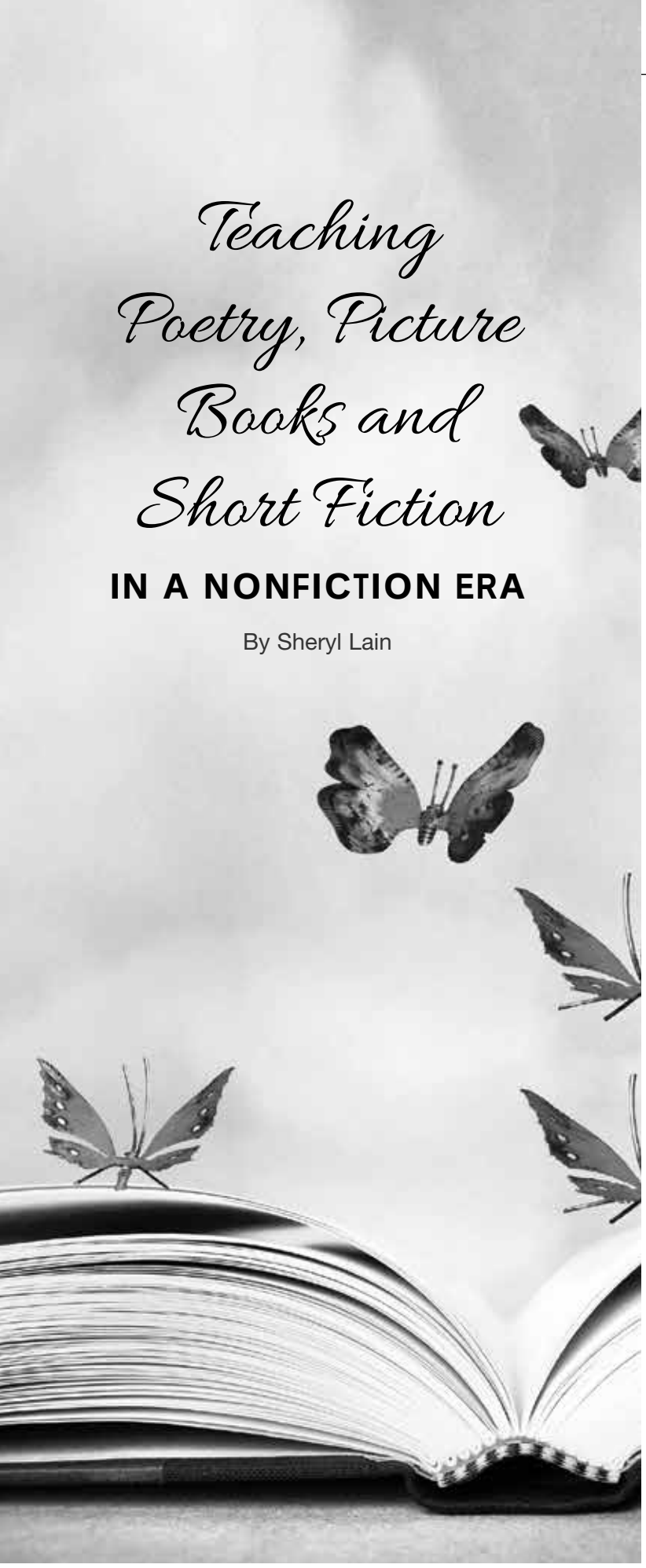

Teaching Poetry, Picture Books and Short Fiction

IN A NONFICTION ERA

By Sheryl Lain

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I am concerned that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association ..., 2010) in English Language Arts seem to relegate fiction and poetry to the back shelf. Some states adopted the standards wholesale while others adapted them. Either way the CCSS affect our English Language Arts classrooms. Having taught English and collaborated with teachers for 40 years, I know that this change in emphasis, favoring nonfiction, has an impact in the classroom. After districts and schools realign the curriculum, many English teachers feel compelled to put away some of their fiction and poetry units. The effect makes poetry and imaginative prose the red-headed stepchildren of our curriculum.

This pendulum swing can have a negative effect on students. I learned empathy from reading novels, so I worry that kids on the playground and in the hallways will experience more bullying. I learned the difference between my petty tragedies and real ones from reading plays and novels, so I worry that students will become even more self-absorbed, never learning the difference between their narcissistic wants for smartphones and prom dresses and the real needs of someone like Stopthief, the main character in the Holocaust story *Milkweed* by Jerry Spinelli (2005).

The pendulum swing also affects teachers. Zealous application of the standards leads some districts in my state to adopt scripted teachers' guides, lock-step lessons, district-required unit tests, and hours of standardized testing. Donald Graves's (2001) book *The Energy to Teach* expresses his concern that top-down mandates strangle teacher autonomy and sap their energy. Further, Wehrle (1999) worries that the humanizing and personalizing of teaching diminish when covering curriculum takes center stage instead of spotlighting students.

The good news is that the reading and writing standards do allow room for teaching fiction and poetry. The writing standard calls for producing writing in which the style is appropriate for the purpose and audience (CCSS.W.4.1). The reading standard calls for teaching craft—specifically figurative language—word choice, and tone (CCSS.R.4.1). Authors convey their craft through the skillful use of literary devices/elements. Therefore, I collected a list of commonly used literary elements, to be assured that I select literature to explicitly model these elements:

- Alliteration
- Allusion
- Analogy
- Assonance
- Concrete details
- Dialect
- Flashback
- Foreshadowing
- Hyperbole
- Idioms
- Imagery
- Irony
- Metaphor/simile
- Onomatopoeia
- Personification
- Symbolism

One solution for teachers who want to keep fiction and poetry in their classrooms is to use short pieces of literature, specifically poetry, quality picture books, and short fiction, that do not take much class time yet teach the literary elements embedded in style and craft.

Teaching Literary Elements Through Poetry

Poetry teaches life lessons while demonstrating to students how to apply standards-based literary elements. In Kenneth Koch's (1973) book *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?*, the author teaches poetry to students by reading poems and having students write imitations of these poems. An adaptation of Koch's idea is to select poems that use the literary elements embedded in author's craft and ask students to write imitation poems using these elements. For example, the poem *Fog* by Carl Sandburg (1916) demonstrates the use of metaphor:

The fog comes
on little cat feet.
It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

After reading this poem aloud, I ask students, "So, what does Sandburg compare in this poem?" I explain to students that when a writer takes one thing—in this case, fog—and compares it to something else—in this case, a cat—you have a metaphor. "Now," I say, "how about if we try writing an extended metaphor ourselves? I'll write, too, up here on the white board. Let's see . . . I could write about wind. We have plenty of that here." I write: *The wind thunders on stallion hooves. It swirls dust in my eyes and shakes the ground as it charges by.*

Students then write a poem creating their own extended metaphors. I walk around skimming the student versions. One writes, *The wind hisses, slithering through the air. It stops in its S-shaped tracks its tongue flicking, considering more destruction. Then slips under a granite overhang.* I ask permission to read hers aloud, hoping it will spark ideas for others.

I often set a timer so that students have only a few minutes to compose. I'm always amazed that this simple tool discourages dawdling and perseverating about details. I want my students to trust their first thoughts. When time is up, I ask them to share with one another in their writing groups. Then I tie the lesson together by reminding students that we have been working with metaphor, a word or phrase that compares two things that are not alike but have something in common. "You will run into metaphors everywhere, in literature and in everyday life," I tell them. "My dad always said that taking a car trip with us six girls was traveling with a barrel of monkeys. His metaphor, like all metaphoric language, says a lot more than just the literal words."

Sandburg's *Fog* is one poem of many that demonstrates the use of literary devices. Table 1 shows a sampling of the short poems I like to use with students so they better understand literary devices.

Teaching Literary Elements Through Picture Books

Quality picture books also teach life lessons and literary elements. For example, Cynthia Rylant's *The Old Woman Who Named Things* demonstrates personification.

Before I begin to read the book aloud, I ask students, "Have you ever heard of naming an inanimate object or giving that object human characteristics? Some people call thunderclouds *angry*. Well, they aren't really angry. Some people name their cars human names like in the *Nobody's Perfect* ad for Liberty Mutual car insurance. When you give inanimate objects human names and personalities, this is personification." I like to keep a running list of the literary elements posted in my room to help them remember.

Poem	Author	Literary Device
"Fog"	Sandburg	Metaphor
"Old Lilacs"	Ted Kooser	Analogy, Simile, Imagery, Personification
"The Dog"	Sandford Lyne	Simile
"The Rider"	Naomi Shihab Nye	Imagery, Alliteration
"In the Hardware Store"	Pam Koo	Dialogue
"Winter Poem"	Nikki Giovanni	Metaphor, Tone
"City Night"	Eve Rice	Tone, Alliteration, Assonance, Dialogue
"Miss Rosie"	Lucille Clifton	Simile, Alliteration
"Nocturne"	Jane Yolen	Onomatopoeia, Alliteration, Symbol
"The Place of Wild Things"	Wendell Berry	Allusion
"The Red Wheelbarrow"	William Carlos Williams	Symbolism, Imagery
"Two Friends"	David Ignatow	Irony
"Sick"	Shel Silverstein	Humor, Irony, Details

Table 1. A sampling of the short poems I like to use with students

Sometimes I give the students the gist of the story before I read aloud. This context acts like Velcro to make the text stick to them. "In this book, the main character is an old lady who has grown tired of living things dying, so she resorts to naming and giving human characteristics to objects. Her house, for example, is named Fred and she loves Fred's dependability. Her bed, Roxanne, gives her comfort every night."

For readers who do not know this story, the old lady is visited by a living thing that wags its tail at her gate, and though she tells it to go away, she gives it a bit of food first. Of course, the dog returns the next day for its handout. This pattern continues, but the old lady is adamant about not naming the critter until one day when he doesn't show up at the gate. She frets and finally finds him at the dog shelter on the verge of being put down. She calls to him, "Here, Lucky," for she is lucky that he cracked her shell of isolation, and he is lucky to be loved. She names him Lucky and he becomes her own.

When I read a picture book aloud to older students, I read with animation and maintain a fairly fast clip, focusing on the story line. Afterward, I ask, "What a powerful life lesson the author reveals in this story. The message seems simple but it's not. I love this author Viktor Frankl." I hold up his little book called *Man's Search for Meaning*. "Frankl was a Holocaust survivor and he wrote this

book after he was rescued by the American army toward the end of World War II. He was a student of Carl Jung who says that when we objectify people, resorting to name-calling and stereotyping, we can hate them. Jung and Frankl say that we have to name people in order to care about them and, thus, heal. I think Cynthia Rylant was talking about this big idea in her simple picture book."

I ask students to write again. Quick Writes are a staple in my classroom so students can learn by applying and creating. From the first day of school, we jot pieces in spiral notebooks. Today, I say, "Open up your spirals and put the date at the top. Pick some aspect of nature to write about. Could be a rainbow, could be the moon, could be the wind, could be a monsoon."

After kids jot down something, I say, "Can you write a short personification about this aspect? Give it human physical characteristics, like eyes or heart. Then have this natural phenomenon do something." I then provide this sample:

> *I am a rainbow. My arms enclose the misty world after the rain. I lure photographers and poets with my elusive beauty.*

I write alongside my students, my marker rushing along the white board trying to keep up with the ideas coming into my head. When I write, I prove to them I value the assignment.

Students also write poetry in response to Rylant's picture book. They might write a summary poem following Barry Lane's (1993) idea of using the structure afforded by one's telephone number. Students write their phone number down the left side of the page and then write just that many words on each line. For example, a summary poem of Rylant's picture book morphs into its own story:

3 Lucky for you
6 that you were named at birth.
7 What if no mother love greeted you
7 and you were left in a box
3 uncleaned and unnamed?
8 Then you might know why I can't love,
3 why I left.

Picture Book	Author	Literary Device/Skill
I Love You the Purplest	Barbae Josse	Metaphor, Imagery
I'm in Charge of Celebrations	Byrd Baylor	Concrete Detail
If You're Not from the Prairie	David Bouchard	Assonance
Meanwhile Back at the Ranch	Trinka Noble	Hyperbole, Irony
Shrek	William Steig	Allusion, Allitreation, Vivid Verb, Onomatopoeia
Skippyjon Jones	Judy Schnachner	Foreshadowing, Dialect, Idioms
The Old Woman Who Named Things	Cynthia Rylant	Personification
Welcome Comfort	Patricia Polacco	Symbolism
What You Know First	Patricia MacLachlan	Simile
Worry Stone	Marianna Dengler	Flashback, Foreshadowing

Table 2. Some of my favorite picture books model the use of literary elements

Some of my favorite picture books model the use of literary elements for my students (see Table 2). These picture books do triple duty: they are quality literature, they teach the craft of writing named in the CCSS, and they convey important life lessons.

Another way to inject powerful fiction into an already crowded curriculum is to share very short pieces that serve multiple purposes. I believe fiction enables students to have powerful, even life-changing, vicarious experiences. They don't have to have endured child abuse to shudder at the treatment of Laura in D'Ambrosio's book *No Language But a Cry.* They don't need to have encountered the death of a pet to cry at the end of Rawls's book *Where the Red Fern Grows.* The book becomes real life. I want to teach fiction and poetry to expand my students' life experiences, and I want to use literature to demonstrate how authors create their style (CCSS.W.4.1) and hone their craft (CCSS.R.4.1). I don't want to tell my students what irony is; I want them to experience an ironic twist through reading and recreate it through writing.

Leo Tolstoy's short story "How Much Land Does a Man Require" demonstrates the literary element of irony. "In this story," I tell my students, "a man can own all the land he walks around in one day." I read aloud the story to the class. If I want to encourage a shared

reading, I might give each student a copy or post it on a Smartboard so students can follow along as I read.

Afterward, I summarize the parable saying, "He is greedy and walks too far. He dies trying to outrun the sunset before reaching home base. The ending is ironic, meaning it turns out the opposite of what you'd expect. Turns out the man really only needs enough land to bury his three-by-six-foot casket. I guess Tolstoy figures that's all the land any of us really need."

If we have read literature this year with situational irony, I remind them about it, having built a community in our room through shared reading experiences. "Remember O.Henry's short story 'The Gift of the Magi' when the girl cuts off her hair to give her husband a watch chain for Christmas while he sells his watch chain to get her cool combs for her hair? That's an ironic twist."

I then ask students to write an anecdote that ends with an ironic twist. I read them a student sample before they set off to write in their journals:

> *My dad and the rest of my uncles got up to work off their huge picnic. A softball game was in order. Dad played centerfield. His team gave my grandpa Ross a lot of razz about trying to pitch to his boys half his age. The first pitch was smacked to centerfield. Both Uncle Chuck and my dad raced for the ball. They collided. Chuck got up laughing. Dad didn't. He was dazed and blood gushed from his nose like a faucet and it wouldn't stop bleeding. Mom took him to the hospital and I rode along. I watched them try to reposition Dad's nose on his face. He yelled, right there in the emergency room. It turned out that Dad had two black eyes and a bruised nose.*
>
> *Hey, I wonder why they call this game 'softball.'*

Table 3 shows a few of my favorite short fiction pieces that teach author's craft.

Conclusion

One way to sidestep the pressure to teach more nonfiction at the expense of fiction and poetry is to use short literature that does not consume much class time. I select literature that teaches the literary elements embedded in author's craft (CCSS.R.4.1.) and writing tone (CCSS.W.4.1) by reading poetry, picture books, and short fiction and by having students write, applying the literary device in their own creations.

Gary Paulsen (2003) says that he owes everything to books. Books transformed his life. Since literature has the power to transform us, our students need more than a steady diet of nonfiction. They need the open spaces of poems. They need the stories to tell them who they are.

Short Fiction	Author	Literary Device/Skill
"A Leak in the Heart"	Faye Moskowitz	Metaphor, Simile, Imagery, Dialect
"Eleven"	Sandra Cisneros	Simile, Concrete Detail, Symbolism
"The Little Girl and the Wolf"	James Thurber	Humor, Foreshadowing, Irony, Personification
"The Custodian"	Brian Henshaw	Allusion, Irony, Assonance
"The Starfish Story"	Adapted from Loren Eisely	Symbolism

Table 3. A few of my favorite short fiction pieces that teach author's craft

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