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Miller, L. C. (2010) *Make Me a Story: Teaching Writing Through Digital Storytelling*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

Pp. 102

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Reviewed by Brenda Reed
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Make Me a Story is a superb introduction to digital storytelling that is set in the helpful context of an extended writing process. This book is for teachers who are not sure that they can or want to work through a digital writing project with their students, but who would at least like to know more about what a digital story is and why it would be of benefit to young writers. Lisa Miller's convincing reasons for trying a digital story project with young students and her sensible teaching suggestions for succeeding with that project make this concise text an ideal guide for teachers willing to try out this increasingly popular writing showcase. If you begin reading this book not completely sure what a digital story even is, you will find that the best part about Miller's text is that she takes you step-by-step through every part of the digital storytelling process, from the writing your students will do

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before they go near a computer right through to an array of assessment options you may choose from once the stories are complete. When you finish reading this book, not only will you know what a digital story looks like, but you will have a detailed checklist for working through a digital storytelling project in your own classroom. The success of this book lies in the author's ability to combine an experienced writer's guide to the writing process with a new learner's guide to using software. Miller's expertise as a writer merges beautifully in this text with her novice-level voice as a software user. The book moves from thoughtful recommendations for encouraging productive writing from students to a detailed how-to guide for moving student writing into Microsoft Photo Story 3. Teachers will find the sequential approach of the book's organization to be helpful and appropriate.

Miller writes from her experience as a professor of journalism who has also done professional development with both primary and secondary teachers, and she acknowledges right in her introduction that she is "not a computer expert" (p. 2). The author's journalism background does not at all mean, though, that this book is one step removed from the school classroom. Instead, the suggested teaching strategies and accompanying examples are firmly set in the context of primary-elementary grade classrooms. In her foreword to the book, Linda Rief suggests that the book is "for all teachers at all grade levels" (p. xv), and while I agree that all teachers will find it helpful to track the writing and digital creation process that Miller outlines, the readers who may find this book the most helpful are primary and elementary teachers, because these are the grade levels of most of the examples. A CD-ROM that comes with the book includes many examples of digital stories made by students in classes that Miller has either worked with or provided teacher professional development for. This CD-ROM will be immensely helpful for teachers wishing to provide models for their own students.

The book is composed of five chapters. The first two explain what digital stories are, what type of writing students will need to do to create them, and where the author is going to go with digital stories later in the book. We learn that the digital stories Miller is going to help us learn to teach are 3 to 5 minute stories that incorporate

text, images, narration by the student author, and background music. Seven compelling reasons are given as to why teachers should seriously consider introducing digital storytelling into their classrooms, including the ideas that “digital storytelling projects do not have to be complicated to be effective” (p. 7) and “stories can be done across the curriculum” (p. 7). Miller notes that she has chosen to work with the free Microsoft Photo Story 3 for Windows software for this text-based workshop because it is so readily available and so easy to use. Readers will likely agree that this decision was a wise one, because when Miller works through the options offered by this program, it is clear that similar software products are based on the same principles and would likely require many of the same textual and formatting decisions to be made. The first section of the book also includes an extremely helpful “Resource Box” of online sources that students may turn to in their searches for free images for use in their stories.

In the second third of the book, Miller presents many excellent strategies for encouraging young writers to produce their best writing, with an emphasis on how to write stories that will engage audiences. Miller emphasizes that one of the benefits of adding voice, music, and images to students’ stories is that young authors become very aware of the audiences who will be viewing and listening to their story. The examples included in the text and on the accompanying CD-ROM provide evidence that students want their best work to be presented when the end product is in a digital format that their friends and family are eager to see. Teachers will appreciate the detail that Miller provides in her chapter on “Taking Students Through the Writing Process, Part One”. In this substantial chapter, Miller offers teachers and students several ways to think about the writing process, including a series of writing process steps that she has adapted from her mentor, Don Murray, to help clarify for students the path from prewriting tasks to the final editing of a draft. Miller modifies the traditional writing process to incorporate the digital elements required by the digital story software, including the addition of storyboarding (matching images with text), and the whole process of putting the story together on the computer. This adapted writing process extends to a conclusion that features a digital format as a final product.

The last third of the book is devoted to the technical aspects of putting together the digital story. At this point readers will appreciate the step-by-step approach taken to guide teachers past potential chaos in the computer room. Teachers will be pleased that Miller frames the work done on the computer as an integrated stage of the writing process where the revision of writing can and should still take place. The publishers obtained permission from Microsoft to reproduce images from Microsoft Photo Story 3, which is really helpful here for understanding how the detailed explanations connect to the software. This section is written as if you have Miller right there in your classroom. She gives you teacher tips such as “before your students work with the program themselves, you’ll probably want to demonstrate it to the whole group” (p. 60), and she gives you details that may come in handy -- such as the valuable information that “Photo Story 3 automatically displays each picture for as long as the recorded audio for each lasts” (p. 69) – thus alerting you to the need to discourage students from modifying the duration of the image display at any point. A moment of frustration in the process is potentially averted by this timely tip! Teachers will also appreciate the attention Miller pays to the multiple features offered by the software. Miller either recommends or cautions against the use of particular features, always noting that your own choices will depend on your students, your timeline, and your goals. Her guidance in these choices is clearly made from experience and the reasons for her decisions are always given. Practical advice is the focus in this section, from how to crop images, to how to create text-only slides. This “Taking Students Through the Writing Process, Part Two” chapter will be much loved by teachers trying out digital storytelling for the first time.

The last chapter of the book offers teachers several choices for assessing digital stories, including rubrics that could be modified for specific digital story projects. The list of print and online references that follow the text offer further sources for digital storytelling and a helpful subject index is also included. The CD-ROM version of completed student projects is well-organized and clearly matched to the references made to the projects in the text. Overall, this is a tremendously helpful resource for teachers who want to bring a digital storytelling project into their

classrooms, and I highly recommend it for all elementary and middle schools.

About the Reviewer

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