

TUCKY JO AND LITTLE HEART...THE POWER OF LONGER PICTURE BOOKS

By Jean Woodbury

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I admit it...I'm a sucker for longer picture books—storybooks with complex plots and character development that draw me into the narrative...enticing me to read them again and again. *Tucky Jo and Little Heart*, written and illustrated by Patricia Polacco, is one such book.

The story is based on a real event experienced by Johnnie Wallen, who as a boy living in rural Kentucky enlisted in the army soon after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. He was deployed to the Philippines with the Sixth Infantry. While clearing the jungle to build an airstrip, he encountered a little Filipino girl. She'd clearly been traumatized by the war, and his heart melted. "Somehow lookin' at her made all the combat make some sort of sense," Johnnie said. "I felt like I was doin' all this warrin' for her...for kids just like her."

The two of them developed a friendship that eased the pain of war for both. She called him "Tucky Jo," short for "Kentucky Johnnie," which she couldn't pronounce. And he nicknamed her "Little Heart" for the heart-shaped birthmark on her arm. He became friends with the people in her village, as well, and helped provide them with food as they struggled for survival. When Johnnie learned that the area was to be firebombed, he convinced his sergeant to evacuate the villagers along with his unit, thereby saving many Filipino lives, including his young friend. Sixty-five years later, in a truly heartwarming scene, Tucky Jo and Little Heart are reunited.

Polacco shows the horrors of war, but in a way that a child can accept and relate. The reader experiences from Johnnie's perspective the first-hand suffering of both civilians and soldiers. A timely topic given the war in Ukraine. But it also shows how compassion can prevail during wartime. Tormented by the misery of jungle combat and the sight of Little Heart's emotional fragility, Johnnie realizes the truth of war. "She just blinked at me," he says. "Didn't smile...didn't say nothin'...just looked at me with those beautiful, haunted eyes.... There ain't no glory in war." The emotional connection between such seemingly different people is a reminder that at core we are all the same and that friendship can reach across different cultures, language, age, and gender.

The publisher lists the reading age for *Tucky Jo and Little Heart* as 4 to 8 years (preschool to third grade). Younger children, however, might find it difficult to read independently and benefit more from hearing it read by an adult. Older children, those in upper elementary through high school studying World War II, can benefit from the story as well. Discussion might be centered around war with Japan in the Pacific, for example, versus war with Germany in Europe. The Philippines was a colony of the U.S. for nearly fifty years—from 1898 until 1946. Japan's invasion wasn't an attack on the islands as an independent nation. It was a direct attack on the U.S. Why, then, especially in view of Pearl Harbor's bombing, did the United States focus on the war in Europe first? Such discussion could lead to better understanding of how politics impacts war and its victims.

Writing children's stories about war is difficult, but Patricia Polacco nailed it. Selected by the National Council for the Social Studies as one of the 2016 Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young Children, *Tucky Jo and Little Heart* is a treasure to be read repeatedly whether used in the classroom as part of the curriculum or read simply for the beauty of its heartwarming story. Don't be surprised if you cry during its most touching scenes.

I do...every time I read them.

Recommended Reading

Miller, S. (2022, June 23). Utilizing Picture Books in Upper-Grade Curriculum. *The Open Book*. <https://blog.leeandlow.com/2022/06/23/utilizing-picture-books-in-upper-grade-curriculum/>

Paul, P. (2021, February 30). Your Kids Aren't Too Old for Picture Books and Neither Are You. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/20/opinion/sunday/picture-books-reading.html>

Polacco, P. (2015). *Tucky Jo and Little Heart*. Simon & Schuster. <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Tucky-Jo-and-Little-Heart/Patricia-Polacco/9781481415842>

Silvey, A. (2011, November 1). Make Way for Stories: There's a good reason why people are passing up picture books. *School Library Journal*. <https://www.slj.com/story/make-way-for-stories-theres-a-good-reason-why-people-are-passing-up-picture-books>

Simpson, M. (2015, September 1). Book Review: Tucky Jo and Little Heart. *School Library Journal*. <https://www.slj.com/review/tucky-jo-and-little-heart>

Sohyun An. (2021). Teaching Difficult Knowledge of World War II in the Philippines with Children's Literature and Inquiry. *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 34(1), 10-15. <https://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/2021-09/y1-34012110.pdf>