

Mark JENKINSON MP

Serving the people of Workington



The gifting books to school children is one of my favourite Christmas traditions as your Member of Parliament. Last year, I delivered thousands of copies of *'Twas the Night Before Christmas* to primary school pupils. The year before that, it was *The Nutcracker*.

This year's festive offering is the story of a snowman who comes to life at the stroke of midnight to take a boy on an adventure. This the original wordless picture book version of *The Snowman* – the popular classic by Raymond Briggs later adapted into a film.

Wordless picture books – those told entirely through their illustrations or with minimal text – represent a great introduction to reading. They play an important role in instilling a love of reading in children, and in fostering an interest in books. It is also worth remembering that children do not simply learn to read words. They learn to read expressions and body language. They can learn to read maps, signs, and music. They learn to read and interpret pictures. In later life, some may even claim to be able to read the room!

Illustrated books are part of that journey of discovery, allowing the young reader to shape his or her own stories around the pictures. They reinforce the idea that stories and pictures are connected. In early history, the division between word and image was blurred. Some of the first written words were pictures of the object they represented. This connection between word and image remains strong to this day. Children often enjoy writing down a story in their own words to accompany a wordless book, using the pictures to inspire them. Each tale told will be unique because every child is different.

There is no right or wrong way to read a wordless book – and they can be enjoyable and beneficial for children of all ages and levels of reading comprehension. Educational specialists have suggested that parents may like to spend time looking at the cover and talking about the title – guessing what may happen in the book. Children may like to admire the illustrations, point out details or simply talk about what they think is happening in the pictures. Parents could give the characters voices, or develop different stories based on the images. Wordless books build important literacy skills, including listening skills, vocabulary, comprehension – and an increased awareness of how stories are constructed.

The Snowman is a particularly rich starting point for children who may be coming to books for the first time. More generally, pictures have the capacity to capture children's attention, to fire their imaginations and to provide portals to new worlds and experiences. They have an immediacy that words alone do not. Around half of our brains are involved in visual processing – and children often express themselves creatively through drawing and painting as they have done in my recent Christmas card competition.

I hope that you have a magical day just like the boy in *The Snowman*. Merry Christmas!

