

Images of Struggle and Triumph: Using Picture Books to Teach about Civil Rights in the Secondary Classroom

Karen H. Wilkins, Caroline C. Sheffield, Martha B. Ford, and Bárbara C. Cruz

Colored men and women traded in the five and dime all the time. They kept money in the bank and on some Saturdays were allowed to sit in the balcony of the theater to watch a movie. This all seemed normal to me. It's true that they couldn't drink out of the same water fountain as white folks or eat in the same coffee shop. They had to wait to be served in the stores until white folk had been served, but that's just the way things were.¹

The African American experience prior to the civil rights movement is difficult for secondary students to grasp. The unabashed racism of the time is unfathomable for most students in twenty-first century America. While racism and other prejudice still exist, it is now more subtle and less obvious to the casual observer. The above quote, from the 2004 NCSS Notable Trade Book *Mississippi Morning*, conveys the pervasive nature of racism in the United States prior to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. *Mississippi Morning* presents the perspective of a young white protagonist in this vivid picture book about Depression-era Mississippi, a place and time where the Ku Klux Klan dominated society. As a result of the Klan's dominance, African Americans lived in fear, forced to live in an atmosphere of prejudice and discrimination. The richly descriptive prose engages readers in a way that no standard textbook can. Fortunately, as social studies educators, we have a wealth of books that we can use to bring the past to life and to our students.

Why Picture Books?

As mentioned above, *Mississippi Morning* is a picture book. Traditionally 32 pages in length, with an image on every page or two-page spread, the picture book format enables the author to address the difficult and emotionally charged topics of racial discrimination and prejudice both visually and textually. This connection of picture and text creates a rich portrait of the period; the characters and the setting of a picture book are accessible to the student through the visual representation.² The use of selected images also enables the author to emphasize themes, emotions, and significant details that might otherwise be lost in a conventional text-only medium.³

Although picture books are traditionally associated with elementary level learners, they can also be utilized effectively without patronizing older students. The picture book format is not an indication of the reading level or content. It can be more accurately described as the medium that the author felt best captured the concept. In fact, many recently published picture books may be inappropriate for use in a younger class setting.⁴

Mississippi Morning includes images and references to Klan-related violence that are not age-appropriate for students at the primary level. Comprehending many of the complex topics addressed in today's picture books—such as the civil rights movement—requires more background knowledge than most elementary students have. Additionally, the vocabulary and reading level of many recently published picture books are too advanced for the traditional elementary student.⁵ The excerpt at the beginning of this article is written at a 6.5 grade level, well within the appropriate range for middle school inclusion.

Picture books are fun and visually arresting. We have found that secondary students clamor to see the illustrations, listen intently to the text, and enjoy the novelty of a read aloud. The format's concise text is enhanced through the use of vivid imagery. The images are often great works of art in and of themselves. All of the books highlighted in this article present artwork by award-winning illustrators who also display their works in formats other than picture books.

The visual-verbal connection of picture books also facilitates learning for a variety of special needs students: the English Language Learner (ELL), the exceptional education student, and the reluctant reader.⁶ The ELL students, who might otherwise be excluded from the content in a traditional textbook

due to limited English proficiency, is drawn into the story by the pictures.⁷ Illustrations provide a bridge to content that might otherwise be missed by allowing pictures to fill in the blanks of unfamiliar vocabulary. These same benefits are available to the exceptional education student, particularly those students with reading difficulties.⁸ Picture books are particularly appropriate for the reluctant reader who typically reads below grade level and is unable to comprehend traditional textbooks.⁹ Unlike picture books, whose images are integral for comprehension of the narrative, textbooks are dense with text, and the limited graphics are not necessarily correlated with the narrative. By utilizing picture books, these students who rarely experience success in the classroom are able to actively participate in class discussion and engage with peers.¹⁰

Textbooks by their nature are a survey of knowledge from the dominant perspective. They typically overlook the stories of the individual, the “common” person, and the human side of history. Since textbooks are the prevalent teaching tool, their use can negatively impact all students, not just the special populations listed above.¹¹ Pictures books are useful for the instruction of all students. They give a face and a soul, so to speak, to the events of the past. While traditional textbooks often include images of the famous and well known, picture books often include stories of everyday people and everyday lives. Picture books are pieces of the whole mosaic, providing insightful and relevant depictions from differing perspectives. Through rich illustration and vivid text, each picture book allows the student to walk in the shoes of a participant in history not typically represented in most textbooks.¹²

Another problem with the traditional classroom text is that students do not often see themselves represented in textbooks and see little relevance between the text and their experiences.¹³ The voice of children in history is rarely heard. Picture books fill this void. In

contrast to textbooks, picture books are often presented from the perspective of a child or young adult. These perspectives are completely developed in a concise format, and easily comprehended by students in a relatively few number of pages.¹⁴ Through the presentation of the child’s perspective, the student is more easily engaged with the event and able to visualize the relevance of the content. Bruner, Combs, and Palardy contend that students will be intrinsically motivated to learn if the content is relevant and makes sense to them.¹⁵

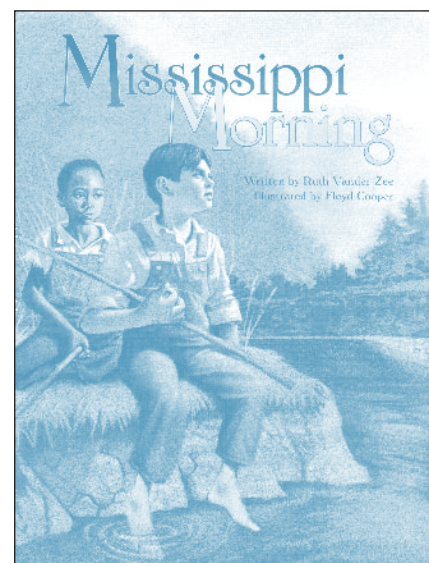
Secondary classes typically have a duration of less than one hour. Picture books are easily incorporated in this short time span, without any loss of content.¹⁶ Whether or not an educator is concerned with the amount of content to be covered or the depth to which the content is examined, using picture books appeals to both needs. The perspectives add depth to any topic, and the length and illustrated format of the books allows them to be quickly read without detracting from the pace of content coverage.

Picture books can be used in a variety of ways within a secondary class. Taking advantage of the compact format, picture books are an excellent method to introduce a topic.¹⁷ A read aloud or a center activity can be utilized at the beginning of a curricular unit to introduce the themes that will be discussed during the rest of the unit. From this springboard activity, students can explore specific topics with more depth. Another option for the integration of picture books is as a tool to highlight one event or person related to the unit theme. Picture books can be used as part of a concluding activity for a unit. Specifically, picture books can be analyzed for accuracy and authenticity using what the students have learned throughout the unit.

The Civil Rights Movement through Picture Books

While picture books can be used to teach about a multitude of social studies topics, we have found them especially

useful to teach about the civil rights movement. Our students’ cognitive and affective learning have been enriched immeasurably by the incorporation of picture books into our classrooms. All of the picture books described in this article are NCSS Notable Trade Book Award winners. In addition to a summary of each book, suggested teaching activities are provided. The books are presented in historical order, beginning with the Depression and moving through the civil rights movement of the 1960s.



Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2004

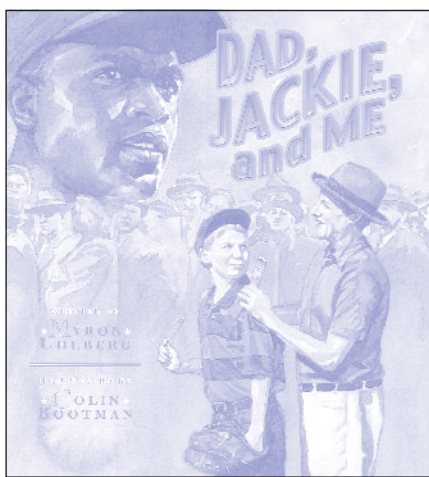
***Mississippi Morning* written by Ruth Vander Zee, illustrated by Floyd Cooper. Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2004.**¹⁸

This book, set in rural 1930s Mississippi, tells the story of James William, a young, white boy who does not question the constructs of his segregated community and is ignorant of the inherent violence. Through his friendship with LeRoy, a young, black boy living in his community, James William becomes aware of the realities of the Ku Klux Klan’s influence. He discovers the town’s “hanging tree,” the truth about the black preacher’s house fire, and his own father’s role as a local Klan member.

This story—from the viewpoint of a young, white boy in the rural South—offers an unusual perspective for a book about this time period. The Depression

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is usually told from an adult perspective, and the African American experience is usually told from the African American perspective. The presentation of this story from the perspective of a young, white boy provides another angle—the ignorance of many white youth to the pervasiveness of racism and how one boy is pulled into awareness by his surroundings.



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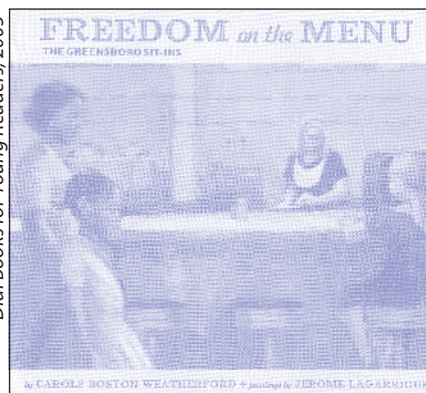
***Dad, Jackie, and Me* written by Myron Uhlberg, illustrated by Colin Bootman. Peachtree Publishing, 2005.**¹⁹

Set in 1947 Brooklyn, a young, white boy shares his love of baseball with his deaf father. Jackie Robinson has just become the first black major league baseball player. The book's characters support the Brooklyn Dodgers and Jackie Robinson throughout his rookie season, a time when Robinson is slowly accepted by the Brooklyn fans even as he faces discrimination from other teams. The story intertwines the protagonist's feelings about his father's deafness with Robinson's acceptance by the team and their fans.

The events of Jackie Robinson's rookie season are well known. This book

provides a unique perspective—that of a white fan who is grappling with his own issues of acceptance—adding depth to a well-known story. The picture book about Jackie Robinson, a pivotal character in the saga of the civil rights movement, illuminates how his strength empowered not only African Americans but those in other communities as well. The hardback version of this book provides primary source documents (newspaper articles and pictures) that can be used as teaching tools.

Dial Books for Young Readers, 2005

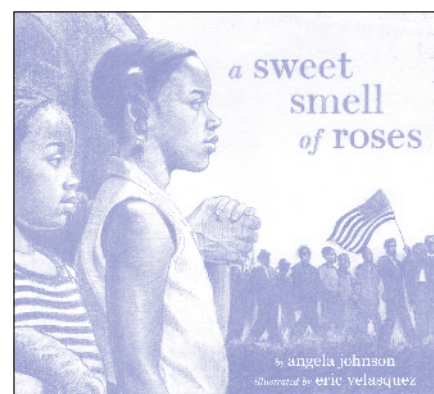


***Freedom on the Menu* written by Carole Boston Weatherford, paintings by Jerome Lagarrigue. Dial Books for Young Readers, 2005.**²⁰

The Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, was the site of one of the civil rights movement's seminal events, and the setting for this picture book. This story is told from the perspective of Connie, an eight-year-old African American girl, who wants to sit at the lunch counter and drink from the "whites-only" water fountain. The author interweaves the events of the sit-in with the character's personal experience; her older brother and sister are participating in the NAACP's drive to register black voters and are eventually jailed for their efforts. The story ends with the family enjoying ice cream at the infamous Woolworth's counter.

The perspective presented in this

book demonstrates to the reader that the major events of the time period had lasting effects that were experienced by the entire population, including children. This book is a simplistic progression through life-altering events, such as a speech by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Greensboro sit-ins, through the naïve eyes of a young girl who lives the events but does not necessarily comprehend their significance. The book shows that we are all involved in history.

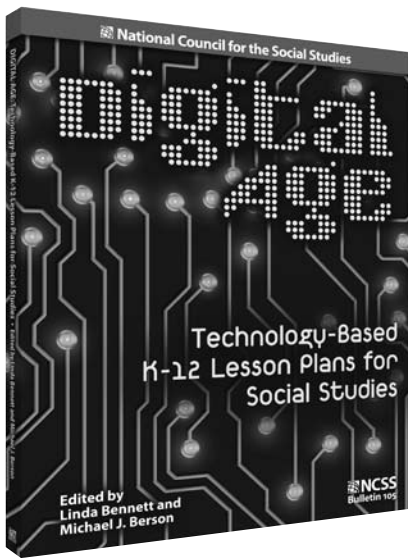


***A Sweet Smell of Roses* written by Angela Johnson, illustrated by Eric Velasquez. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2005.**²¹

Set in an intentionally unnamed Southern town during the early 1960s, this book follows the actions of two young girls who defy their mother to take part in a civil rights march led by Martin Luther King Jr. During the march, the girls endure the taunts of the jeering crowd to become part of the growing civil rights movement. The characters in this story do not participate in a known historical event; however, they represent the efforts of the tens of thousands of everyday people in the struggle for civil rights, including the efforts of countless children.

This book relies on images to convey the feeling of the time period. The vivid illustrations pull the reader into the story with the use of realistic black and

Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2005



Digital Age: Technology-Based K-12 Lesson Plans for Social Studies

Linda Bennett and Michael J. Berson, editors
NCSS Bulletin No.105, 200 pp. 2007

Exemplary K-12 social studies lessons that infuse technology are the focus of this bulletin. At least one of the authors is a classroom teacher in the majority of the lessons presented. The lessons are based on the NCSS standards. Each lesson includes links with NETS-S (National Educational Technology Standards) and suggests technology applications appropriate for the grade level. In addition, the bulletin includes a section on tools and techniques concerning classroom management, Internet safety, software, images, and podcasting.

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white drawings and a single element of red. The sparse text is written in first person to draw the reader into the character's perspective on the march and civil rights movement. The book demonstrates how the actions of the common person, seemingly insignificant individually, are monumental in the collective.

Conclusion

The four picture books described in this article provide a concise (yet nuanced) chronicle of the civil rights movement—from the Jim Crow era of the early twentieth century to the movement for integration in the 1960s. The use of picture books is one method to bring students closer to the past. This format brings relevance and understanding to all students through text and images. Students who may not normally be able to participate in class discussion and activities due to language difficulties or learning disabilities are included through their connection with the images, developing and enhancing their visual literacy. As for students who are proficient readers and can gather meaning from text, their understanding of the time period is enhanced by the emotions and details portrayed in the visual images. Whether used as an introduction, exploration of an event or person, or as a concluding activity, picture books have a place in every secondary classroom. 🌐

Notes

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