

MINI-LESSON – FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE –

Sarah Sullivan

Using *Passing the Music Down* as a Mentor Text

(By Sarah Sullivan, ill. by Barry Root, Candlewick, 2011)

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE: “Figurative language is language that’s intended to create an image, association or other effect in the mind of the listener or reader that goes beyond the literal meaning or expected use of the words involved.”

www.dictionary.com This effect is achieved through the use of literary devices such as metaphor, simile, alliteration and onomatopoeia, among others.

Introduce the text – Tell students you are going to share a book with them that is based on a true story. Tell them that, as they listen, you want them to pay particular attention to the images that the words conjure in their minds and to the sounds of the words.

Tell them that, after you finish reading, you are going to ask them to share an image or particular words that stick in their minds.

Read the book out loud.

1. NOTICE THE CRAFT/NAME THE CRAFT - Ask students to share images and words. Use this time of sharing to start examining craft, i.e., what the author was doing in crafting those images or selecting those particular words.

Here are some examples of passages and/or words that students might select:

- “corn strutting high in the field”
- “tomatoes plumping out on the vine”
- “the old, old mountains slumbering east of Tennessee.”
- “the boy’s heart dances.”
- “Life scoots along.”
- “Bees nuzzle honeysuckle when they jam up at Glenville.
- “Frost stiffens hay bales when they teach out at Elkins.”

*[For the sake of convenience, I have chosen to focus on **personification**. Students will probably notice other kinds of figurative language and you can place those examples*

in a separate column if you want to focus on one type of figurative language at a time, or you can brainstorm and collect examples of different kinds of figurative language.

Since the personification occurs early in the story, examples of it will probably be among the first examples of figurative language that students notice. Once you begin a list, you might narrow the classroom inquiry by talking about the author is doing – personifying an inanimate object – and asking students if they see additional examples where the author is doing the same thing.]

A working definition – “Personification is the giving of human characteristics to inanimate objects, ideas or animals.” *Fundamentals of Poetry*, William Leahy, Kenneth Publishing, Chicago, (1963) (p. 19)

2. FORM A THEORY – Examine the passage again. Ask students how those images or words support the idea of the story. Why did the author choose to make the landscape so active, for example?

- Is the natural world important to the story? [This can lead to a discussion of what the story is *really* about. On the surface, it’s about a young boy learning from a mentor, i.e., the old fiddler. Beneath that is a more universal story – the story of passing down culture and tradition from one generation to the next. So, one of the themes of the story is the circle of life and the continuity of nature. Think about how the word choices and the use of figurative language supports and reinforces that theme.]

Students might notice the passage of the seasons on the pages where the old fiddler and the boy are playing in Charleston, Glenville and Elkins (as noted in the art). The references are to actual festivals and events where the two musicians upon whom the story is based, used to play together.

“Seedlings dot the garden” is a reference to the Vandalia Gathering held over Memorial Day weekend.

“Bees nuzzle honeysuckle” is a reference to the State Folk Festival held in late June.

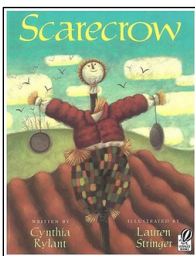
“Frost stiffens hay bales” is a reference to the Augusta Heritage Center’s October Old-Time Week.

<https://augustaheritagecenter.org/augusta-schedule/october-old-time/>

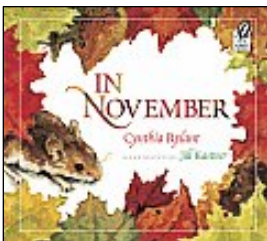
Students might notice how the author uses the references to these annual festival events to indicate the passage of time.

- Using personification makes a more direct connection with readers/listeners. Creates a more vivid image in reader's mind. A way to drive this point home is to offer a bland version of one of these phrases. *It's the third weekend in June when they "jam up at Glenville."*
- Using personification provides the opportunity to use active verbs in an interesting way. i.e., "Life scoots along." [*Ask why the author used "scoots."* Since the story is about musicians, this is an active way to handle the passage of time.] Makes readers see something in a more interesting way.
- "old, old mountains slumbering east of Tennessee" suggests the agelessness of the "story underneath the story," of people on earth passing down their culture, arts and traditions from one generation to the next. *They've been doing it for as long as these ancient mountains have been here. [You might want to inquire why the writer chose to refer to the characters as the "old man" or the "fiddler" and the "boy" in conjunction with this idea of timelessness. In other words, why the intentional vagueness? To suggest universality of the story. Like Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi, Merlin and young King Arthur.]*

3. Explore Other Authors - Ask students if they can think of other books where there are similar examples of figurative language. Ideally, you will have books that have been read aloud in class and discussed or that are familiar to the group. Your discussion may concern various types of imagery -- metaphors, similes, and personification, for example -- or you may keep the focus narrowed on a single type of figurative language. One of your goals is to assist students in developing an ear and an eye for when writers use this type of figurative language, to become better adept at reading as writers.



Scarecrow by Cynthia Rylant, ill. by Lauren Stringer, Voyager-Harcourt (1998)
 "A morning glory has held tight to his legs and a worm is living in his lapel."



In November by Cynthia Rylant, ill. by Jill Kastner Harcourt (2000)
 "In November, the earth is growing quiet. It is making its bed, a winter bed for flowers and small creatures."

4. Think About Your Own Writing – Tell students that now that they have some good ideas about how writers use figurative language, it's time to think about how they might use figurative language in their own writing. For example, you might say: *We've talked about how using figurative language deepens our understanding of the story the writer is telling. We've examined how using imagery and personification helps the writer make a direct connection with readers and listeners. So, now it's time to think of ways we might use this craft in our own writing. This is what writers do. They learn from reading the work of other writers. They see the "tricks" or "craft" that other writers use and then apply those same techniques in their own writing.* (Perhaps offer an example from your own writing or that of another student or of another writer.)

If students are in a writing workshop or have writing notebooks, ask them to look at their own work and see if they can imagine a way in which they might use imagery or personification or metaphors or similes in their own work.

Another alternative is to do a writing exercise, asking students to include at least one example of figurative language. [see sample exercise below]

*Also see, Lester Laminack, *Cracking Open the Author's Craft*. Scholastic, 2007.*

EXERCISE-To Be Pared Down and Tailored for Your Specific Needs

Think of an object that holds special meaning or significance for you. It can be a letter, a postcard, a piece of jewelry, a paperweight, a blanket, a chair, a rock, an article of clothing, a photograph, a drawing or painting, something that belonged to your brother or sister or grandparent or parent or something you earned or won in a contest. Think about how you came to have this object and where you keep it. If an object does not resonate with you, think of a pet or a thing in nature, such as a tree someone planted or your father's vegetable garden or a flower or fallen leaves. Now write a quick paragraph or two about this object or pet or tree or plant. Tell why it or, he or she, if you're writing about a pet, is important to you and what this object, pet or tree or plant means to you. You can talk about what you remember when you hold this object or pet or see the tree, flower or garden or when you think about it (or him or her, if it's a pet) and how it makes you feel. You can describe the physical characteristics of the object, pet or plant or tree. You can explain how you came to have this object, pet, tree, flower or garden. You can tell about the person it (or he or she) used to belong to, if that's appropriate and what that person means to you. Don't think too hard about this. Just write, but try to include at least one of the five senses in your discussion. A sight, a sound, a smell, a taste or how something feels or felt. And think about those action verbs!

After you have written quickly, go back and see if you can find a way to use one of these types of figurative language – if you haven't already done that. For example, if you write about a good luck charm, can you use personification? How does the charm protect you? Can you compare the subject of your writing to something else – creating a metaphor or simile? [You will probably want to narrow the exercise in

class – to an object or a pet, for example, but I have been overly inclusive in the interest of offering more ideas.]

FOR FUN–Video resources about the people who inspired *Passing the Music Down*

Jake Krack’s winning performance at the Galax Old Time Fiddler’s Convention in 2009.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUXsp4a4VuI>

YouTube video of Jake Krack’s first-place winning performance at the 2015 Appalachian String Band Festival at Clifftop, WV. This is the festival where Jake first met Melvin Wine when Jake was 10 and Melvin was 86.

First Tune (“Queen of the Earth, Child of the Stars”):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezNm_R8_PE

Second Tune (“Bitter Creek”) : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmSXYxNvPf8>

YouTube video of Jake playing “Yew Piney Mountain” at the Clifftop Festival in 2013.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7-eMCGb7D8>

Yew Piney Mountain was a tune Melvin frequently played. It is supposed to be one of the oldest tunes in West Virginia.

If you are interested in school visits, please contact me using the information provided below. And, don’t forget, I offer SKYPE AND ZOOM VISITS!

Sarah Sullivan

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All That’s Missing, Candlewick, 2013

“an outstanding debut novel.” VOYA

*starred review – *Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*

Passing The Music Down, ill. Barry Root, Candlewick, 2011

N.C.T.E. Notable Children’s Book in the Language Arts

Bank Street College Best Children’s Books

“part of musical history” – *New York Times*

Nominated for West Virginia Children’s Choice award

Chosen to represent the State of West Virginia at the National Book Festival

“FIGURING OUT FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE”

Sarah Sullivan

Figurative Language in *Passing the Music Down*

SIMILE

“Like a katydid in spring”

“tunes old as the mist and twisty as the roads.”

METAPHOR

“Their lives are stitched together in a quilt of old-time tunes.”

PERSONIFICATION

“corn strutting high in the fields

“tomatoes plumping out on the vine”

“the old, old mountains slumbering east of Tennessee.”

“the boy’s heart dances.”

“Bees nuzzle honeysuckle”

“Frost stiffens hay bales.”

“Life scoots along.”

ALLITERATION

“morning mist”

“flip flapjacks”

“fiddle by the fire.”

“snow settles deep.”

“creek swells in spring”

COLORFUL LANGUAGE- HONORING STYLES OF SPEECH

“saws out a lick.

“You got to start with a spin and end with a skid”