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SLM 503

Children’s Literature

Final Activity

**Kindergarten** – *The Pigeon Finds a Hot Dog* by Mo Willems

Mo Willems’s books are simple and direct; they do not overwhelm the reader with complex pictures or text. His pigeon series provides the reader with a somewhat silly protagonist, one that young children will appreciate. The pigeon is an animal, personified, who acts like an adult and a child at the same time. He is relatively well-spoken and can express himself in a way that children can understand (he is determined to drive a bus; he is content to sit and eat a hotdog – very different plans, but both easy for children to comprehend and relate to).

In *The Pigeon Finds a Hot Dog*, the problem is simple and one that any young child (especially one coping with a younger sibling) can relate. The pigeon is being tricked into sharing his hotdog with a curious and (somewhat) annoying duckling. The illustrations are straightforward, without extra stimulus, thus rendering a child incapable of focusing on anything but the conflict and the solution. The pigeon throws a tantrum, screaming loudly, yet the duckling is not fazed. The children learn from this that anger and frustration will not solve problems as well as level-headedness and sharing will. The pigeon eventually shares the hotdog with the duckling and the book ends with a comfortable companionship.

In terms of readability, just as the illustrations are simple, the sentences in the word bubbles are large enough for a child to follow along during a story time, and the sentences are uncomplicated in organization. Throughout the text of the book, Willems employs a variety of punctuation marks. The pigeon’s (and duckling’s) expressions mimic what is said. Overall, this book is an excellent choice for a child who is not yet learning to read independently, but who is learning to decode and understand the connection of text and illustration.

**First Grade** – *Chato and the Party Animals* by Gary Soto

Gary Soto is a famed children’s, young adult, and adult author. His books are quite popular among any age group and the ease with which he addresses multicultural issues for American readers is phenomenal. In *Chato and the Party Animals*, he provides a healthy balance between the subjects of friendship, acceptance, lack of family, and Hispanic heritage. This book is an ideal picture book to share with students in first grade because the illustrations are a bit more abstract than the pigeon series, the colors are bright and bold, and the storyline is more complex.

In *Chato and the Party Animals*, Novio Boy is a cat who does not know who his mother is or when his birthday is because he came from the pound. This conflict will help the students understand, at the animal level, the stress that a pet who comes from the pound has felt and, on a human level, the concept of being an orphan. Novio Boy has no family; lack of family may be a real problem for children who read this book. The fact that the picture book does not trivialize this subject, but instead celebrates friendship to balance out lack-of-family is admirable and one that many children can appreciate. Chato, the main party animal, chooses a specific date for Novio Boy’s birthday and the story ends with all of the party animals celebrating Novio Boy’s (meaning new boy) new birthday. It is important to note that not just cats are invited to this party. Dogs and mice are as well, thus instilling acceptance of differences.

The book is written in English, with Spanish words inserted in opportune places for students to use contextual clues to determine definitions. As mentioned earlier, the illustrations are involved and provide many focal points for students who are listening to the story. This picture book is an excellent choice for the first grade curriculum because of its emphasis on ethnic diversity, acceptance, and connectability: friends help friends get through tough times.

**Second Grade** – *Once Upon a Cool Motorcycle Dude* by Kevin O’Malley

*Once Upon a Cool Motorcycle Dude* is a picture book that can be read aloud to a group of students. However, it is more complex than a typical picture book, making it an ideal read for students on the brink of truly reading on their own. The book is complex because it is a satire of fairytales (a fractured fairy tale) with an emphasis on both girl and boy themes. What makes it even more unique is O’Malley’s book is visually narrated by both a girl and a boy of elementary school age. They are actually completing a project where they have to write a fairytale together. As much as parents and teachers encourage gender equality in their homes and classrooms, girls and boys typically tend to have different interests, and these interests begin to show themselves after children have been in school for a couple of years. This book reflects these differences, how they clash, and how they can be deceiving.

The book’s conflict, it seems at first, centers on a princess who has many lovely, favored horses. Then a monster begins to kidnap these horses one by one. The princess needs a savior. So, she expects a knight and begins to spin gold from straw. Instead of a knight, however, a cool motorcycle dude speeds up to the castle and promises to save the horses if the princess, whom he has no romantic feelings for at all, gives him the spun gold. Arguments ensue. However, the real conflict is how differently the boy and girl narrators want this story told. The girl begins with romantic notions, while the boy makes snide remarks and gagging noises. The boy picks up the story when he can no longer stand his partner’s narration (the unicorns, pink dresses, and lame girly names of the horses are too much for him). Instead of a knight in shining armor, he picks a cool motorcycle dude with no romantic intentions. His monster is even more gruesome and disgusting than his girl partner’s is. The female narrator, however, becomes offended by the boy’s insinuations regarding girls. She recreates the princess character so that she is tough and muscular, working out at the gym everyday. Then, according to the girl narrator’s side to the story, the princess enters into a power struggle with the motorcycle dude over who can better save the kidnapped horses. O’Malley, through a brilliant twist, resolves their conflicts while maintaining the girl’s and boy’s equality within the story.

This book is an excellent choice for a second grade class for a number of reasons. First, it takes the idea of fairytales in a different direction. Up until this point, they most likely have read and understood the themes and motifs of fairytales. This one bends the rules, while still keeping many of the same components. The book also encourages differences and resolving these differences. The concept of gender diversity is rampant in this book, and yet it does not, in the end, demean either gender. Instead, it focuses on resolutions that can be met, and how boys and girls transcend their stereotypes. The concept of gender equality in a second grade classroom is powerful; it clears up misconceptions regarding male and female interests earlier than normal. This book is wholly entertaining, melding modern-day storytelling with traditional fairy tales, while entertaining the students with two narrators so very much like themselves.

**Third Grade** – *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* by Paul Fleischman

Children in the third grade have already been introduced to poetry through the works of Shel Silverstein, Jack Prelutsky, and other entertaining children’s poets and authors. The majority of poems that they have read have been silly, scary, or bizarre. By third grade, students understand the concept of poetry and its rhyming and line break elements. But they have only really had poetry read to them or have read it to themselves. Paul Fleischman, in his poetry book *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* provides a unique opportunity for the classroom teacher. First, the poems in his book all center on insects. This book is co-curricular! Its poems allow the teacher to ease literature into his/her science unit. The other opportunity it affords in the third grade classroom is its encouragement of students to read interrelated poems *at the same time*! Each poem has two voices, one on the left and one on the right. Sometimes the voices are speaking the same line at the same time; sometimes the voices are speaking different lines but at the same time; and sometimes the voices are speaking at separate times.

Current teaching theory and pedagogy dictates that teachers should incorporate poetry throughout the day’s lessons, units, and the entire school year. Poetry not only provides another writing outlet for students, it teaches them important literary elements such as rhythm, imagery, and word emphasis (diction). This is especially true with Fleischman’s book because it encourages two students to read simultaneously. However, the dual-poems provide a combination of same lines and independently-read lines, thus emphasizing important elements of the poem! What a valuable skill to teach a third grader: certain, specific words can be mighty and powerful, more important than others!

Despite the fact that Prelutsky and Silverstein’s poems are brilliantly written and executed, many of them tend to be lengthy. Fleischman’s are not. He understands that children, no matter how engaged, cannot maintain duets of poems for long. His words are carefully chosen, simple, and pronounceable. His lines are written in such a way that rhythm is inherent in the text. And, of course, the teacher can choose to incorporate this book any way he/she wishes. If the teacher knows of students with public speaking strengths, he/she can choose to read the poetic duets with them, while the rest of the students listen, learn the rhythm, and enjoy.

**Fourth Grade** – *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney

According to Jon Scieszka and many other children and young adult male authors, mid to late elementary school is the breaking point for male readers. If not engaging their male readers with materials of interest, teachers may likely lose a large portion of their male student readers. This is why Jeff Kinney’s *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* should be included on a list of required texts for fourth grade. The book has a male protagonist who is not always an upstanding young man. He battles bullies, stinky cheese, a younger and older brother, and a “stupid” best friend everyday of his life. His life, told through the first person, is simply hilarious.

Greg Heffley can’t win. His older brother Rodrick is the ultimate big brother, complete with practical jokes and disdain. His younger brother Manny is the ultimate baby; he can do no wrong, unlike Greg. And his best friend, Rowley, brings him down quite a few popularity rungs on the ladder. His story is told in diary-format; though he is quick to emphasize that he is not keeping a diary; he is keeping a journal. He includes sections on dressing up for Halloween (not the cute Kindergarten version), playing video games, and losing and regaining a best friend that he is not even sure he wants. His story has so many elements to being a boy on the brink of puberty that any male reader who picks this up will somehow connect. Also, the storyline is funny enough and the narration has such a slick tone, that most girl readers, savvy or struggling, will find an entertaining element that will keep them hooked (if anything, they will read it with the firm belief that all that goes wrong with Greg wouldn’t have happened if he was a girl).

Students at this age need to be hooked. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* can hook and hold a male reader. And, like any parent or teacher could hope, Greg learns a lesson in the end. He has to gain his best friend back after having hurt him terribly. Emotions are beginning to run deep in fourth graders; a book that can relate to these emotions through hilarious narration and simple, strategic cartoon drawing is a gem.

(*Note:* If I were to recommend this book as a required read in fourth grade, I would also encourage the school system to incorporate a girl-friendly text as an alternative choice. My recommendation would be Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars*. It provides suspense and historical background, while emphasizing the subject of friendship, much like Jeff Kinney’s book does.)

**Fifth Grade** – *Locomotion* by Jacqueline Woodsen

Jacqueline Woodsen’s *Locomotion* is written in poetic verse. However, it is not the same poetry that students reading the third grade *Joyful Noise* have encountered. Instead, the poetry is mostly free verse, written from the perspective of an 11-year-old African-American orphan. By the time students reach the fifth grade, they are able to read and understand a book with sorrowful themes. They should also be able to read a complete novel written in poetic verse. Woodsen’s book allows the readers to put these two elements together: a book detailing subjects of sorrow, despair, and hope through poetry.

Lonnie Motion’s parents died in a house fire. He and his younger sister Lili are separated, sent to different foster homes. Lonnie lives with Miss Edna, a seemingly gruff older woman who is incapable of replacing Lonnie’s loving mother (the reader meets her through Lonnie’s nostalgic free verse poetry). Lonnie’s teacher encourages the poetic writing and the reader sees Lonnie transcend from a depressed, indrawn young boy to a frustrated and angry boy to a hopeful boy, all through the different tones and patterns of his poetry. In this book, poetry is not beautiful, flowery verse. It is sometimes three lines long. It sometimes repeats nonsense words over and over. And sometimes it is in the form of letters, long sorrowful letters from Lonnie to his dead parents. And yet, as aforementioned, the poetry takes on a hopeful tone as Lonnie spends more and more time with his loving, younger sister and as Lonnie begins to see how caring and affectionate Miss Edna (and her two grown sons) are to him.

Woodsen’s book not only tackles the difficult subject of the loss of one’s parents, but also of war, cancer, and prejudice. Lonnie’s story is not sugar-coated; the reader feels his pain. However, it is definitely an excellent book for higher-grade elementary school students because it takes difficult subjects such as cancer and introduces it to the reader through an 11-year-old voice who appreciates the value of poetry.