As my class was doing historical research in the library, I pointed out to my students that they should study the pictures in the books to help them understand their topics. I was met with some blank stares, and one boy raised his hand and said, "But, I thought we were too old to look at pictures in books. I didn't think we should." Many other students murmured their agreement. It was sad that they were denying themselves an important aspect of their research and more particularly of their reading. As I looked at the ones who felt this way about picture books, I realized they were also poor readers. Knowing some of their backgrounds, I believed they probably had never been read to as children. It was sad that they were still denying themselves the pleasure of enjoying picture books.

Picture books are a great asset to reading and a useful tool for teachers. An important trend in publishing and marketing is picture books for young adult readers. "Dramatic changes in children's and YA publishing over the last decade have blurred the lines between children's and adult books. The fact that a book has 32 pages, full-color illustrations, and a 9-by-13 inch trim size no longer automatically means it's "for children only" . . . (Zvirin, 1998, 1716). Although it is difficult to define an exact age limit for picture books, some criteria for picture books for older readers are that they use:

- Mature themes
- More complex illustrations than those that would be easily appreciated or understood by younger readers
- More text or difficult text than would be appropriate for the short attention spans of younger readers
- Subtle meanings beyond the understanding of younger readers
- Two levels of meaning - one for younger readers and one for older readers
- Fiction or non-fiction

Picture books for young adults have mature themes that would be neither understood by nor appropriate for younger readers. For example, I Never Knew Your Name (Garland, 1993) is told by a boy who is troubled because he didn't reach out to another teen who committed suicide. Just One Flick of a Finger (Loribecki 1996) is the story of a boy who brings a gun to school, and of the disaster that results. The theme of drugs is illustrated in The House That Crack Built (Taylor 1992). These are all topics of concern to young adults, but inappropriate for most younger readers.

Today's picture books contain beautiful artwork. However, the tastes of many young children are not developed enough to fully appreciate the meaning or effect of some more sophisticated picture books. "Although young children can enjoy the pictures in Ammo's USA, the visual references in the book are subtle and beyond their grasp. Readers must have a solid background in American history, literature and folklore to truly appreciate the breadth of Anno's celebration of America" (Flack 1994, 54). The contemporary paintings of Wayne Theibaud, in O Beautiful for Spacious Skies (Bates 1994), are beyond the understanding of most children. Some of the potential to make meaning when encountering a picture book would be lost if the reader did not understand the complexity of the illustrations. "A picture book uses both text and illustration to create meaning; one is not as powerful alone as it is with the other" (Giorgis 1999, 51).

Picture books for young adults are often boring to younger readers because of the longer, more complex texts. However, older readers would find these texts and pictures entertaining and engaging.

Younger children are unlikely to grasp the subtleties in young adult picture books. Although much of the humor,
allusions, and situations would have little meaning for them, young adults pick up on these elements and find enjoyment in them. For example, Snow White in New York (French 1986) has the wicked step-mother looking in the newspaper the New York Mirror to get her information instead of in a looking-glass mirror. This is appreciated by older readers not children. In the book A Little Pigeon Toad (Gwynne 1988) the humor is based on puns that are delightful to older readers but might be meaningless to children.

Many picture books can be enjoyed by both older and younger readers. My Great Aunt Arizona (Houston 1992), The Rag Coat (Mills 1991), and Dandelions (Bunting 1995) are examples of stories that have strong themes and enjoyable stories for young and old alike.

Young adult picture books are written in fiction as well as non-fiction formats. Enjoyable stories in all genres and information texts on all subjects abound. Young adult readers would have no trouble finding picture books to match their tastes in literature of any kind. Picture books increase their understanding and pleasure no matter what mode they select to read.

Implications for Teachers of Young Adults

Young adult picture books are valuable tools for teachers. These books lend themselves to all content areas. Picture books help students be more strategic readers. Readers use many of the same skills to interpret pictures as they do to interpret print, such as determining their purpose for reading; drawing upon their background knowledge, experience, and attitudes; asking and answering questions; inferring; and visualizing. Putting these skills together through both illustrations and text enhances comprehension and the creation of meaning.

There are several types of picture books that a teacher may consider:

- **Wordless books:** The story is told completely through pictures. No text is included.
- **Picture books with minimal text:** There is a small amount of text, but the illustrations reveal most of the story.
- **Picture storybooks:** Pictures and text have about the same presence and interact to tell the story.
- **Books with illustrations:** There are more words than illustrations, but the illustrations give enlightenment and clarification to the story or informational text. (Vacca and Vacca 1999, 99).

Each type of picture book could be used by teachers to teach comprehension strategies as well as to increase reading comprehension itself.

Janet Allen, an expert in reading strategies, explains the importance of picture books. "Creating images of scenes or events is an expression of a mental model (Johnson-Laird 1983; Sanford and Garrod, 1981; van Dijk and Kintsch 1983). I think that's one reason children's picture books were such a hit in my classroom. The beautiful illustrations gave my [secondary] students a mental model they were often unable to create for themselves because they were struggling with the words" (Allen 1998, 51).

In You Gotta Be the Book, Jeffrey D. Wilhelm tells how picture books helped his struggling readers. "Once students were introduced to picture books and encouraged to read them, they did so vigorously. I wrote in my journal that 'I just have to wonder if school conveys a very limited view of literature that does not include picture books and comics, and if this limited view of literature contributes to how bummed out and distanced many of my student readers become from literature and the literary experience,'" (Wilhelm 1997, 123).

Picture books support readers by helping build schema. Letting students read books with pictures and text can help them understand concepts and facts that would be difficult without such support. Picture books are on students' independent reading level, while literary "classics" and content textbooks are on their instructional or often on their frustrational level. Picture books can bridge the gap in students' understanding.

Picture books are available in any content area. Some useful, educational and interesting content area picture books are:

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<th>Math: Sir Cumference and the First Round Table (Neuschwander 1997)</th>
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<td>Math Curse (Scieszka and Smith (ill.), 1995)</td>
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Picture books may be used to awaken interest and tie new learning to old. For instance, the book, Postcards from Pluto (Leedy 1992) would be an interesting way to begin a unit on astronomy. The double meanings on the postcards are amusing as well as informative. The Jolly Postman (Ahlberg 1996) with its varied types of mail can be used to introduce a unit on letter writing.

These books provide springboards to discussions. For instance, the books The Wall (Bunting, 1990) and A Picture Book of Anne Frank (Adler 1993) would be good discussion starters on war and prejudices. A Day's Work (Bunting 1994) could evoke a discussion on integrity. They may be used as models for literary development, as well. I Hate to Read (Marshall 1993) introduces the idea of reading and literacy, what reading does for the reader, and what makes a good story.

Picture books are also great for sparking ideas for writing. The Mysteries of Harris Burdick (intro by Van Allsburg 1984) is a sure way to inspire the imagination, with its mysterious pictures, captions, but no text. To go along with writing, there are picture books on the parts of speech by Ruth Heller - definitely a more interesting way to introduce grammar to young adult readers (1987-1990). Picture Books, An Annotated Bibliography for Use with the 6-Trait Analytic Model of Writing Assessment and Instruction (Spandel and Culham 1994) suggests picture books that may be used to teach the six writing traits.

A plus for using picture books in the classroom is their length. "An important reason for reading a picture book aloud is that the story can be shared in one class sitting, an ideal situation in secondary schools, where class periods are often brief and reading and response to picture books is possible within a single period. Of course, the book can be reread time and again, but the impact will be lost if the story is carried out over several days." (Giorgis 1999, 54)

Some of the very best writing may be found in picture books and should not be missed by young adults. Mem Fox, a picture book author, makes this point very well: "In my experience, the best-loved picture books are so well written that they leave a lasting impression on the reader . . . They have a passionate quality. By passionate, I mean a constant undercurrent of tension combined with compassion, which makes readers care desperately about the fate of the main characters. It's not easy to achieve, but I am convinced that writing without passion is writing for oblivion . . . If we don't laugh, gasp, block our ears, sigh, vomit, giggle, curl our toes, empathize, sympathize, feel pain, weep or shiver during the reading of a picture book, then surely the writer has wasted our time, our money, and our precious, precious trees." (Spandel and Culham 1994, introduction).

Young adult picture books are useful and effective tools for teachers. The trend of publishing and marketing young adult picture books is a positive one. It provides enjoyment and education for the young adult reader. Pictures and text together can leave a profound and lasting impression on this age group.

Works Cited


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