Text Review: Children’s Picture Books

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Do you remember learning to read? For me, the specifics are fuzzy but the memories are sensory laden. I vividly recall reading with my mother, the cozy feel of her lap, and the wonder I experienced as she read aloud. Unbelievably, I can even recollect the fragrance of her cologne, “Christmas Night,” and the tone of her voice as she brought the characters to life. I never tired of her stories or these special times with her. Soon, I could read the words myself. Through the familiar, personal, and comfortable contexts of our daily read alouds, I discovered that I was a reader.

Now, many years later there are little ones sitting on my lap. I watch the ways my grandchildren are coming to understand what reading and writing are all about. They are on the precipice of knowing that the print on the pages of the stories I read has significance and meaning. Eager to unlock the secret of those squiggly lines and marks that transform into words during our read alouds, they demonstrate a willingness to become members of the “literacy club” (Smith, 1988). I am eager to share the gift given to me, and appreciate the fact that the single, most important thing I can do to support their understandings is to read aloud to them as much as possible (International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998, p. 3).

I have found several picture books that make visible learning to read and write in fanciful, humorous, and somewhat realistic ways. These books support our conversations about why we read and their evolving competencies as readers and writers. I have also used these texts with my graduate students to increase their knowledge of the affective, motivational, social, and interactional components of literacy learning. These books have supported our conversations about how we read, as well the reasons we do so. For, as Vukelich and Christie (2004) write, “Teachers who want children to behave like readers and writers must create a classroom environment that coaxes young children into being readers and writers” (p. 24). What better way to do so, than with literature! In this review, I present a synopsis of each picture book (primary to elementary).

**IT’S A BOOK**
**WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY LANE SMITH**
**ROARING BROOK PRESS, 2010, 32 PAGES**
**ISBN: 978-1-59643-606-0**

This book was a favorite across all age groups! Even the youngest grandchild enjoyed this humorous, short, and subtly told story about traditional versus digital reading. I am not surprised, because the latter is so much a part of their everyday lives. Told primarily through mottled illustrations (distinctively Smith) and dialogue positioned dramatically on each page, it is the perfect read aloud and conversation starter about the active nature of reading. The story revolves around the interactions of a contemplative Monkey and annoying Donkey. Monkey, an avid reader, is pestered throughout by Donkey who wants to know what he’s doing. A close examination of the illustrations shows that Donkey is holding an iPad when he enters the story. Consequently, he asks how Monkey “scroll downs,” “blogs,” “texts,” “tweets,” and “wi-fis” with the book he’s reading. I love the repetitive language, the patterning of the text, and the way Lane enables the reader to see right inside the picture book Monkey is reading, creating a story within a story. I even appreciate the double entendre at the end of the book. Young readers will acknowledge the literal or straightforward meaning of this entendre, and teachers, caretakers, or guardians can decide about its inclusion in the read aloud.
More mature readers, however, will appreciate the way it is used for ironic purposes. I agree with Lane’s own description of this story, it reads “like a one act play.”

**A SPLENDID FRIEND**  
**WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY SUZANNE BLOOM**  
**BOYDS MILL PRESS, 2005, UNPAGED**  
**ISBN: 978-1-59078-488-4**

This picture book is the perfect companion text for Smith’s text, since the plots are so similar. The expressive, pastel illustrations are set within a vibrant blue and white color palette. They are very appealing, especially the rendering of Bear’s fluffy coat, which looks soft enough to touch. My grandchildren immediately made connections to the story, which is told through a simple conversation. Bear loves to read and write. He doesn’t like interruptions. However, talkative Goose remains undeterred in engaging his attentions. Bear’s facial expressions and body language say it all! He is frustrated, and even exasperated by Goose’s persistent barrage of questions like “Do you want to hear me read?” “Do you want to see me write?” “What are you doing now, thinking?” Finally, when Goose reads Bear a note he’s written describing him as a “splendid friend,” the two become friends. This text has won many awards, including the Theodor Suess Geisel Honor Book. The grandchildren awarded it first place! Those of us who have experienced the joy of immersion in a good book, will relate to Bear. Students can continue to enjoy Bear and Goose’s escapades in *Treasure, What About Bear?* and *Oh! What a Surprise!* All three of these stories are perfect for story re-enactments.

**HOW ROCKET LEARNED TO READ**  
**WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY TAD HILLS**  
**SCHWARTZ AND WADE, 2010, 40 PAGES**  
**ISBN: 978-0-375-85899-4**

For children just beginning to read, or reluctant readers, Tad Hills has created the perfect story. The expressive images rendered in oil and colored pencil, tell a charming story about reading and friendship between Rocket, an adorable black and white puppy, and his patient teacher, a little yellow bird. The expressiveness of Rocket’s eyes and playful body language portray changes in the puppy’s attitude towards learning about letters, words, and reading. After the little bird reads a story about a delicious bone, but flies away before finishing the tale, Rocket is hooked! He needs to know what will happen next. So, he comes to yellow bird’s class in the meadow the very next day. Little bird uses an alphabet banner and word of the day chalkboard as teaching tools. As the story progresses she shows Rocket how to hear the sounds of language that all around him. He learns that the “whoosh” of the wind or the “grrrr” of an angry dog can be represented by certain letters in specific patterns. As bird flies away she reminds Rocket, "Don't forget! Words are built one letter at a time!" *How Rocket Learned to Read* is available in iPad story format from Random House Kids Apps. I was delighted to come across a sequel to this book entitled *Rocket Writes a Story*, and to discover that it had been awarded the School Library Journal Best of Children’s Books for 2012. Young readers might be interested in knowing that both these books were inspired by the author’s own puppy named Rocket. This second one is an apt description of the ways writers develop and sustain their ideas. It is the perfect read aloud for a workshop.

**DOG LOVES BOOKS**  
**WRITTEN BY LOUISE YATES**  
**KNOPF BOOKS, 2012, 32 PAGES**  
**ISBN: 978-0375864490**

Dog loves the smell, the feel, and just about everything about books! Since he is such an avid reader, he decides to open his own bookstore to share his passion. However, he is disappointed when at the grand opening customers fail to arrive. Undaunted, he waits, tries to keep busy with all sorts of chores, and begins to read every book in his store. He doesn’t even realize he is alone anymore. Finally, a little girl arrives. By this time, dog is well prepared to recommend just the right book. Louise Yates’s expressive little white dog, who is obviously overjoyed when surrounded by books, reinforces the idea that reading is indeed a worthwhile past time, and a source of great personal satisfaction. Students might like to know that Yates began drawing pictures for her stories when she was just a young child. She writes, “One of the things I love most about picture books is the silences, the moments when the text shuts up and the pictures either tell you something that the text hasn’t, or something totally different.”
YOKO LEARNS TO READ
WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY ROSEMARY WELLS
DISNEY-HYPERION BOOKS, 2012, 32 PAGES

Children who are already familiar with Yoko will enjoy reading about the ways she learns to read in Japanese and English! The intricate patterns and gold filigree brushstrokes of the illustrations, give the watercolor renderings vibrancy, life, and magnificence. It is clear that Wells has studied Japanese culture, and conveys her knowledge through words and pictures. In this book, Yoko is eager to learn how to read but anxious that she will never catch up to the other children in her class. She loves to read at home with her mother, but all of their books are written in Japanese. Her mother, eager to assist, talks with the teacher but does not tell her she is unable to read in English. She is determined to follow the teacher’s recommendation to “read one book out loud every night” with her daughter. So, she and Yoko put on their best kimonos and visit the local library. They begin to take out books which Yoko and she read by looking at the pictures. She uses these clues, sounds out the letters, remembers the words her teacher posts in school, and makes connections to environmental print to help her to figure out new words. Gradually, she begins to read herself and to share the stories with her mother. This book is truly a story of intergenerational literacy learning, motivation, and self-efficacy. It will appeal to the countless students in our nation’s classrooms who are processing two or more languages simultaneously, and sharing their new understandings with family members, caregivers, and siblings. They will relate to Yoko’s experiences becoming literate in two languages.

WE ARE IN A BOOK!
WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY MO WILLEMS
HYPERION BOOKS FOR CHILDREN, 2010, 57 PAGES
ISBN: 978-1-4231-3308-7

“This is looking at us,” says Piggie.
“Who is looking at us? A monster?” Gerald asks.
“No. It is … a reader!” Piggie exclaims. “A reader is reading us!”

This book is part of the “Elephant and Piggie” series. In the story, the characters learn that “someone” is watching them!

My youngest grandchild, delighted by this concept, has begun to read this book repeatedly. Willems invites young readers into his tales through simple vocabulary, expressive caricatures, humorous scenarios, and active participation in the story conversation. For example, Piggie has great fun making the “reader” of the book say “funny” words out loud, to the great enjoyment of Gerald. That is, until Gerald realizes that the book is going to end. The way Willems forefronts Piggie in the corners of the pages, make him seem like he’s coming right out of the book to have a closer look at the reader. Students might enjoy listening to Mo Willems read his own book.

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Tad Hills
Lane Smith
Rosemary Wells
Mo Willems

REFERENCES

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