

The New Picture Book: For All Ages

by ReLeah Cossett Lent

A lively group of eighth-graders watched expectantly as I pulled a thin book out of my bag and arranged it on the document camera. They had recently read Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Bantam, 1983), and I thought her picture book *Life Doesn't Frighten Me* (Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 1993) would provide an opportunity for them to expand their understanding of the novel. They listened raptly, and I gave them plenty of time to study the drawings of Jean-Michel Basquiat, the famous graffiti artist whose illustrations accompanied the text.

When I finished reading, I placed students into small groups and asked them to talk about why the author might have

written this book. The ensuing discussion demonstrated how a picture book can spark dialogue and deep thinking. "She's really not scared of anything life throws at her," one group offered. "She's gotten tough. Ghosts and bullies are nothing compared to what she went through as a child."

Another group wondered if she was protesting too much. "We think life does frighten her even though she says it doesn't, because she knows how painful it can be. She's trying to put up a brave front." Still another group thought she may have written the book to reassure other kids who also have had a hard time. "But," one girl said quietly, "the pictures are pretty scary. I don't think I would be reassured."



“When my students come in to class and they see ‘Story Time’ written on the daily post . . . There are actual shouts of ‘story time!’” —Amy Sussen, middle school social studies teacher

I had enough books for pairs of students to share, and I asked them to turn to the back pages and read the extended biographies of both the author and the artist to see if this additional information changed their views. Not even one student hesitated before diving into the reading.

Picture Books for Every Content Area and Age

As you can see from this example, picture books are not just for little kids. If you have wandered through the children’s section of a good bookstore lately, you saw the same beautifully illustrated books that you once read to your toddler, but you also might have discovered some books designated “for all ages” with sophisticated topics ranging from civil rights to botany. Such books, referred to as “crossovers,” can be perfect tools for teachers of all disciplines. Terrell Tracy, a professor at Converse College, uses many of these books in her content-area literacy courses because “they are imminently engaging and scaffold important skills from critical literacy to close reading.” I couldn’t agree more.

History and Social Studies

Picture books can be a strong addition to the study of history and social studies. Walter Dean Myers, award-winning young adult novelist, has worked his magic in the picture book genre as well. *Patrol* (HarperCollins, 2005), for example, is a visually compelling crossover about a soldier in Vietnam who questions the meaning of *enemy*—and then of fear; hardly a bedtime story for six-year-olds but a thoughtful read for students of American history. His *Blues Journey* (Holiday House, 2006), written in verse and reminiscent of Langston Hughes, explores “blues” from the African American experience, including a disturbing rendering of a sign announcing “Yesterday a Man Was Lynched.” Illustrator Christopher Myers offers a lesson in visual literacy and symbolism through the infusion of brown and blue hues on every page. The final feature, a “blues glossary,” explains how words used in the book might have unusual meanings, such as the definition of *crossroads*: “A place where an important decision is to be made, often the decision to do right or wrong.”

Cary Waxler, high school U.S. history teacher, uses the picture book *Forever Young* written by Bob Dylan (Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2008) to graphically represent some of the changes in American society since the 1960s. “There are so many little details, beautifully illustrated, that kids can explore and research. Especially nice are the annotations of each page by the illustrator at the end of the book that act as scaffolds for kids who need more background knowledge.”

Middle school social studies teacher Amy Sussen created “picture book tasks” for literature circles, often to introduce new topics in history. For example, a unit on women’s suffrage includes the following books for students to read in small groups:

- *Heart on Fire: Susan B. Anthony Votes for President* by Ann Malaspina (Albert Whitman & Company, 2012)

- *Marching with Aunt Susan: Susan B. Anthony and The Fight for Women’s Suffrage* by Claire Rudolf Murphy (Peachtree, 2011)
- *I Could Do That! Esther Morris Gets Women the Vote* (Melanie Kroupa Books) by Linda Arms White (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005)
- *Elizabeth Leads the Way: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Right to Vote* by Tanya Lee Stone (Henry Holt and Co., 2008)
- *Ballots for Belva: The True Story of a Woman’s Race for the Presidency* by Sudipta Bardhan-Quallen (Harry N. Abrams, 2015)

Students then create open-ended question for use in small-group discussions such as the following:

- Why did many people (and Congress) in the 1800s and early 1900s believe that women should not be allowed to vote in the United States?
- Why does voting matter?
- What would the United States be like today if women did not have the right to vote?

Amy often uses picture books for front-loading a unit by reading a picture book aloud. “When my students come in to class and they see ‘Story Time’ written on the daily post, they are very excited! There are actual shouts of ‘story time!’ It is hard to believe this would come from eighth-graders, but it is true. Many come and sit on the floor in front of me, just as they did when they were in elementary school, to hear the story and see the pictures up close.” Last semester, Amy’s students created ABC picture books about the people, places, and events of World War I as a summative assessment.

Language Arts

High school English teacher Dan Riskind used an online version of Myers’ *Harlem* (Scholastic, 1997) with his seniors to explore how a single word choice can influence meaning and clarify voice in descriptive writing. He notes that sensitive readers can almost hear the sounds of Harlem in the ’20s as they are swept away through the book’s lyrical prose and vibrant images.

Jeanne Morgan, middle school English language arts teacher, uses the *True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka (Puffin Books, 1996; also available in a Spanish translation) to help students define *claim*, *evidence*, and *interpretation* by identifying examples from the text. She says she also helps student conceptualize vocabulary used in the book through a word sort activity prior to reading.

Science

High school biology teacher Caroline Milne uses *The Skin You Live in* by Michael Tyler (Chicago Children’s Museum, 2005) as an introduction to the integumentary system for her honors human biology class. “I read the book aloud and then come back to this book at the end of the unit as a summative assessment. Students should be able to explain how the simplified text and images have actual biological anatomy and physiology to support them.”

Justin Stroh uses the picture book *Little Changes* by Tiffany Taylor (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013) in his science class as a model for having his students create their own illustrated book about how a creature evolves. His instructions include:

- Create a population of organisms that is not real.
- Describe this population's trait and the variations of this trait in the population.
- Discuss and illustrate the original environment of the population.
- Create a change in the environment that will result in the population changing over time.
- Demonstrate one of the three types of natural selections.

Professional Development

It will come as no surprise that I use picture books in most of my workshops and even in keynote addresses. In Barrington, Illinois, where I have been engaged in a Heinemann Residency for several years working with cohorts of content-area middle and high school teachers, librarians have created Google spaces for the picture book lessons teachers create. High school librarian Janet Anderson asks teachers to let her know the topics and skills they cover with specific picture books so she can coordinate lessons with titles in an online format to make finding appropriate books easier. Middle school teachers have accumulated over fifty lessons related to picture books (and aligned with Common Core State Standards) across all disciplines, which their librarians also post online.

And What About Rigor?

Despite my unbridled enthusiasm for this genre, I still field questions from skeptics who worry that picture books may not be challenging enough to meet their disciplinary standards. In reply, consider Alice Walker's *Why War Is Never a Good Idea* (HarperCollins, 2007). I introduced this book to juniors in an English class amid snickers and groans regarding the "kids' book." "Give Ms. Walker a chance," I asked and they reluctantly agreed. I slowly read the first page:

"Though War speaks
Every language
It never knows
What to say
To Frogs."

After a few more pages, one of the students blurted out what everyone else was thinking: "What is the author talking about?" The class laughed; it was clear that this student was not the only one confounded by a simple picture book. At the end of the reading, I engaged students in a critical literacy lesson using the following questions:

- What are the author's intentions and motives?
- Whose perspective has been left out?
- Whose values are represented?
- How is the author trying to persuade you?

After small-group discussions, students then wrote in response to a question prompted by the title of the book: Is war ever a good idea?

I can't think of many texts that would have engaged students in such rigorous intellectual activity. The key is in choosing not only the right picture book but also the right activity to spur literacy learning.

Picture Books in Action

Recently, I observed an English teacher facilitate small-group analyses of various picture books about the Holocaust. The students were focused, engaged, and thoughtful as they considered the images and text, taking turns talking and offering ideas for sharing the book with their peers.

"What did you learn from this activity?" I asked one of the students. She sat quietly for a minute, and I wondered if she was going to answer. She then looked up, smiled, and said, "Everything."

And her teacher lived happily ever after.

Picture Books by Our Favorite Authors

Walter Dean Myers, whose novels have turned many of our most reluctant learners into voracious readers (think *Monster* [Amistad, 2004] or *Fallen Angels* [Scholastic, 2008]), has also created mesmerizing picture books such as *We Are America* (HarperCollins, 2015), *Blues Journey* (Holiday House, 2006), and *Harlem* (Scholastic, 1997).

Other award-winning authors who have added their talents to this genre include **Lois Lowry**, **Nikki Grimes**, **Toni Morrison**, **Ted Kooser**, and **Jacqueline Woodson**, to name a few. Unfortunately, their picture book contributions are often overlooked as valuable resources for supporting skills and enhancing content in middle and high school lessons.



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ReLeah's latest book with Heinemann is *Adolescents on the Edge: Stories and Lessons to Transform Learning*, coauthored with Jimmy Santiago Baca. ReLeah's first two books, coauthored with Gloria Pipkin, won the American Library Association's Intellectual Freedom Award and the NCTE/Slate Intellectual Freedom Award. ReLeah was also the recipient of the PEN/First Amendment Award in 1999.

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