

Using Picture Books to Teach Literary Techniques

by

Shutta Crum

In the article “Story Skeletons: Teaching Plot Structure with Picture Books” which appeared in *Book Links* (May, 2006: vol. 15, #5), I said that picture books are “quick reads, lots of fun, and often gems of characterization, mood, and dialogue.” Picture books are also perfect to illustrate literary techniques to writing students of all ages.

Don’t be fooled by the audience age of a picture book. Many picture books are witty on several levels and thus appropriate for any age reader. In addition, picture books are short so the writing in the best of them is sharp and elegant. Remember: *short* does not necessarily mean *easy*. (Think of Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*, or Frost’s poem, *Stopping by Woods*.) Mark Twain said it best, “I didn’t have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead.”

Therefore, though some of the titles I recommend below may be used to teach writers as young as second and third grades, when there is not much time in the upper-grade classrooms or if you’re teaching adults for only two hours a week, consider using picture books. In them you will find a variety of techniques on display such as assonance and consonance, irony, hyperbole and understatement, simile and metaphor, allusion, imagery, meter, personification, caesura and enjambment, foreshadowing and many more.

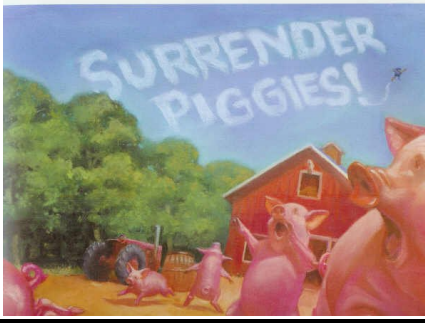
Since we are limited here by space, I will share just a few titles I have found useful when teaching some selected techniques. Hopefully you will get a feel for how a good, small-sized collection of picture books in the classroom can expand the understanding of your students—whether those students are ten years old, or ten years shy of a century.

In keeping with this idea, note that the grade level indicators used below reflect writing levels, not reading/audience grade levels. An open-ended indicator means that a title can be used for adult students.

A Sampling of Literary Techniques

Allusion: A reference to something that those who share our knowledge (literary, historical) or background (cultural) will understand. Allusion is a type of shortcut that creates power through the use of compression. When we say “9/11” or read the titles of Pilkey’s books (below) these allusions immediately bring to our minds a whole universe of thoughts, feelings, memories, etc.

"I've got you in my sights now, you little porkers!" she cackled as she circled overhead.



from Palatini, *Piggie Pie*:


This illustration immediately brings to mind the “Surrender Dorothy” message written across the sky in the movie version of *The Wizard of Oz*. Not only do we chuckle at the recognition, we also know that as readers we are to group Gritch the Witch of Palatini’s book with the likes of the Wicked Witch of the West.

Palatini, Margie. *Piggie Pie*. Illus. by Howard Fine. 1995. 32 p. Clarion Books, paper, \$5.95 (0-395-86618-9). Gr. 3 and up. Supremely silly, with lots of allusions in the illustrations and text including Old MacDonalld’s farm, and that huffing and puffing wolf that’s been chasing three pigs! With a great ironical ending, this is also sure to make older readers laugh.

Palatini, Margie. *Three Silly Billies*. Illus. by Barry Moser. 2005. 32p. Simon & Schuster, \$15.95 (0-689-85862-0). Gr. 2-4. Three billy goats take their surf boards and head out across the troll-bridge for a day of fun but don’t have the money for the toll. Readers will recognize the allusions to the stories of the other characters that join them in the dilemma.

Pilkey, Dav. *Dogzilla*. 1993. 32p. Harcourt Brace, and Co., paper, \$7.00 (0-15-223945-6). Gr. 3 and up. *Kat Kong*. 1993. 32p. Harcourt Brace, and Co., paper, \$7.00 (0-15-242037-1). Gr. 3 and up. Goofy spoofs on the classic monsters that will have kids and older readers laughing out loud. Collage with photos of real animals.

Alliteration (Assonance & Consonance): The repetition of sounds. Alliteration is generally defined as repeated initial sounds. Subtypes include assonance and consonance which are sounds within words. **Assonance:** repeated vowel sounds. **Consonance:** repeated consonant sounds.



from Shaw, *Raccoon Tune*:

“Ash cans./Trash cans./How we love to crash cans./Mash and smash and bash cans.”


Assonance: “a” sound in “ash” and “cans.” Consonance: “sh” sounds. (This is also an example of onomatopoeia. Note: many techniques overlap.)

Helakosi, Leslie. *Big Chickens*. Illus. by Henry Cole. 2006. 32p. Dutton, \$15.99 (0-525-47575-3). Gr. 2-4. While trying to escape from a wolf, four very silly chickens keep getting themselves into the very situations they are trying to avoid. Lots of alliteration and onomatopoeia as the feisty foursome flock from page to page.

Shaw, Nancy. *Raccoon Tune*. Illus. by Howard Fine. 2005. 32p. Holt & Co., \$15.95 (0-8050-6544-X). Gr. 3 and up. On a night just right for raccoons, cans are banged as goodies are sought. Shaw (Sheep in a Jeep) is back with her trademark attention to word choice, meter and rhyme. Paired with Fine's zany nighttime blue illustrations—a winner. Be sure to look closely at that last full page illustration. Are those paw puppets?

(Note: Many alphabet books have great examples of alliteration.)

Imagery: A concrete description that creates a picture in the reader's/listener's mind. Using imagery we move from the abstract to the particular. e.e. cummings said, "There is nothing as something as one."



from Mannis, *One Leaf Rides the Wind*:

“Adrift on eight pond pillows/pink-cheeked blossoms rest.”

The water lilies are not simply resting on leaves. The leaves are specifically pillows which are adrift in a pond. Note that the blossoms are personified (see below) by this description and by their pink cheeks.

Mannis, Celeste Davidson. *One Leaf Rides the Wind: a Japanese Counting Book*. Illus. by Susan Kathleen Hartung. 2002. 28 p. Viking, \$15.99 (0-670-03525-4); Penguin, paper, 2005. 32 p. \$6.99 (0142401951). Gr. 3 and up. Tailor-made for teaching imagery, the writing of haiku, or a unit on Japan. Included at the bottom of each exquisitely illustrated page is a bit of exposition relating to a single haiku. And it's a counting book as well! Altogether, a beautiful package.

Steig, William. *Shrek!* 1990. 32p. F. S. & G., paper, \$5.95 (0-374-46623-8). Gr. 4 and up. Unmitigated Steig with a vocabulary well above most picture books. “Ho there, varlet!” Don't reach for the movie. This original employs great language and a wide variety of literary techniques including alliteration, imagery and personification all wrapped up in a hyperbolic storyline.

Yolen, Jane. *Owl Moon*. Illus. by John Schoenherr. 1987. 32p. Philomel Books, \$16.99 (0-399-21457-7). Gr. 4 and up. This Caldecott medal-winning book is so gorgeous in its understated poetic language and strong images; it should be in every teacher's collection.

Personification: Giving human qualities to inanimate objects, abstractions, movements, events, etc. Examples from everyday speech include: “justice demands,” “yawning chasms,” or “instinct tells us.”



from Crum, *Who Took My Hairy Toe?*

“... the trees are scratching at the sky” and “Old Tar Pockets heard a question on the voice of the wind. It asked”

Setting (trees and the wind) is personified to heighten suspense.

Crum, Shutta. *Who Took My Hairy Toe?* Illus. by Katya Krenina. 2001. 32p. Albert Whitman, \$15.95 (0-8075-5972-5). Gr. 3 and up. A greedy man digs up a hairy toe and takes it home. The monster that comes to claim it gets closer and closer. This folktale retelling ratchets up the suspense using personification, assonance and consonance.

Martin, Jr., Bill and John Archambault. *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*. Illus. by Lois Ehlert. 1989. 40p. Simon & Schuster, \$15.95 (0-671-67949-X); Aladdin, paper, \$6.99 (0-689-83568-X). Gr. 2 to 4. Letters of the alphabet are personified as they climb up the tree and get in trouble. After getting their cuts and scrapes bandaged, can they resist doing it again?

Walker, Alice. *There is a Flower at the Tip of My Nose Smelling Me*. Illus. by Stefano Vitale. 2006. 26p. HarperCollins, \$16.99, (978-0-06-057080). This beautifully illustrated poem by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker uses personification to turn the tables on the outside world. The girl in the poem is walked by the road, swum by the ocean, and tasted by the rain.

Onomatopoeia: Words that bring to mind the sound of their meanings, such as; splat, sizzle, buzz and puff.



from Wilson, *Bear Snores On:*

“Bear gnarls and he snarls. Bear roars and he rumbles! Bear jumps and he stomps. Bear growls and he grumbles!”


Lots of fun “sound” words!

Usui, Kanako. *The Fantastic Mr. Wani*. 2005. 32p. Tiger Tales/ME Media, LLC., \$15.95 (1-58925-054-0). Gr. 2 to 4. Mr. Wani's been invited to a party, and he's running late. Getting there proves to be full of ups and downs—literally. With a pop, crash, bump, screech and ouch this story is peppered with onomatopoeia. Keep an eye out for the porcupines first seen on the endpapers!


Wheeler, Lisa. *Old Cricket*. Illus. by Ponder Goembel. 2003. 32p. Atheneum, \$16.95 (0-689-84510-3). Gr. 4 and up. Old Cricket has got more excuses than you can shake a stick at for why he can't work, including a crick-crack back. Fun onomatopoeia in a prose story with gorgeous finely detailed illustrations.

Wilson, Karma. *Bear Snores On*. Illus. by Jane Chapman. 2002. 36p. Margaret K. McElderry Books, S. & S., \$16.00 (0-689-83187-0). Gr. 3 and up. Told with a rhythm that rolls off the tongue, bear snoozes while others party in his den. Lots of onomatopoeia and other poetry techniques on display. Also, it reads so well aloud that the youngest classes will want to join in the telling.

Suspense/Foreshadowing: Language that directly, or indirectly through the use of cultural convention (allusion—see above), sets the reader up for certain expectations.

from Scieszka, *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*: 

Direct: “. . . the whole big bad wolf thing is all wrong. The real story is about a sneeze and a cup of sugar.”

from McPhail, *Pigs Aplenty, Pigs Galore!* 

Indirect: Read aloud the first two pages of **Pigs Aplenty, Pigs Galore!** by McPhail and compare it to the opening lines of Poe's "*The Raven*." (Suspense created almost subconsciously by allusion to the rhythms of another well-known suspenseful work.)

McPhail, David. *Pigs Aplenty, Pigs Galore!* 1993. 32p. Puffin Books, paper, \$6.99 (0-14-055313-4). Gr. 4 and up. Those riotous pigs are back, and their coming is foreshadowed in a rhythmic imitation of the opening of Poe's "The Raven."

Scieszka, Jon. *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*. Illus. by Lane Smith. 1989, 1999. 32p. Viking, paper, \$6.99 (0-670-88844-3). Gr. 3 and up. Includes an opener that foreshadows the zany

explanation of why A. Wolf is now doing ten to fifteen in the “pig pen.” Pure Scieszka silliness with Lane Smith’s goofy illustrations.

Stevens, Janet. *The Great Fuzz Frenzy*. Illus. by Susan Stevens Crummel. 2005. 48p. Harcourt, Inc., \$17.00 (0-15-204626-7). From the moment we see the close-up of a large dog dropping a tennis ball into a prairie dog hole on the endpapers, and then see the same scene from the prairie dog’s viewpoint, we know the orderly world of the prairie dogs will never be the same. In addition to foreshadowing, this book also has great examples of onomatopoeia. And what a discussion starter! Not only is it a fun story, but it handles important issues as war, greed, and redemption on a level even very young readers can understand.

WRITING ACTIVITIES

- Make an onomatopoeia or alliteration dictionary. Start a new section for each letter of the alphabet. Use it to liven up writing exercises. For ex.: “b” (baheeeeeeeee...) makes me think of starting quickly and then zooming off into the distance like race cars. So when I think of being at a race, the “b” words that *sound* right to me are, brake (with its hard stop sound), bench, blare, etc. Keep the lists going all year for extra credit and writing help.
- Bring a variety of objects into the classroom and have students give the objects human backgrounds. List what kinds of friends they might have, phrases they might say, attitude toward their jobs/functions, and memories or desires they might have. Once you have several lists, play with the ideas to make a poem/story. For ex.: “The blender spluttered angrily as it bounded decisively across the countertop . . .”
- Have students assume a favorite book is being made into a movie and they have been assigned to write the trailer script. Their goal: to create suspense through foreshadowing without giving away the ending or other important plot turns. (Remind students that allusion and imagery may be used in creating suspense.)

SIDEBARS

I. Additional Resources

- 📖 Drury, John. *The Poetry Dictionary*. 2005. 368p. Writer’s Digest Books, paper, \$14.00 (1582973296). From “abstraction” to “Welsh poetic forms,” an authoritative yet easy to use compendium of writing techniques. Lively examples include samples of types of poems from around the world.
- 📖 Mason, David and John Frederick Nims. *Western Wind*. 2005. 688p. McGraw-Hill, paper, \$47.19 (0072819596). The classic humanities text with a little bit of everything—definitions, exercises, examples. At over 600 pages it is expensive, but very complete. If you can only afford one book on writing/teaching poetry this a great reference to have.

II. Meets these National Curriculum Content Area Standards

(at <http://cnets.iste.org/currstands/cstands-ela.html>)

1. *English Language Arts:*

📖 “Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, and graphics).”

📖 “Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.”

III. Web Connections

📖 *Just4Teachers* at <<http://expage.com/4writing>> was created by a Baltimore teacher. This is a comprehensive collection of writing resource links, especially for the classroom. A good place to start your online research.

📖 *Picturing Books: A website about picture books* at <<http://picturingbooks.imaginarylands.org/#anatomy>> has almost everything you could possibly want to know about picture books. With images from inside well-known books, information on how picture books are put together, and tips on how to evaluate them, and how to share them, this website is a wealth of information for lovers of picture books.

📖 *WriteNet* at <<http://www.writenet.org/>> is a wonderful resource where writers and teachers advise each other on methods for teaching writing to students in grades K-12.

Shutta Crum is an educator, and was the Michigan Library Association’s, Children’s Services Division, Youth Librarian of the year, 2002. She is also the author of WHO TOOK MY HAIRY TOE? (above) Her newest title, BRAVEST OF THE BRAVE (Knopf, 2005) was listed by the Chicago Public Library on their Best of the Best List, 2005. For more information, visit her website at www.shuttacrum.com.

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