

November Why Picture Books Matter

Picture Books Are Theatre

By Jackie Azúa Kramer

Picture books matter because at their best they are conceptual, beautiful, and transcendent.

Picture books are like theatre. With each page turn the curtain rises and a scene unfolds with plot, characters, costumes and setting. The stories offer the reader as its audience opportunities to wonder, question and feel many emotions.

As a student at NYU, we often used picture books to adapt into fun plays for children. There were always squeals of laughter as soon as the ‘Cat’ from *Cat in the Hat* stepped on the stage.

And it never ceased to amaze me when children watched with rapt attention as ‘Harold’ got out of trouble by drawing a boat in *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. Or when they called out to me as ‘Henny Penny’ that it was only an acorn that fell from the sky. Although our costumes and sets had low production value, it never seemed to matter. What mattered is what always matters...a good story.

Now fast forward. My children are snuggled tight in my bed. A stack of picture books waited to be opened like the doors of a theatre on opening night. I did my best to create voices for each character and took care not to rush the page turn or the next act. Time after time, the room filled with sounds of their giggles or questions or sometimes, quiet thought. We did this for years till my bed felt too small. But here’s what I know...the stories never got small.

Seasons come and go, and yet my kids and I still discuss the anguish of Sylvester's parents in *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* or how their ribs hurt from laughter in a cow that could type in *Click, Clack, Moo*. Or, when they huddled even closer, as I read *Owl Babies*. And their magical thinking that a little boy could keep a snowball in *A Snowy Day*.

Much of what makes a picture book memorable is hard to describe in words. They share within their pages universal truths and are helpful in introducing difficult subjects and emotions. Picture books simply put, are Shakespearean, as 'all the world' lies between thirty-two pages. Huzzah! That's why picture books matter.

Literacy Activity

Reader's Theatre:

Children love to act! Adapt your picture book into a play. Enhance a student's level of comprehension. Reader's Theatre appeals to different learning styles—visual, auditory and kinesthetic. Students get to act the characters in the story. That process includes reading aloud, movement and emotion, which may offer a deeper and lasting effect in understanding the stories plot, setting, characters and motives. Hand out roles for the narrator and characters in your story. Don't forget to include children for sound effects and set pieces. Watch the children bring the story to life!

Suggested Readings

Creative Drama in the Classroom by Nellie McCaslin

Children's Picture Books- The Art of Visual Storytelling by Martin Salisbury & Morag Styles

Amandina by Sergio Ruzzier

Biography

Jackie Azúa Kramer was once an actor, singer & school counselor. Jackie earned her Masters in Counseling in Education from Queens College, NY. Her work with children presented her with an opportunity to address their concerns, secrets, and hopes through storytelling.

Jackie has written for the SCBWI Bulletin and was a presenter at the first nErDyCamp Long Island. In 2014, Jackie was invited to be a member of the esteemed Bank Street Writers Lab, NYC.

Jackie lives with her husband, 'Muti-talented Brad' and amazing kids 'Jazz-hands Jonah' & big sis, 'Free-spirited Daisy' in Long Island, NY. Jackie's picture books include: *How Lilly Ate the Rainbow* (Fastpencil 2011), *The Green Umbrella* (North South Books) debuts February 2017. *The Boy and the Eight Hundred Pound Gorilla* (Candlewick Press, TBD) and *If You Want to Fall Asleep* (Clavis Books, Spring 2018).