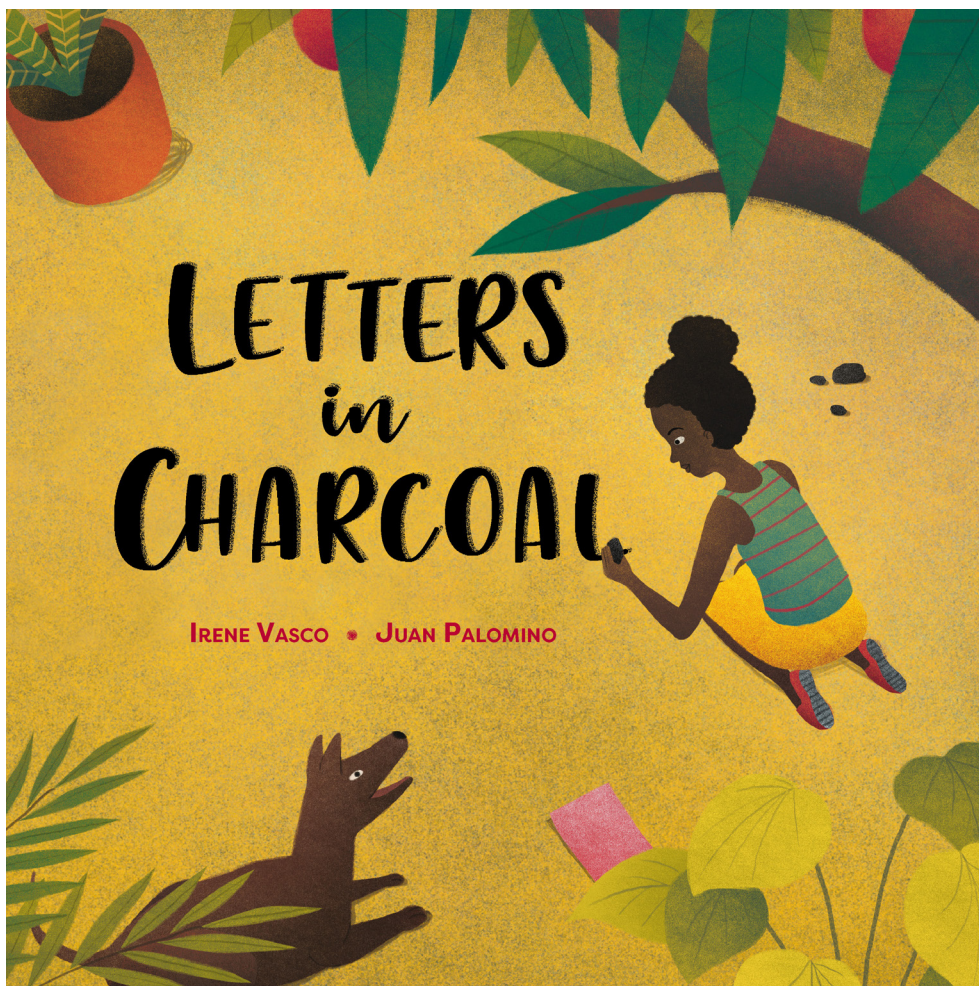


The Carnegies



The Carnegie Shortlist 2025 Shadowing Resources



Teaching Ideas for the Carnegie Medal for Illustration Shortlist 2025

Title: Letters in Charcoal

Illustrator: Juan Palomino

Author: Irene Vasco

Translator: Lawrence Schimel

Publisher: Lantana

These notes have been written by the teachers at the CLPE to provide schools and settings with ideas to develop comprehension and extended provision around Carnegie-shortlisted picturebooks and illustrated texts for children of all ages. They build on our work supporting teachers to use high-quality texts to enhance critical thinking and develop creative approaches in art and writing. We hope you find them useful.

These notes have been written with children aged 5–11 in mind. However, this is a sophisticated picture book which has scope for it to be interpreted in different ways with pupils of different ages.

Reading the book and close reading of illustration:

- Celebrated Colombian author Irene Vasco's *Letters in Charcoal* offers a powerful distillation of her lifetime of challenging illiteracy, to which Mexican illustrator Juan Palomino brings an enormous warmth and charm. Fittingly for a story about the journey into reading and writing, words and pictures work together to share the transformative power of being literate, and extended time will need to be given for children to explore the interplay between the text and illustrations.
- Begin by sharing the front cover illustration. *Who do you think this character might be? What can you tell about her from her facial expression and body language, and what she appears to be doing? What do you think she might be thinking or feeling?* Now read the title, "*Letters in Charcoal*". *What do you think this title means, and how might it relate to the character you have just met?*
- As you read the book together, encourage the children to be detectives, forensically looking for any clue the illustrator may be offering to the thoughts and actions of the characters, and to the setting: every mark is intentional. They may observe that the vegetation suggests a balmy climate, the palette is of warm colours, the ground may be rock, earth or sand, the girl's clothes suggest clement weather. If children have not used charcoal for mark-making, you could share some now — it will be used for an activity later — explaining how it is made, and that it is one of mankind's oldest mark-making tools, found in prehistoric cave paintings. *What might all this suggest about the book you are about to read?*
- Go on to share the publisher and title pages: *what do we see the girl doing here; what*

might her behaviour tell us about her; how do these images build on your predictions about the story from the cover? At the top-left the children might comment that she is looking around her, as if distracted or curious; and that she is again mark-making, this time with paint, in a title to which a large hand is adding the first letter of the alphabet: what do the focus on mark-making and letters make you think? Why might the illustrator want to draw your attention to this?

- Then share the opening illustration of the mother and son, inviting them to pore over the details and speculate about what they tell us. *Who do you think these two people are, what do you think you know about them, from the words and from the illustration?* They might note the continued verdant foliage, the bold patterns and tiled floor, telling us about the setting. Invite them to consider what the items on the wall tell us. *Might this be the mother's diploma? What might the letter say? Why are these displayed? Who do you think the girl in the modern city might be?*
- Turn to read the next two pages — of the pueblo and Señor Velandia — then the double-page spread of hair being braided. *What do you learn from these pages, what do you see people doing in the pueblo, how does this contrast with the interior of the shop, the lettered packages and marks on the wall; how does Juan show us that "letters were everywhere, but hardly anybody knew how to read them"?*
- Now share the next three spreads as we learn more about the letters Gina receives from Miguel Ángel. *What do you notice in these spreads? What might each character be thinking or feeling, and how does the illustration convey this?* The children might observe the gentle natural settings, the letter a boat bobbing in Gina's hair. *How do the spreads make you think the story might develop?*
- Read on to the end of the book, allowing time and space for the children to discuss the illustrations. Children might comment on how Juan shows the girl seeing letters everywhere, possibly a metaphor for her blooming literacy. In the spread where she sees A laid out in pebbles they may recognise the vignette from the publisher page. Señor Velandia literally gives her letters. We see her writing in chalk on the wall, in charcoal on the ground; renovating the pueblo's sign; finally reading Miguel Ángel's letter. At the Christmas party we see Gina sharing letters with Juan José; the girl holding to her chest her first book, a gift from Señor Valencia. The final vignette shows her as a mother reading with her son. *What do you think the book wants to tell you about the change that comes from reading, as girls become women; letters become words; a pueblo becomes literate?*
- After reading, encourage the children to share their thoughts. *What did they like and/or dislike? What did it make them think about? How did it make them feel? What made them feel this way? How do Juan's illustrations convey the transformative power of literacy?*

Engaging in illustration:

- Revisit a range of different spreads to see how Juan's illustrations explore the story within the story of the mother's/girl's journey to literacy, and its implications for her family and community. Support the children to see how bold colour, beautiful patterns and a sense of warmth and movement draw us into the setting and the story and help us see letters appearing everywhere.

- *Letters in Charcoal* has a distinctive look and palette. Juan's use of jewel-like colour and pattern against earthy tones and textures convey the warmth and mood of a pueblo in a South American country. You can see more examples of his work, and insights into his process, on his Instagram account.
- Invite the children to explore how different kinds of mark-making can evoke a setting. Model how to use a range of materials, including coloured pencils, oil pastels, and watercolours that mirror the palette and effects used in the book. Work alongside the children as they work, encouraging them to find tones that evoke a setting from the story, be it inside (the family home, Señor Valencia's store, the Christmas party) or outside (the pueblo, the river, the trees) before recreating a favourite scene. They could consider using newspaper for a collage effect inside, or recreate the exotic foliage and flowers we see outside. Afterwards, reflect on the work together. *What did they like about working in this way? Were there any challenges? What were these and how could you overcome them?*
- Give space for the children to pin up and share their drawings, allowing them to look at the similarities and differences in their work and to talk about what is effective in their own work and that of others.

This sequence of activities was designed in partnership with CLPE, a UK-based children's literacy charity working with primary schools to raise the achievement of children's reading and writing by helping schools to teach literacy creatively and effectively, putting quality children's books at the heart of all learning. Find out more about their work, and access further resources and training at www.clpe.org.uk.

Carnegies Shadowing Resources 2025

These resources have been created by the following YLG librarian representatives: Alison Brumwell, Maura Farrelly, Kelly Greenwood, Mary-Rose Grieve, Margaret Griffin, Cassie Hands, Tanja Jennings, Jenny Jones, Ellen Krajewski, Ruth Keys, Alison King and Lizzie Ryder.

General Ideas for all books

1. Take some time to look at the judge's criteria for the Carnegie Medal for Writing and for Illustration. Pick out one or two points and discuss them with one of this year's shortlisted books in mind. Remember, not every criteria will be relevant for every book!
2. Document your journey through the 2025 Shadowing period either on paper or in a shared digital space. You can record the books discussed and activities undertaken in each session, as well as offer a creative platform for reviews, reflection, artwork and anything else you might like to add.
3. Choose a character from one of the shortlisted books and reinvent them in the art style of your choosing. You could create your character digitally, draw them by hand, paint them or even make a sculpture. You could try creating the same character in a variety of styles - Manga, Pop Art, Disney - using different materials.
4. Create your own book trailer for one of the books, or work together to make a trailer for the entire shortlist. This could be a BookTok style pitch to sell the book to a viewer, or a more traditional thematic video.
5. Redesign the front cover or endpapers of one of the shortlisted titles. Compare yours to the original. What makes it different? Why did you make these changes?
6. Choose one of the books and reflect on the themes it presents. Could any of these themes be considered an issue of social justice? Which resonates with you most strongly? Create a leaflet or flyer highlighting one of the issues and the ways people can help, as individuals and collectively.
7. Celebrate the shortlisted books with themed food. You could bring in snacks that are inspired by the locations or cultures featured in the books, or choose foods that link to themes, illustrations or a particular character or event.
8. Recommend one of the shortlisted books using just three words. You could write these on sticky notes to put inside the book's jacket for others to find, or create a display for other readers to add to on a noticeboard, clothing line or bunting.
9. Use a jar or shoebox to create a 'book in a box' or diorama. Your box or jar should include key items which reflect the themes, plot, characters and mood of the book.
10. Host your own judging meeting where you decide which book your Shadowing group thinks is the best. Think about why you are voting for the book, link back to the judging criteria where you can and make sure the process is democratic.

Letters in Charcoal by Irene Vasco, illustrated by Juan Palomino

1. Using the title of the book, make as many words as possible out of those letters.
2. Explore mark making with a range of different materials. Try writing your name in charcoal, in crayon, in chalk. Then try string, spaghetti, and sand. Which materials do you prefer? Why?
3. On the final page of the book the author explains how Letters in Charcoal is inspired by true stories from women in Colombia. Spend some time researching Columbia and create a poster or display board using the information that you have found. If you are working as a group, perhaps you can split into pairs or work individually on exploring one element such as literature, cuisine, language, wildlife, etc.
4. Write a letter to another member of your Shadowing group, but have your group leader redact some of your words. Can it still be understood? Is your meaning clear? Does the letter still communicate what you intended? What might be the challenges of communicating in print where redaction has taken place? Can you think of any ways around it?
5. What difficulties might be faced by someone who struggled to read? How might this affect day-to-day life? What advice would you give to someone who has difficulty reading?
6. One of the illustrations shows the girls blowing bubbles. Recreate this image but add the girls' dreams to the bubbles either in the form of words, symbols or images. You could even add yourself to the image, and include your own bubble full of dreams. Share your creations on social media using the hashtag #Carnegies2025
7. Through sensitive research, explore groups of people through history who were unable to read. What were the reasons beyond it? How did it impact them? When/ how did things change?
8. Can you remember what it was like learning to read? Who helped you learn to read? Did you find it easy or frustrating? What was the first book or series you remember reading on your own?
9. The author mentions stories told around fires in the past. Make a fake fire or pretend to have a fire and read stories around it with your group.
10. Can you find the Spanish words in this book? What do they mean? Have a go at learning some simple Spanish words and use them in conversations with your group.