Second Reaction: *Ballots for Belva*—Engaging Middle School Learners with Picture Books


Lois M. Campbell

*Ballots for Belva: The True Story of a Woman’s Race for the Presidency* is an engaging book which lent itself well to classroom instruction as a read-aloud with older learners. The book is a wonderful picture book, and using it as a read-aloud with opportunities to discuss the detailed pictures and the history plot was a major asset to my middle school literature program.

As a read-aloud, I was able to particularly address the historical basis of the book as an introduction to a unit on women in politics. This topic was particularly engaging during this year of the presidential election. Having an additional resource on the role of women in early politics in our country was enlightening but, more so, surprising for my students. Drawing on the historical role of women in politics and referring to well-known women in recent history was a wonderful segue to consider the role of women during the history of this country. As we discussed the book, the children were surprised to learn of the early role of women—particularly in a leadership position. The content was truly engaging for middle schoolers. The students responded to the book, indicating that “it should be in our library—particularly as a role model for females;” and “she proved that women are just as important as men.” Further, some of my students said “the book helped us understand that women have to endure;” and “this book is important for boys to read because they need to know that girls are just as good (sic).”

In addition to the topic of women in politics, the students found the book to be delightful, not only for its historical accuracy, but also for its charming illustrations of various cats throughout the plot of the book. As we read, a few of the students made note of some of the cats in the early illustrations. However, it was a particularly quiet student who pointed out to the rest of the class the use of cats throughout the book. From that point on, the students would comb the pages, wondering who the cat was and if the same cat appeared over many pages. It was an additional draw for some of my reluctant readers. I linked this notion of looking for particular features by the illustrator to others known to the students, particularly Chris Van Allsburg’s use of his dog throughout *Two Bad Ants* (1980).

I found the use of illustrations throughout the book to be appealing for the students as it set the tone of that time period. However, the illustrations were also significant in
demonstrating the impact that Belva Lockwood had on the vote at that time. My students and I found especially moving the instance of the newspaper proclaiming Ms. Lockwood as an “unworthy” candidate and the piles of ballots that suggested an unbalanced outcome in the election. These particular drawings led to some lively discussion as to the role of the press in the outcome of the election and how vote counting has changed over the years (or, perhaps, has not).

Overall, my students found the book delightful and would recommend it to a variety of readers. Though it may have appeared to be a book for younger readers (ages 7-10), I found the book to be quite appropriate given the context of my instruction for my middle school students.

Work Cited

About the Author
**Dr. Lois M. Campbell** is a middle school teacher at St. James Lutheran School in Lafayette, Indiana. Having taught for more than twenty-five years, Dr. Campbell has had a variety of teaching experiences, including teaching on the Navajo Indian Reservation as a special needs teacher, working in outdoor education environments with inner city youth programs, as well as her current position as a middle school teacher in a K-8 environment. Dr. Campbell enjoys teaching literature and science and how these two subjects weave together in the classroom environment.