Autobiographical Picture Books

The authors of these books have used literature as a way of sharing personal narrative; each of the books is based on an event or events from the author’s own life. The illustrations, in many cases, have been done by others; in those cases, there’s an artist as well as a writer creating the story, which invites interesting discussion about collaborating to communicate narrative. In many others, though, the author is also the illustrator and uses both art forms to tell their story.

A variety of cultures and heritages are represented in the list, helping to extend the theme of American Narratives in art. As is often the case with good books, connections can be made to many classroom subjects, especially in the areas of social studies and language arts. Autobiographical works are also good springboards to discussing topics like tolerance, change, and having a mindset for growth.

The Art Lesson
Tomie DePaola (author and illustrator)
Young Tomie is dismayed by all the “rules” for art during an art lesson at school. The story speaks to DePaola’s development as an artist; the last page is a good example of personal narrative illustration.

Dim Sum for Everyone!
Grace Lin (author and illustrator)
A Chinese American family enjoys choosing and sharing a meal of dim sum. This book is the first in a series about the family. Lin has a kid-friendly website (gracelin.com) that provides backstories for all her books. This one is good for ages 3 and up.

Bigmama’s
Donald Crews (author and illustrator)
Crews describes summers spent at his grandma’s farm. Verbal and visual details give a strong sense of time and place as well as the bonds of a family. Note: Crews’s Shortcut tells about a specific event during one of those summers and may be better for slightly older students.

Author: A True Story
Helen Lester (author and illustrator)
The creator of Tacky the Penguin describes her journey from mirror-writing child to successful author. Obstacles on the way are described with humor; children are likely to recognize some of their own struggles with writing.

Big Red Lollipop
Rukhsana Khan (author) and Sophie Blackall (illustrator)
Two young sisters in an immigrant family clash when the older sister is required to take her younger sister along to a birthday party because their mother doesn’t understand the unfamiliar custom. The story is based on an actual event, and the illustrations sensitively convey the family’s Pakistani roots.

Tar Beach
Faith Ringgold (author, with illustrations from her story quilt of the same name)
A young girl takes an imaginary flight over her apartment building and New York City of the 1930s. More information about the author and her books and artwork can be found at her kid-friendly website faithringgold.com. Another book, Talking to Faith Ringgold, by Faith Ringgold, Linda Freeman, and Nancy Roucher, is an autobiography that often reads like a conversation and is full of photographs. It includes questions and project suggestions for the reader. The book is out of print but well worth a search.

Coat of Many Colors
Dolly Parton (author) and Brooke Boynton Hughes (illustrator)
This is a picture-book telling of Dolly Parton’s well-known experience of wearing a patchwork coat made by her mother. The story, which also inspired a song and a movie (art forms themselves), is a personal narrative many connect to. The edition illustrated by Hughes was published in 2016; there is also an edition illustrated by Judith Sutton published in 1996.
Grandfather's Journey
Allen Say (author and illustrator)
Say describes his grandfather’s experience of immigrating to the U.S. and then missing (and eventually returning to) Japan. Say connects it to his own similar experience. Look for juxtapositions of the two cultures in the illustrations.

The Keeping Quilt
Patricia Polacco (author and illustrator)
A quilt made from family members’ clothes becomes an heirloom passed down through generations. Trace the owners of the quilt and watch for how it’s used, noticing that it’s the only colorful element of each illustration. Note: Polacco has created several other autobiographical picture books as well.

Ruby’s Wish
Shirin Yim Bridges (author) and Sophie Blackall (illustrator)
Bridges tells the story of her grandmother growing up in China and how she inspired her grandfather to assist her to break with tradition and go to college.

The Girl Who Buried Her Dreams in a Can
Dr. Tererai Trent (author) and Jan Spivey Gilchrist (illustrator)
This is the story of a girl in rural Africa whose hunger for learning drove her to achieve and to serve. The title refers to a traditional way of holding onto goals. Her first name is pronounced “TEH reh rye”.

Reaching for the Moon
Buzz Aldrin (author) and Wendell Minor (illustrator)
“We all have our own dreams. This is the story of how mine came true.” The Apollo 11 astronaut tells about his path to his moon walk. The illustrations are paintings by a NASA artist and capture key moments of Aldrin’s personal history. For ages 8 and up (due to length).

Things Change
Troy Aikman and Greg Brown (authors) and Doug Keith (illustrator)
The football star describes experiences that helped him learn to overcome challenges. There are many photographs, but there are also drawings and paintings that skillfully illustrate the narrative. It’s not a typical read-aloud but shows another approach and is good for older students.

The Wall
Peter Sis (author and illustrator)
Part picture book, part graphic novel, it details the conflict Sis experienced between conformity and creative freedom growing up behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. The artwork is essential to the storytelling and deserves careful observation beyond a read-aloud experience. That fact and the subject matter make it appropriate for older students.

Dancing Cloud, the Navajo Boy
Mary Marsh Buff (Author), Conrad Buff (Illustrator)
The book portrays the everyday life of a young Navajo boy, Dancing Cloud, and his sister, Lost Tooth. The book tells of tending flocks of sheep, shearing sheep, weaving blankets, adventuring among the buttes, visiting the trading-post and listening to the talk of the elders. Illustrated by Conrad Buff, who is represented in the Crocker Art Museum’s collection.

Abuela
Arthur Dorros (author) and Elisa Kleven (illustrator)
Come join Rosalba and her grandmother, her abuela, on a magical journey as they fly over the streets, sights, and people of New York City which sparkles below. The story is narrated in English, and sprinkled with Spanish phrases as Abuela points out places that they explore together.

Filipino Friends
Liana Romulo (author) and Corazon Dandan-Albano (illustrator)
A Filipino-American boy visits the Philippines for the very first time. Each watercolor illustration is labeled with English words and their Filipino translations and shows readers both the similarities and differences between Western and Philippine lifestyles. Filipino Friends bridges the gap between the two cultures.

Pan de Sal Saves the Day: A Filipino Children’s Story
Norma Chikiamco (Author), Norma Olizon-Chikiamco (Author), Mark Ramsel N. Salvatus III (Illustrator), and Mark Salvatus (Illustrator).
Pan de Sal Saves the Day teaches children to see the unique qualities in everything—especially which we give little thought to, but which bring us such great love and joy.
**Float**  
Daniel Miyares (author and illustrator).  
A little boy takes a boat made of newspaper out for a rainy-day adventure. This is a picture book without words.

**Jake Makes a World: Jacob Lawrence, A Young Artist in Harlem**  
Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts (Author), Christopher Myers (Illustrator).  
*Jake Makes a World* follows the creative adventures of the young Jacob Lawrence as he finds inspiration in the vibrant colors and characters of his community in Harlem.

**Frida Kahlo and Her Animalitos**  
Monica Brown (author) and John Parra (illustrator).  
Brown’s story recounts Frida’s beloved pets—two monkeys, a parrot, three dogs, two turkeys, an eagle, a black cat, and a fawn—and playfully considers how Frida embodied the many wonderful characteristics of each animal.

**Dreamers**  
Yuyi Morales (author)  
Dreamers is a celebration of what migrantes bring with them when they leave their homes. It’s a story about family. And it’s a story to remind us that we are all dreamers, bringing our own gifts wherever we roam.

**The Darkest Dark**  
Chris Hadfield (Author), The Fan Brothers (Illustrator), Kate Fillion (Contributor)  
Chris is afraid of the dark. But when he watches the groundbreaking moon landing on TV, he realizes that space is the darkest dark there is — and the dark is beautiful and exciting, especially when you have big dreams to keep you company.