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Authors(s): Peggy Agostino Sharp

Source: *The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Nov., 1984), pp. 132-137

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the International Reading Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20198715>

Accessed: 23-03-2016 17:23 UTC

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# Teaching with picture books throughout the curriculum

*Picture books can be used effectively in teaching all areas of the elementary school curriculum, to show students that reading is part of all learning and to encourage them to become lifelong readers. This article describes lessons in math, social studies, language arts, science, and art that include the sharing of quality picture books.*

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## **Peggy Agostino Sharp**

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Not long ago I was in the children's section of the public library where I spend a fair amount of my time. I was sitting on the floor in front of the picture books, pulling books off the shelves, enjoying the illustrations, and laughing at the stories. Suddenly I had the feeling that I was being watched. I looked up to discover a little boy about 3 years old wearing overalls and staring at me intently. I said, "Hello," and he said, "Where's your kid?" Somewhat surprised, I said that I was looking at the picture books for myself. The little boy then said, "This is the kids' section. You can't be in here without a kid!"

That experience convinced me that it is necessary to spread the word that picture books are for everybody, not just for the "kids" up to grade three.

In fact, some picture books are more appropriate for older children than younger ones. I cringe when I hear these books referred to as baby books—in fact, not many of them are about babies at all. I also believe that Melvil Dewey made a mistake when he assigned to picture books the designation E for Easy; one popular children's book, *Where the Wild Things Are*, is written at about a sixth grade reading level.

Charlotte Huck advocates the use of picture books with children of all ages. She says that they have something of universal value and that some of the best have been missed by many children. They are short, easy to fit into stolen moments of the schedule. They may entice reluctant readers, nonreaders, and poor readers. These books can stimulate interesting classroom projects and may increase the popularity of the written

word for those children who fear and distrust it. Picture books, then, are for everybody.

*Leo the Late Bloomer* by Robert Kraus is a wonderful story about a young tiger who can't read, write, draw, eat neatly, or speak. Leo's father is concerned, but Leo's mother knows that Leo's time will come. Young children appreciate this story for its colorful illustrations and the fact that Leo suffers just they do. Older children see the humor and appreciate the story's clichés and satire. Perhaps the best audience is parents who need to know that their children will probably turn out okay after all.

*Drummer Hoff* by Barbara Emberley is a wonderful rhyming game. Private Parriage brought the carriage, Corporal Farrel brought the barrel, and Drummer Hoff fired it off. Young children love the sound of the words and the colorful explosion at the end. Written in 1967, this story has also been interpreted as antiwar. The final page shows the cannon quiet, with flowers and cobwebs all around—a fitting illustration for the cry of the 1960s: "War is not healthy for children and other living things." I have seen *Drummer Hoff* used in secondary history and social science classes.

### Teaching literary elements

I know of no better way to increase students' understanding of literary elements than through picture books. They will certainly understand plot after hearing *Doctor Desoto* by William Steig or *Bye-bye, Old Buddy* by Deborah Robison. Sibling rivalry in *I'll Fix Anthony* by Judith Viorst and *Much Bigger than Martin* by Steven Kellogg will leave no doubt in the students' minds as to what is meant by conflict in a story. Discuss the importance of setting by discussing *Madeline* by Ludwig Bemelmans—Miss Clavel just has to be

Parisian! Illustrate the effect of mood by sharing Leo Lionni's *Swimmy*. When Swimmy is with his friends, the pictures are light and airy, but when Swimmy is left alone, the pictures turn dark and somber. Students of all ages learn these literary elements—why not use quality picture books as examples?

A variety of more difficult literary elements can also be discussed through picture books. Introduce similes with *It Looked Like Spilt Milk* by Charles Shaw. This book is filled with similes of how a cloud looked—"it looked like an ice cream cone, but it wasn't an ice cream cone"—and is a perfect pattern book for students to use when writing their own similes. Metaphors are illustrated in *Summer Is...* by Charlotte Zolotow, where the pleasures of each season are described: "Fall is new pencil boxes and dark coats and heavy sweaters." After reading or hearing the comparisons in these two books the students will better understand the differences between similes and metaphors and be able to write their own.

Many novels for older children include flashbacks. Children have difficulty understanding this technique and are confused as to exactly when a specific event is occurring. *Rapsallion Jones* by James Marshall effectively illustrates the flashback technique. Rapsallion is a fox who thinks it is beneath his dignity to work. His landlady has other ideas, so Rapsallion decides to take up writing, only to discover that all his stories end right after "once upon a time." Rapsallion then looks to his childhood experiences for his stories, thereby introducing readers to the flashback. This picture book makes the time change very clear.

Daniel Manus Pinkwater is a satirist not to be missed. Like his earlier *The Big Orange Splot*, his more recent *I was a Second Grade Werewolf* makes a not-so-subtle state-

ment about society. Lawrence Talbot wakes up one morning to discover that he is a werewolf. Much to his chagrin, no one seems to notice. Reminiscent of *The Shrinking of Treehorn* by Florence Parry Heide, this book reminds us to take time to see the obvious.

Irony is another literary device that is often not understood by children. Introduce irony with *The Judge* by Harve Zemach. In this story, a not very understanding judge jails five witnesses for lying to the court after they describe a horrible creature that is coming their way. On the final pages, the creature that has been perfectly described by the jailed witnesses enters the courtroom and devours the judge. In Raskin's *Nothing Ever Happens on My Block*, Chester is bored because nothing ever happens to him. The reader knows better, however, as a burglary, a fire, and other events happen as Chester speaks.

A parody imitates the style of some other work, treating the subject in a nonsensical or humorous manner. *Once upon MacDonald's Farm*. . . by Stephen Gammell tells the true story behind this famous farm. MacDonald was not the farmer we have always thought him to be—elephants, baboons, and lions do not a successful farm make. Other picture book parodies include *A Wart Snake in a Fig Tree* by George Mendoza and *Jim and the Beanstalk* by Raymond Briggs.

Picture books effectively illustrate many literary devices found in more difficult novels and should be considered by teachers working with students of all ages.

### **Illustration techniques**

Art is another subject area easily taught with picture books. Children's book illustration is an art form in itself. Color, style, and illustration techniques can be easily taught using

picture books.

Students of all ages find it fascinating to experiment with the specific technique used in illustrations. Chris Van Allsburg used a pencil to illustrate *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* and *Jumanji*, and Nancy Winslow Parker used colored pencils for the illustrations in *My Mom Travels a Lot* by Caroline Feller Bauer. Students can easily experiment with the same technique.

*Fish Is Fish* by Leo Lionni shows students that crayons can be effectively used in illustrations. In it, the illustrations indicate the setting—the underwater world is shown with crayon rubbings over burlap, the “real” world is shown by crayon illustrations without the burlap texture, and the fish's imaginative world is shown with felt-pen clarity. Watercolors are used effectively in two very different books—*Natural History* by M.B. Goffstein and *Rain Rain Rivers* by Uri Shulevitz. Some of the best examples of chalk and charcoal are in *Where Does the Butterfly Go When It Rains?* by May Garelick and illustrated by Leonard Weisgard and in *April's Kittens* by Clare Turlay Newberry.

Share a variety of books using the same medium so that the students can see the versatility possible with a single technique.

Printing techniques are interesting for students to try for themselves. Begin with the simple thumbprinting techniques used in Ed Emberley's many thumbprint books. Prints from found materials such as doilies are effectively illustrated in *Swimmy* by Leo Lionni. Both of these printing techniques are easy for students to duplicate. More difficult printing methods are illustrated in *The Wave* by Margaret Hodges, in which artist Blair Lent has used cardboard cutouts for printing, and in *A Story, A Story* by Gail Haley, which has illustrations made from linoleum block

prints. Woodcuts are especially well done by Marcia Brown in *Once a Mouse*.

Ezra Jack Keats and Leo Lionni are known for their collages. Recently Marcia Brown has added to the possibilities with her illustrations in *Shadow*. Students can easily recognize collages and can be quite successful in making their own illustrations from found materials.

### **Art history**

Picture books can also be used effectively to study art history. Students can identify the borrowings from famous painters found in children's book illustrations—Rousseau in *A Painted Tale* by Kate Canning, Brueghel in a version of *The Snow Queen*, the influence of the Impressionists in *Anno's Journey* and in Sendak's illustrations for *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present*. Some books are written specifically to help students understand the paintings of the masters—*Just Look: A Book about Painting* and *Just Imagine: Ideas in Paintings*, both by Robert Cumming, and *Brueghel's The Fair*, by Ruth Craft are examples.

### **Visual literacy**

Visual literacy, the ability to interpret visual images accurately, is an important subject area. Many picture books have illustrations that encourage the students to really study them. *Round Trip* by Ann Jonas is an extraordinary trip through the country to the big city. At day's end, turn the book around (literally) for the trip home. The pictures are the same, but viewed upside-down, the result is quite different. Upside-downers are also effective in Ruth Brown's *If at First You Do Not See*. A favorite book to encourage students to really look at what they see is *Spectacles* by Ellen Raskin. Can the students see what Iris doesn't before she gets her glasses? Other favorites for encour-

aging visual literacy include *Alphabet World* by Barry Miller, *Arlene Alda's ABC: A New Way of Seeing*, and books by Tana Hoban and by Mitsumasa Anno.

### **Music**

Music is an art form that picture books can enhance. One of my favorites is *Ben's Trumpet* by Rachel Isadora. Beautiful illustrations in the art deco style of the 1920s illustrate Ben's longing to be a jazz musician and the many hours he spends around the Zig Zag Jazz Club. If you're studying the great orchestras, then include *The Philharmonic Gets Dressed* by Karla Kuskin, which tells how each player prepares for work. While showing students that the orchestra consists of regular people, it also accurately describes some of their positions in the group.

### **Science**

Nonfiction has long been used to teach science. Books by Vicki Cobb, such as *Bet You Can't: Science Impossibilities to Fool You*, are classics in nonfiction science. Picture books also effectively reinforce basic science concepts. When teaching about the weather, *It Looked Like Spilt Milk* by Charles Shaw, Tomie de Paola's *Cloud Book*, and *A January Fog Will Freeze a Hog* by Hubert Davis are good components of a motivating lesson.

It seems that all students are assigned an animal report at some point in their school career. Instead of the usual oral report, use *Animal Fact/Animal Fable* as a format for an animal riddle report. Following their research, the students write a statement about their animal that is either true or false (fact or fable). An appropriate illustration is drawn, and the illustrations and accompanying statements are shared with the class. Then classmates vote on whether the statements are fact or fable. The

researcher then reads the research that proves the statement to be either true or false. These oral presentations are an interesting variant for oral reports.

### **Social studies**

Social studies is a very broad category, but for each topic there is probably an appropriate picture book. Susan Torrence and Leslie Polansky have written two alphabet books that are excellent for teaching locations of towns and cities in the American Northwest. In *The Oregon Alphabet Book* and *The Washington Alphabet Book*, various locales are identified in alliterative verse that tells about someone who lives in each location. There are similar titles for other states. If your state or province does not have its own alphabet book, your students can make their own using others as models. Of course, the students need to locate these interesting sounding places in the atlas.

*Gila Monsters Meet You at the Airport* reminds all of us that assumptions and facts about a place are not necessarily the same. In this book, a young boy is moving from New York City to the West and is sure that he will not like it there because "out West everyone grows up to be a sheriff," and he wants to be a subway driver. At the same time another boy is moving from the West to the East and is sure that if he is not attacked by the alligators that live in the sewer, he will be hit by the airplanes that fly through his bedroom. This makes a fine introduction to a geography lesson about a place with a strong image that may or may not be correct. Many picture books are good examples of regional stories that can be used to help students further understand about different areas. Rylant's *When I Was Young in the Mountains* is a fond recollection of a childhood in Appalachia, and *From the Hills of Georgia: An Auto-*

*biography in Paintings* is Mattie Lou O'Kelly's remembrance of life in Georgia at the turn of the century.

Check the picture book shelves for books about aging, other cultures and countries, ancient civilizations, etc., when you begin teaching your next topic in social studies. David Macaulay has certainly made the picture book legitimate for all ages with his *Pyramid* and similar titles, but there are many other social studies treasures to find among pictures books as well.

### **Math**

Mitsumasa Anno is fascinated with math and has written and illustrated several picture books that are especially effective in teaching this subject. For the very young, the concepts of sets, numerals, seasons, and time are beautifully illustrated in *Anno's Counting House*, in which all occupants and furnishings are moved from one house to another as the readers count to make sure that nothing is left behind. His most recent book about math is for older students. *Anno's Mysterious Multiplying Jar* illustrates the concept of factorials through story and illustrations. In each of Anno's books, the author explains some of the concepts he is illustrating and offers suggestions for helping students understand those concepts.

While these books are written specifically to help teach basic mathematical concepts, there are many other picture books that can be used effectively in math. *Something Special for Me* by Vera Williams is about a young girl and her family who have been saving money for something special. Use this as the basis for an activity in which the students estimate the amount of money in each of several jars. Additionally, they can go shopping through catalogs based upon their estimates.

Math concepts for older students

can be introduced through picture books as well. Introduce fractions with *Pezzettino* by Leo Lionni (what fractional part of the wise one is blue?). Tesselations are a good follow-up to *Changes*, *Changes* by Pat Hutchins.

Reading contributes to lifelong learning. However, the small number of adults who continue to read indicates that we need to further encourage our students to become lifelong readers. Picture books can

be an important part of this encouragement. In the words of Susan M., grade 4, "You may say this book is for younger kids, but if you like picture books, it doesn't matter how old you are."

*Sharp teaches in the Program in Educational Media/Librarianship at Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, and is a consultant in children's literature and motivating reading.*

### **Here's why**

Variation in sentence length is the fundamental rhythm of speech in all languages. Writing that does not resemble the rhythm of human speech will not succeed. That is why so much business, academic, and governmental writing goes unread, uncomprehended, unheeded.

Theodore Cheney in *Getting the Words Right*

### **Eye problems among the handicapped**

Children identified as handicapped may be up to twice as likely to have visual dysfunctions as are other children. In a study of 159 children at a learning center for the handicapped in New Jersey, clinicians from the Pennsylvania College of Optometry noted that 40% of the children suffered from some visual dysfunction, whereas 20% would have been the expected level in an average population.

Only nearsightedness (myopia) was at normal levels. Higher than normal levels were found of farsightedness, astigmatism, walleyedness, crosseyedness, and eye pathology. The data suggest that attention should be given to vision care for handicapped children.

The children in the study, aged 4 to 9, included individuals identified as emotionally disturbed, severely communication handicapped, multiple handicapped, and neurologically or perceptually impaired. Only 2 of the 159 had such poor vision as to be classified as legally blind.

For details, see "Analysis of Visual Dysfunctions in a Population of Handicapped School Age Children," Lawrence Ragone and Sylvan Shubin, *Optometric Monthly*, August 1983, pp. 430-35.