

Books with Class

This month I'm featuring not one but THREE books for special reasons—one because it's especially appropriate for Black History Month; one in celebration of Valentine's Day; and one because it's a book I've fallen in love with and can't wait to share with those of you at upper grades who haven't read it yet. Hope you'll enjoy them!



When Marian Sang
written by Pam Munoz Ryan
illustrated by Brian Selznick
Scholastic Press, NY



This is one of the most beautifully illustrated and well written children's books I've ever read. Ryan's words capture Marian Anderson's strong character and her grace and dignity as she made a major contribution to Civil Rights and to the world with her "voice of a century." This is one of those children's books for children of all ages!

Guided Reading - The literary elements are all strong in this book: plot, character development, chronological sequence, problem/solution, and, most of all, theme. This also makes a perfect genre study for biographies.

Writing - Study the genre and technique of developing a character and a plot spanning many years within just 32 pages of few words; study Ryan's transitions.

Self-Selected Reading - This a powerful read-aloud enhanced by the gorgeous illustrations.

Art - The artwork in this book is simply stunning. Brian Selznick is a previous Caldecott Award winner, and his talent is certainly apparent in this book. The copper, black, and gold hues on each page become analogous to the message of this writer. Notice how Selznick illuminates Anderson

throughout the book. Ask students how this speaks to the reader as well as the words do.

Music - Surely you'll want to find clips of Anderson's powerful voice for your students to enjoy. Be sure to call attention to her amazing range which was 24 notes by the age of 8! Many of the lyrics of her songs are excerpted in the book, mostly hymns.

History - This book reveals the need for the Civil Rights movement. Marian was celebrated in the great concert halls all over the world, yet was refused by Constitution Hall in Washington, DC because of her color. Many people rallied at the injustice and inequity faced by Marian Anderson, including Eleanor Roosevelt. The book has interesting notes and a well-developed timeline of Anderson's accomplishments (See the special section in the Appendix for their timeline and match the events with others occurring in the world).

Character Education - This character who faced great adversity responded with determination, strength, calm, and dignity. The dignity and grace with which Anderson dealt with the prejudice around her is worthy of discussion with students.



This is a fun children's book (for the primary ones) about a lonely porcupine that lives in a petting zoo—only he's never petted for obvious reasons. He sets out to find a mate with whom he can share his life. His adventures are filled with fun and puns! There's a happy ending to his exploits.

Guided Reading Block - You can use this book to point out the logical sequence, poetry of songs, as well as the rich puns/figures of speech.

SSR - This book is probably best as a read-aloud for pure-T enjoyment!



Freak the Mighty
written by Rodman Philbrick
Scholastic Inc., NY

I fell in love with this novel when I read it. After having the book recommended by upper grade teachers at seminars, I bought it while in Kokomo, IN, and read it from cover to cover on my flight home. I laughed out loud and shed a few tears, too. This one will definitely touch your heart! It's the story of two boys, considered freakish by their peers, who discover their own identify through their friendship.

Guided Reading - The literary elements are all strong in this book—setting, plot, problem/solution, theme, and especially the character development. The author has given Max, the speaker, a rich voice through the use of word choice, dialect, and color. Text relationships are abundant—cause and effect being very obvious. The symbolism is definitely worth exploring—from the dictionary that Kevin keeps to the allusion of their body sizes and mental capacities.

Writing Block - This book will provide great exemplars of voice, character development, point of view, mood, setting, and symbolism. Kevin's creation of dictionary could be worth pursuing as a writing project, too. His dictionary includes humor and definitions specific to his experiences.

SSR - Your students will beg you not to stop reading this one. (Remember that it's for older kids, though. Definitely not for primary grades!)

Character Education - Explore how we can't always "judge a book by its cover" or a person by his appearance. The book is filled with problems these characters encounter. How Kevin and Max choose to solve their problems

can provide a rich discussion for your students. The symbolism throughout the story develops the theme and supports ideas of character building.

Word Block - Kevin's constant dictionary use is interesting to explore and might get some students interested or curious in words they encounter.