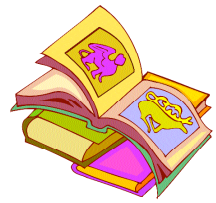


Picture Books for All? YES!

by Karen Antikajian



Why might teachers of grades four and above use picture books? For one thing, they can add another exciting dimension to the curriculum. Use them for motivation, to explore topics, to examine language, as models for writing, and just to add enjoyment to the learning process.

From fables to poetry to biographies to all kinds of nonfiction books, thousands of wonderful titles are available. Older students are often excited to encounter familiar favorites (as well as become acquainted with new selections), especially when they are approached from a different perspective. Sharing a picture book is an efficient and motivating way to introduce a topic to your class.

Usually thought of as books that contain simple text dealing with universal themes, such as *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* by William Steig, picture books actually vary widely. Some, with a simpler plot and universal theme, may be used as models for older students to write stories for younger children, while others called “wordless books” (even though some contain a bit of text), are useful at any age for developing inference and generating both oral and written stories. *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* by Chris Van Allsburg, is an example of one that works extremely well with older students.

Jane Yolen, a prolific writer and poet, has a series of books with poems inspired by her photographer son’s stunning photos. Another collection of poems, *A Kick in the Head* by Paul Janeczko, gives examples of 29 different poetic forms with a description of the characteristics of each in the back of the book. These are just two of many marvelous poetry picture books.

How about the growing collection of “fractured” fairy tales and versions from other cultures? Some of these also feature strong female characters in traditional male roles. Writing another version of a fairy tale is excellent practice because the basic plot (ideas and content and/or organization) is established so the writer can concentrate on other writing traits such as voice, sen-

tence structure, and word choice.

We have a continually expanding wealth of attractive, informative nonfiction picture books that entice the reader, especially the reluctant reader, to explore a variety of topics. Examples that come to mind are *Ghosts of the 20th Century* by Cheryl Harness and *The Bone Detectives: How Forensic Anthropologists Solve Crimes and Uncover Mysteries of the Dead* by Donna M. Jackson. What middle school student wouldn’t be intrigued by these titles? Or, perhaps, *A Woman for President: The Story of Victoria Woodhull* by Kathleen Krull and *When Marian Sang* by Pam Muñoz Ryan. The list goes on and on.

Some picture books are clearly intended for an older audience because of the background knowledge needed or the sophistication of the language. *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* by Julius Lester, a beautiful book with a powerful message, is much too graphic for younger readers. Another of my favorites, *Why the Chicken Crossed the Road* by David Macaulay, works well with older students because of the author’s use of euphemisms and humor—something that younger students will not fully understand.

Interesting reader’s theater scripts that provide fluency and oral reading practice can be created from favorite picture books. Scripts for many titles are available online (a search for “reader’s theater” will bring up a number of sites). An even better idea is to have groups of students write their own scripts based on the story. With practice, each group will be able to perform for the class. Students can even add an accompanying rap or song, if they are so inclined.

There are so many ways these wonderful books can be used to support and enhance your regular curriculum such as: capturing the interest of a reluctant reader, encouraging a student to investigate a topic in depth, providing models or inspiration for student writing, investigating and evaluating author style, and motivating talented students to create something of their own. The possibilities are endless!