First Opinion: The Science in The Cuckoo’s Haiku


Anita Roychoudhury

This book is a pure joy poetically and visually. The book sparked my interest because of the ways it combines science and poetry. These two dimensions run parallel throughout the book. I will write about the science facet of the book first and then I will describe my impression of the poems and the illustrations.

One of the strengths of the book is the information provided about birds and their habitat. It includes their common names as well as the scientific ones. It also provides information about the time of the year the bird might be seen. However, this aspect of the information will need supplemental information from teachers indicating how the seasonal visits are location dependent. For example, the Canada Geese and the Hummingbirds fly south in the winter. The double-page illustrations of some birds show the visual differences between the males and the females. For example, the prominent differences between the male and female Northern Cardinal and American Robin would be easily identifiable by young learners in the elementary grades. Even if they do not notice these, the teachers...
can use simple guiding questions such as “Do you see any difference between the birds on these two pages (with the pages on the Cardinals or Robins open)?” Or, the questions could be more specific, “What differences do you see in the colors of the two birds?” “Where on the birds’ bodies do you find different colors?”

The students could also be asked to draw pictures of the birds to reinforce their knowledge of the differences they noticed. They could learn to use sources such as Cornell Lab of Ornithology (http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern_Cardinal/id/) to supplement the information provided in the book.

Another interesting point about the science in this book is that males and females are illustrated in cases of a few birds only. Although some teachers might call this a shortcoming, I see this as a strength since this provides an opportunity for students to get involved in doing some research. They could be asked to find pictures of males and females of the different birds described in this book. Once again, the teacher could give them some guiding questions so that the students make appropriate observations.

Depending on the language competency and the age of the children, they could also be asked to write a brief informative paragraph that they could share in the class. The teacher could provide guiding questions to ascertain that these writings include certain scientific information. Here are a few examples of such questions: Where does this kind of bird live? Do they migrate from one part of the United States to another (or from one part of North America to another)? What kind of food do they eat?

The description of the birds both in the poem and in the illustrations could also help students’ discussions about the birds’ habitat and feeding habits. The color imagery of above “gold jonquils/feeding finches stacked like coils/April’s alchemy” (unpaged) could lead to two-prong discussions. A teacher could point out the scientific information about the finches provided on these pages. The discussion could focus around the food the finches eat, when are they seen in a certain area, when do they migrate, from where do they come and where do they go, how do the males and females look different, and so forth. The teacher could also use a stack of gold coins to help students visualize how the poet imagined the finches as stacked gold coins. This could help spark student imaginations and lead them to use various types of imagery in their own poems. Student poems could be a part of the assignments I described in an earlier part of my review.

The teachers could supplement the scientific information provided along with the poems and in the Notes section with additional information. For example, there is information about the significance of the beak sizes of the males and their relative ranks in the group, the summer and winter plumage, song, and how they stay warm in the winter. However, there is no information about what they eat, where they live, recordings of their songs, and so forth. This also points to the need for the teacher to develop a set of criteria such as habitat, food, anatomical and color variations between male and females that would be used to teach about these birds. These criteria would guide teachers to
search for supplementary information for each bird described in the book. The colors of
the male and female birds could lead to a discussion about the male birds typically being
more colorful than female birds.

All the poems create visual images—some of which contain such creative comparisons
that could naturally lead to discussions of science concepts that are common to elemen-
tary curricula in most districts. Envisioning and illustrating the juncos as “tilted moons/
half shadow and half reflection” (unpaged) can easily lead to the discussion of the phases
of the moon. Another such example is the vision of “plumped sparrow” (unpaged) as “a
mitten-warmed fist” (unpaged). This poem also provides a natural transition to the con-
cept of heat transfer, conduction, convection, and insulation, and the need for sweaters,
mittens, and hats in the winter.

One shortcoming of the book is how the scientific information about the birds is
provided. The fine print and cursive fonts would make it difficult for children to read or stay
focused. This problem will be more prominent for children with special needs. Although
this feature puts science in a secondary position compared to the poems, teachers could
easily remedy that. They could take some steps such as print information from each page
using large and easy-to-read fonts and display them as children read about each bird.

In short, I would strongly recommend this book for the elementary grades because
it can easily combine the learning of language and science. I believe the book would be
attractive to children because of its vivid illustrations that portray various anatomical and
behavioral features of different birds and verbal images created by the poet. At the same
time, the scientific information provided in the poems, illustrations, and notes creates
natural transitions to relevant science topics. Even though there are some shortcomings
in the book in the way science is positioned within it, in my view, a teacher could easily
use these supposed shortcomings as tools for bringing science into the arena of poetry.

About the Author

**Anita Roychoudhury** is an Associate Professor of Science Education in the Department
of Curriculum and Instruction at Purdue University.