

Picture Books for Lesson-Learning

Berenstain, Stan & Jan. The Bike Lesson. New York: Random House, 1964.

The Bike Lesson is a classic young readers' book that describes a father's lesson on bike safety. The father shows his son how to properly ride a bike by demonstrating how not to do everything. In the end, the son is able to successfully ride the battered bike back home, with his battered father riding on the handlebars.

The lesson here is that it is easy to make a mistake on a bicycle (or anywhere else in life), and one must always be careful not only of their own actions, but the actions of those around them.

This book targets beginning readers in early or pre-primary grades. The illustrations are typical of the Berenstains – hand-drawn and coloured with a fair amount of sketched detail. They add to the text on the page, and could easily tell the story sans words. However, when text and illustrations are used together, the illustrations play an important role in the story's humour.

Bernstein, Dan. The Tortoise and the Hare Race Again. Illus. Andrew Glass. New York: Holiday House, 2006.

After the famous race between the tortoise and the hare, the contestants were having to live up to their success or escape their failure. Both decided that they would be best served by a rematch. Similarly to their last race, the hare fell asleep midway through the race. However, this time before the tortoise reached the finish line, he dressed himself in a hare disguise and with the help of an engine, blasted through to win for the hare. The tortoises knew the truth but the hares did not, so both won.

The lesson here: it is sometimes possible for everybody to win.

The story is written for students in the middle to upper primary grades. The story and illustration complement each other well and could exist and be understood without one another. The illustrations are well-drawn with coloured pencils.

Bunting, Eve. Smoky Night. Illus. David Diaz. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.

At the beginning of Smoky Night, the narrator (a young boy) tells the reader that his family and a neighbourly woman do not get along because their respective cats are enemies. As the story progresses, the cats are caught in a fire together and learn to get along. At the conclusion, all of the people involved agree to give friendship a chance.

The story teaches an important lesson about other people: that until you know a person, it is impossible to know if you should be friends or enemies. It is important to give everyone a chance, even if the first impression is not favourable.

The text is easy to understand, and is probably best for students in the middle primary grades. The backgrounds (which appear behind each illustration and behind the text, different for each spread), while interesting, sometimes makes reading difficult. The illustrations are simple paintings that do not add much, if anything, to the story.

Harper, Anita. It's Not Fair! Illus. Mary McQuillan. New York: Holiday House, 2007.

When a big sister gets a baby brother, she has responsibilities – and it's not fair. However, it is not long before he expressing his own concerns (that she can do things he cannot) – and it's not fair.

Fairness does not always equal freedom: there are reasons siblings have different expectations, and reasons responsibility yields benefits.

It's Not Fair! is an excellent story for early and pre-primary grades due to its words and illustrations. The words are few and small, and the illustrations are bright and meaningful. As long as the reader understands the phrase “It wasn't fair!”, they will not have a problem enjoying this book - whether or not they can read.

Kimmel, Eric A. Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock. Illus. Janet Stevens. New York: Holiday House, 1988.

Anasansi and the Moss-Covered Rock tells the tale of a greedy spider, who uses a magic rock to trick all of his neighbours into falling asleep so that he can steal all of their food. He plays this trick on various animals, including a lion, elephant, and a rhinoceros. In the end, a clever deer tricks Anasansi into putting himself to sleep and invites all of the animals to reclaim their food.

This is a story that teaches the lesson of the golden rule – that you should do treat others and you would like them to treat you.

This is a good book for children of early to middle primary grades – while some of the text is repetitive, there are a fair number of words. The illustrations are wonderfully realistic, with lots of colour and detail. A very young child could appreciate the story through the pictures, and should be able to understand the story without reading the text, though the average reader will be delighted by both.

L'Engle, Madeline. The Other Dog. Illus. Christine Davenier. New York: Sea Star Books, 2001.

The Other Dog is written from a dog's perspective, telling how its mistress brought home a new dog (a baby) and how the new family member changed things. At first, the

original dog is very upset about the competition (especially for affection) and views the change as negative. It finds many reasons why it is a better dog. However, by the end of the book, it becomes encouraged by interaction with the baby, and comes to love it anyway.

This story teaches that it is not hard to cooperate and even love one another; that even in competition both parties can be happy.

It is an amusing tale for lower primary grades and would be especially popular if read aloud. The language is minimal and effective, and the illustrations are stylistically simple, but effective as well. The illustrations are very rough sketches which have been covered by watercolour painted without precision, but are presented well in company with the text.

Lehman, Barbara. The Red Book. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.

The Red Book is somewhat unusual in that it does not have any words, but tells the story only through pictures. While many picture books could accomplish this, there are usually words anyway. The book is like a short film shown frame by frame, where magical books exist - books that show in their pages everyone else who is looking at a copy.

This story, while it seems very trivial, has an important message: that reading can take you places.

The illustrations are very simple – black outlines filled with colour – but are very effective in telling the story. Because detail is minimal, it is very easy to follow because your eyes are instantly drawn to the most important points on each page.

McCully, Emily Arnold. Mirette on the High Wire. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1992.

In Mirette on the High Wire, after meeting a retired high-wire walker, a young girl asks if he might teach her his trade. He refuses, but she practices on her own, falling many times but slowly improving. After showing the man her progress, he agrees to coach her and she

becomes very talented – even going so far as to help him.

This is a story that teaches how valuable intrinsic motivation and persistence are.

The text is not particularly difficult, but some French spelling/vocabulary and advanced sentence structure may slow students. The book is probably best for students in middle/upper primary grades. The text and illustrations work well together; both can exist alone, but are enhanced by the other. The illustrations reflect the French setting of the story, and the author's choice of watercolour was a good one. It enabled her to pay special attention to shadows without adding extra work.

Numeroff, Laura Joffe. If You Give a Moose a Muffin. Illus. Felicia Bond.

HarperCollinsPublishers, 1991.

If You Give a Moose a Muffin is a sequel to the popular If You Give a Mouse a Cookie. It is a delightful circular story where a young boy gives a moose a muffin, only to have the moose ask for more and more favours.

This is a story that teaches students to be careful - sharing and showing generosity are wonderful things, but there are people in this world who will take advantage of you, and it is best not to let things go too far.

The text is appropriate for young children. The illustrations are fairly simple, but make good use of texture and patterns to make a detailed examination more interesting than a simple glance. However, it is important to note that the pictures do not have too much value without the words – children may be able to have fun with the pictures even without the words, but they will probably not be able to make sense of them.

Pittman, Helena Claire. A Grain of Rice. New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1986.

This story is a Chinese peasant's quest to wed the Emperor's daughter. When Pong Lo first asks for her hand, the Emperor is angry, but Pong Lo works hard to prove his worth in the administration, eventually earning the Emperor's promise to provide him anything (except his princess's hand). Pong Lo asks for rice, starting with 1 grain on the first day, to double every day thereafter. Of course, it is not long before he has been given enough to make him the richest man in China – and eligible to marry the princess.

The lesson in A Grain of Rice is that hard work pays off.

The text is extensive but not hard to read; probably best for middle to upper primary students. The illustrations are pencil sketches beautiful and full of detail, but very much reliant on the words to tell the story.

Seuss, Theodor. The Cat in the Hat. New York: Random House, 1957.

The Cat in the Hat, like the Berenstains' The Bike Lesson is a beginning reader which has a simple message. When a young brother and sister let a strange cat into their house while Mother is away, they are left to deal with the incredible messes he makes. Fortunately, the cat is convinced to clean up after himself at the conclusion of the story, but the theme remains clear.

Be wary of strangers, especially if there is no adult nearby.

The book targets lower primary and pre-primary grades. The text is very simple, but effective and has the rhyming style that Seuss is famous for. Because of the style of stanza and prose, children are sure to enjoy re-reading this book. The illustrations, also typical of Seuss, are fairly simple drawings filled with colour, and with detail where it is important. Both text and illustrations could exist without one another, but together the book is a more

enjoyable read.

Seuss, Theodor. The Lorax. New York: Random House, 1971.

Unlike The Cat in the Hat, The Lorax deals with some more mature themes: specifically the topics of deforestation and preservation. When an entrepreneur arrives in an area to find the special truffula trees, he quickly harvests one and creates his product. When he finds a customer and a market, he quickly expands operations and quickly makes the trees extinct. In the process, he also ruins the environment for other creatures such as fish and fowl.

The lesson here is that one should not be selfish – that everyone who lives in an environment together needs to preserve it for posterity. It is an important lesson, and it makes this book a good read-aloud and discussion piece.

The story itself is appropriate for middle primary grades, but the issues are probably best addressed in upper primary grades. Again, the text is in the song-like prose of Seuss (including many nonsense words created just for this story). There is a distinct contrast between the bright colours of the “early world” and the dark colours used post-harvest, but illustrations are attractive and relevant.

Thaler, Mike. The Librarian from the Black Lagoon. Illus. Jared Lee. New York: Scholastic, 1997.

The Librarian from the Black Lagoon describes a child's expectations about the school library – that it is run by a monster who treats children poorly. It turns out that the librarian is a kind lady who disproves every expectation.

Similarly to Smoky Night, this is a book that teaches students about making judgements before they have any facts or experiences. The teacher and the environment are

the opposite of what is expected.

The text is appropriate for upper primary grades, based on the number of words and the vocabulary used. The illustrations are coloured sketches which look rough from up close, but taken as a whole are colourful and imaginative. While the illustrations do not necessarily help tell the story, they certainly contribute to the humour. Children are likely to get a kick out of what is imagined, and will certainly have fun finding strange details or objects that further add to the humour.

Viorst, Judith. Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day. West Hanover, MA: Halliday Lithograph Corporation, 1972.

This story is about Alexander and a single day in his life where everything goes wrong – making messes, getting caught, and being left out. Throughout it all, he wants to start over by moving to Australia, but “some days are like that...even in Australia”.

Alexander learns an important lesson about life – that there are good days and bad days.

The book, which targets the middle primary grades, has a good number of words but uses simple language and sentence structure. The illustrations are different than most in that they are colourless ink drawings, using various styles of cross-hatching to show depth and shadow. However, in this case the most important component to the story is the text.

Willems, Mo. The Pigeon Finds a Hot Dog! New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 2004.

The Pigeon Finds a Hot Dog! is a short, simple story about sharing. When the duck asks the pigeon questions about his hot dog, the pigeon first gets mad, before changing his

mind and deciding to share his meal.

Exploring this book will teach students the value of sharing.

The text in this story is minimal, and the illustrations simple, making it perfect for beginning readers. Both text and illustrations are seemingly done by hand in crayon, and the effect complements the audience well. If one considers the minor speech bubbles part of the illustration, the story could exist with or without text.