



Using Toni Morrison's Picture Books in the Classroom

By Educator Barnes – August 17, 2019

Since the passing of the great literary genius Toni Morrison, people have taken time to reflect upon her body of work. Morrison, the winner of the Nobel prize in literature, is known for her

novels like *Beloved* and for her essays and lectures. She also wrote children's book with her son Slade Morrison, who preceded her in death from pancreatic cancer.

Together, Morrison and her son wrote eight children's books.

Please, Louise – This book follows Louise during a transformative trip to the library.

Little Cloud and Lady Wind – Children can learn the importance of unity and working together.

The Tortoise or the Hare – This book is a twist on the Aesop fable “The Tortoise and the Hare.”

Peeny Butter Fudge – There is nothing better than spending time with Nana while enjoying a tasty recipe.

The Ant or the Grasshopper? – This book is a twist on the Aesop fable “The Ant and the Grasshopper” in graphic novel form.

Poppy or the Snake? Also inspired by an Aesop fable, this story centers around who gets the last laugh.

The Lion or the Mouse? This story is a twist on the Aesop fable “The Lion and the Mouse” with the focus being on bullying.

The Book of Mean People – This book provides a perspective about being mean from the viewpoint of a child.

The Big Box – This story centers around what parents do to protect their children and gives the children's perspective of that protection.

There are a few ways to meaningfully incorporate these books into the classroom. For the books based on Aesop fables, have children read the original fable and the updated version and compare and contrast the texts. Students could also analyze the differences in character development since the characters make different choices in the updated version.

Books like *Little Cloud and Lady Wind* and *The Lion or the Mouse* support social-emotional learning (SEL) and character education. SEL and character education is embedded in many

classrooms across the United States. Teachers can use these texts as an opener to a discussion about the topic of these books.

Children's books, which are called picture books at times, are not just for elementary students. These books can generate critical conversations and be paired with novels at the secondary level.

Last, adults can benefit from reading children's books. In *Psycholinguistics for Reading Teachers K-12*, a course I taught in the spring at IUPUI for five years, I incorporated *The Big Box* into one of my assignments for my college students. Throughout the book, Morrison and her son mention the refrain of a big box, a door that opens only one way, and three big locks. In addition to reading *The Big Box* and another children's book, *The Color of Home*, my students had to read chapter two from Kucer & Silva's (2013) *Teaching the Dimensions of Literacy* (2nd Ed) and James Gee's article "Language and Identity at Home." Then, they completed the following assignment:

Read *The Color of Home* and *The Big Box*. As you read, think about connections you can make between the read alouds and the other assigned readings for this module.

- Part I – Use the connections you made to Kucer & Silva Ch. 2 & Gee (2004) to determine: what the big box, the door (that only opens one way) and the three big locks might represent in those readings.
- Part II – Complete the Psycholinguistic Reading Strategy – 3Ws.
 - What? (What is the main purpose of the readings?)
 - So what? (Why are these issues important?)
 - Now what? (What actions can be taken?)

The various perspectives and opportunities for critical thinking Morrison and her son include in these children's books make them a great read for children, young or old, and adults, too.