping with the Carle Museum's mission, it incorporates the art and other visual elements of picture books as much as their text.

Lambert has been a voracious reader since her childhood in Vermont. "Sometimes I say I was preparing for this career my whole life," she says with a laugh. Still, she almost ended up on a very different career path: as an undergrad at Smith, she majored in government and African-American studies and planned to go to law school. Then in her last semester, she took a class on children's literature and realized, she recalls, "I don't want to go to law school — I want to do this."

Over the years of reading aloud to children at the Eric Carle Museum, Megan Dowd Lambert has developed the "Whole Book" storytime model. It's interactive, inviting children to ask questions, share their thoughts and help shape the reading. And it draws on the visual elements of picture books as much as their text.
Contributed photo

Lambert enrolled in Simmons' children's literature program, finishing her degree with an indepen-

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Storytime: More interactive

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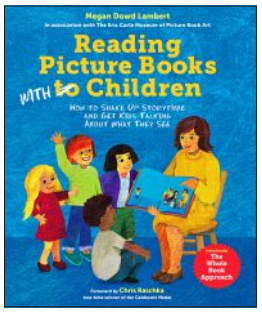
dent study project at the Carle, which was just about to open its doors. It was there that she began thinking about new ways to read picture books to children. Lambert already had experience reading to groups of kids, as a volunteer at her oldest son's preschool. There, she used what's known as the performance-based model: "The kids were really in the audience, and I was telling a story."



Now, working at an art museum, Lambert says, she began to think about a different approach, one that drew on the art and design elements of the books. That meant discussing not just the pictures in the story, but also other physical elements of the book. "I'd tell them about the parts of the books and how they work," Lambert notes. The endpapers, for instance, serve as a "visual overture" that invites readers into the book; the gutter, the seam between the right- and left-hand pages, "helps the reader progress toward, or resist the pull of, the page turn," as she writes in "Reading Picture Books with Children."

Lambert also encouraged the children to be part of a conversation about the books she read during storytime. "I was talking to the kids, asking about their thoughts and ideas," she says. "What I found as I made it more interactive was it felt more like the kind of reading I was doing with my son at home. It felt more engaging."

That approach, Lambert explains, is referred to in literacy circles as the "co-constructive model." Ideally, she says, it's the way kids are read to at home, with lots of opportunities to talk about what they're seeing and hearing as the story unfolds, "making meaning from the words and pictures together."

Engaging kids as the story unfolds can also help clear up confusion, Lambert says. "Kids are learning to read pictures as they're learning to

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Storytime: 'Whole book' way

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read words." She recalls, for example, reading Mo Willems' book "Knuffle Bunny" one day at the Carle and having a child ask why the protagonist, Trixie, had "so many arms"; in fact, the artist had drawn numerous arms to indicate the frantic movements of Trixie, who's lost her favorite stuffed animal — a common technique, but one that was unfamiliar to the confused child.

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> **MEGAN DOWD LAMBERT**
> **AUTHOR, STORYTELLER**

Over her years at the Carle, Lambert offered professional training to thousands of teachers and librarians on the Whole Book Approach technique; she also teaches it to her students at Simmons. But as she makes clear in her book, parents don't need any special training to try out the approach at home with their kids. One easy way to begin, she suggests, is to look together at the layout of the book: does it have a portrait (vertical) or landscape (horizontal) orientation? Then ask the child why she thinks it's oriented that way. Perhaps she'll notice that a portrait orientation accommodates tall buildings in a story that's set in a city, like the Madeline books. Or maybe she'll consider the way the landscape orientation of Eric Carle's Very Hungry Caterpillar mimics the shape of the insect.

"Very young children can start to understand intention behind design," says Lambert, whose book offers accessible explanations of the various visual and design elements of books, along with examples of how these elements are used in some popular children's stories.

"Another thing to do is just to ask open-ended question as you read — not 'Tell me how [the character] feels,' but 'What do you see happening in this picture?'" she says.

For some readers, stopping a story repeatedly to ask and answer questions or comment on the visual elements of the book might be challenging; they may worry that they'll lose the rhythm of the language, for instance. "But I really do believe stopping and starting at the child's pace makes for a richer experience," Lambert says. "There are insights and comments that maybe you never would have thought of. ... These interruptions ... really are signs of engagement."

Which is not to say, she adds, that there aren't times when a family might focus more on finishing a book than talking about all its parts; when bedtime is nigh, for instance, perhaps the whole-book approach isn't the best approach. "With a picture book, who knows how many time you're going to read it, over and over? Maybe one time you try some whole-book stuff; maybe sometimes you read it straight through," Lambert says.

While "Reading Picture Books with Children" is filled with examples and anecdotes about particular books, Lambert doesn't like to offer lists of specific titles that work best with the whole-book approach. Rather, she says, the approach can work with any book. "All it is is talking to your kids about art and design in a very open way" — even if the conversation turns into a critique of how the visual elements in a book don't work. "It's all about engaging critically in the visual."

And one more thing to keep in mind, Lambert adds: if you want your kids to be exited about what you're reading together, follow their lead. In her family, for example, that's meant Lambert's sometimes putting aside her inclination toward historical and realistic fiction to read the fantasy books her older children love. "The same applies with picture book selection," she says. "What are they interested in? What's going to engage them?"