Picture Perfect

Picture Books for Teens

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When news and subsequent discussion came out last year about the declining sales of picture books, it once again became obvious that the format is misunderstood. To most, picture books draw to mind story times with toddlers, preschoolers, and finger puppets. Truth be told, picture books can be used with all ages—even teens. Just like the extremely teen-friendly graphic novel, the illustrations in picture books are integral to the story. Stories using literary devices, authentic cultural references, curriculum-related themes, complex illustrations, and descriptive read aloud language can challenge imaginations and provide opportunities for teen appreciation. They can be used by teens as introduction to a serious moment in history, or provide help with the understanding of poetic structure, or as practice in reading dramatically to younger children. Check out the following list for lots more ideas!

ARTISTIC STYLES AND MEDIUMS


In 1974, French aerialist Philippe Petit entertained people below for one hour on a tightrope between the twin towers in New York. Ink and oil-detailed paintings capture the glorious height of the towers and the memories that will remain in the hearts and minds of people forever. Perfect to open discussion about the events surrounding the 9/11 terrorist attacks.


Lyrical text and descriptive language relay the life of the famous guitar player who died too soon. Steptoe invokes the spirit of Jimi's music using textured illustrations and bright rainbow colors. Teens will appreciate Hendrix's artistic process and growth as a musician. Teens can write their own life story and illustrate it with collage materials that have meaning in their lives.


The story of Wilson A. Bentley, a Vermont farmer turned scientist. In 1885, he was the first person to ever photograph a snowflake. The story is accompanied by Azarian's stunning wintry woodcuts. Teens may enjoy a visit to the “Snowflake Bentley” official page maintained by the Jericho (VT) Historical Society at http://www.snowflakebentley.com/index.htm.


Cut paper collage dramatically portray the Jews of the sixteenth-century as they were protected by Golem, a clay giant who has come to life with the aid of the powers of Rabbi Loew. Kay Vandegrift's page at http://cominfo.rutgers.edu/professional-development/childlit/golem/index.html has additional information about the book and a list of fifteen discussion questions.

CURRICULUM CONNECTION


A collection of thirty concrete poems of various shapes, sizes and contexts which may serve as poetry writing models for teens. Two others in the series include: A Kick in the Head: An Everyday Guide to Poetic Forms (2005) and A Foot in the Mouth: Poems to Speak, Sing, and Shout (2009).


Each of twenty-six endangered animals is created as an artistically graphic letter through the starkness of black and white illustrations with a touch of red. Additional information about the endangered animals is included.

Using this and other curriculum related alphabet books, teens may write and illustrate their own informational books, or each member of a class can assume responsibility for one letter of the book. The book may be used as a springboard to the art and design of letters.


The famous duo makes school subjects a little less intimidating with humor and teen-appealing illustrations. Math Curse shares the pain of applying math principles to everyday life. Science Verse offers poems written in the style of famous poets, thus doubling its connection to science and language arts.


Sis's autobiography of growing up in Czechoslovakia under Soviet rule includes illustrations in predominantly black, white, and red. They expertly relay the oppression of ideas and free speech, then later show a path to freedom. Rebellion against authority and the historical context offer sure teen appeal. Teens can draw what freedom means to them.

MULTICULTURAL


The stark realities of the 1992 Los Angeles riot are the backdrop for this story of a young boy and his mother learning to deal with others in their diverse neighborhood. The dramatic collage
and acrylic illustrations by Diaz earned the 1995 Caldecott Medal. Read this aloud as an introduction to a tumultuous time period in U.S. history.


This single story is extracted from Virginia Hamilton’s collection of American black folktales (Knopf) and is a retelling of how African magic helped some of the slaves fly to freedom and away from the oppression and hard labor of the southern plantations. This picture book could serve as a discussion point as teens discuss the events leading to the Civil War, along with The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales (Random House, 1985). The tales are also available as an audio recording narrated by Virginia Hamilton and James Earl Jones.


This classic poem, in all its simplicity, celebrates the essence of being a Black American. Smith’s sepia photographs capture the beauty and uniqueness of African American people in all shapes, sizes, shades, and ages. This book provides a perfect way to introduce poetry offering a multicultural view of our world today.


Already famous for his YA fiction, Myers offers a way to celebrate and learn about Harlem. Verse depicts the sights, sounds, people, and events shaping lives. Abstract collage in bold colors complements and captures the spirit of Harlem and its special meaning to the African American community.

WORDLESS/VISUAL LITERACY


Haunting black-and-white illustrations chronicle the journey of a slave ship. Maps of slave routes and a brief narrative introduction make this a solid choice for curriculum enhancement. After studying the pictures depicting the struggle for survival, teens can write captions for the illustrations.


A young boy finds a camera on a beach. Upon developing the film, he views an underwater journey including the previous children who used it and then threw it back in the ocean. Wiesner’s watercolor illustrations offer teens an opportunity to examine multiple perspectives in each snapshot and develop visual literacy while stretching the imagination. Teens can take pictures of their bedroom or belongings and then trade them with another to discover clues about each other.


Winner of the second of three Caldecott Medals for Wiesner, this version of the classic folktale follows the pig brothers as they escape into other stories and leave the wolf back on the pages of their book. Teens may “read” The Three Pigs, read the interview with David Wiesner about the book at http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/authors/wiesner/interviews/inter.shtml, and then discuss the illustrations in the context of Wiesner’s comments in the interview.

WRITING PROMPTS


Imagery is used effectively in this almost completely black book that uses braille, raised lines and descriptions of how colors can be smelled, tasted, and felt. (Includes the Braille alphabet). Students may write descriptions of how their favorite colors physically feel, taste, or smell.


To hide his ignorance, an illiterate general bans reading, writing, and printing in a small village. To his dismay, old man Placido and his canaries foil his plans by distributing pamphlets about freedom and liberty. Perfect for discussion on censorship or a quick take for Banned Books Week.


Once-ler’s actions have ruined the once-beautiful environment. Classic illustrations and rhyme offer a perfect tale to discuss how to solve problems such as pollution and deforestation.


With a mysterious beginning, as explained by Van Allsburg, this is not exactly a “picture book,” but rather a collection of fourteen titled drawings that each have a first line of text. One haunting example is titled “The Third-Floor Bedroom,” which is accompanied with the following text: “It all began when someone left the window open,” and the reader sees bird-covered wallpaper with one of the birds seeming to take flight. Right from opening the book, teens will be intrigued to write their own stories for the drawings, or to collectively tell a story in a group setting.

CRITICAL THINKING AND REFLECTION


The author’s last book published during his lifetime, this title provides advice for life, situations that will be encountered and encouragement to “soar to high heights.” One of the most well-known verses in the book is “Will you succeed? Yes, you will indeed.” Encourage a group of teens to think about the statements in the book as it is read aloud and then to particularly reflect on how they define success for themselves.


Multiple narratives and parallel stories require close attention in order to fully understand the events in this one-of-a-kind tale involving cows, problem parents, a boy and a train station. Teen readers will recognize the different points of view and closely examine the illustrations to determine if there are four stories or one.

To better himself, young Nikolai seeks answers from a wise turtle, Leo, to three questions: "When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?" Read the stories and then divide a group of teens into three smaller groups to discuss the answers. What other answers might there be to these questions in this picture book inspired by Leo Tolstoy? Are there other important questions to add to the list?


Symbolism and allegory are prominent in the tale of the tender relationship between a tree and a boy who grows into manhood. Powerful, yet simple drawings show the boy experiencing the generosity of the tree who gives everything it has for the boy's happiness. Along with the study of literary elements, reflect on themes such as relationships and aging.

**TEEN READ ALOUDS FOR YOUNGER AUDIENCES**


All George's mother wants him to do is bark, but unfortunately George has other animal sounds in mind. Exasperated, George's mom takes him to the vet who determines the problem and offers a cure—until the hilarious punch-line! Cartoonish illustrations offer an expressive yet hilarious look at George's problem. Teens can share this timeless read-aloud with younger children, teaching them to speak with inflection.


As Papa tries to read Little Red Chicken a bedtime story, she constantly interrupts him until she takes over the storytelling. A couple of teens could dramatically share this story with younger children with one playing the part of Papa and another as Little Red Chicken. Use the activity kit from the publisher at [http://www.candlewick.com/book_files/0763641685.kit.1.pdf](http://www.candlewick.com/book_files/0763641685.kit.1.pdf) to create the paper plate puppets to use with a reenactment with young children.


Readers have been cautioned by the regular bus driver that Pigeon should not be allowed to drive the bus, but Pigeon has other ideas. Go to [http://disney.go.com/books/discussion-guides](http://disney.go.com/books/discussion-guides) to find the link to an activity guide for three "pigeon" books and teens may choose an idea to use with younger children after reading the book aloud to them or check out Pigeon's website at [http://www.pigeonpresents.com](http://www.pigeonpresents.com).

**JUST PLAIN FUN**


A laugh-out-loud story of a young boy named Nathan agreeing to take another boy's father in exchange for two goldfish.

When the boy wants his father back, Nathan has already traded him for an electric guitar. The story then continues as it follows the zany path of trade after trade of the father from one person to another. For an interesting activity, write the names of a variety of items from things (such as small things like a chocolate bar, or big things like a motorcycle, or funny things like a chicken) on slips of paper or notecards, and give a couple cards to each teen. Trade the cards for a few minutes and then find out who finishes with what the group decides are the "best trades."


Lucy hears frightful noises behind the walls of her family's old house, knowing it is wolves. Unfortunately, she has been told when the wolves come out, "It's all over." Delightfully creepy mixed-media illustrations jump out of every page as Lucy's family deals with the horror. A humorous ending shows that wolves are just one part of the problem. Teens expecting another creepy story by Gaiman won't be disappointed and can try to predict what Lucy's next step will be.


Teens will be amused as Donkey tries to determine the attraction of Monkey's book with non-technical elements and Mouse stating the obvious. Simple text and Lane's signature illustrations can lead into a discussion at the plight of print in the digital age.


John Hancock, Paul Revere, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, plus Thomas Jefferson are each depicted with humorous escapades in this tongue-in-cheek early-American historical story, complete with illustrations of the time period. Teens could select another historical figure and write a short, humorous story that shares an event that was important to the founding of our country.

These thirty picture books offer only an introduction of themes and ideas for using picture books with teens. For more ideas, visit the elementary school library or children's section in a public library to check out the hundreds of other possibilities. A recent professional title by Sharron McElmeel titled *Picture That!* From Mendel to Normandy: *Picture Books and Ideas, Curriculum and Connections—for Tweens and Teens* (Libraries Unlimited/ABC-CLIO, 2009/VOYA December 2009) offers three hundred fifty picture book titles for use with grades 4-12 and sixty titles have a full entry with complete ideas.