First Opinion/Second Reaction, Combined Effort: 
Walking With Nature Through Poetry

Vanderwater, Amy Ludwig. *Forest Has a Song.*

**Christy Wessel Powell**

*Forest Has a Song* is an imagery-filled collection of poems reminiscent of a child on a nature walk across the seasons. It’s illustrated in soft and vibrant watercolors.

When I first read through *Forest Has a Song,* I connected with the language and imagery: the author has obviously spent a lot of time just sitting, just being, in the woods and noticing detail. She addresses lady’s slippers and trilobite fossils, lichens and fern fronds, bone piles, poison ivy, and puff ball mushrooms. Using simple phrases, she evoked multiple sensory memories for me from childhood: sitting, craning, crawling, digging, uncovering, and staring skyward in the forest.

I invited the undergraduate student teachers in my children’s literature course to review and evaluate *Forest Has a Song* with me for its potential use in their field experiences. Which poems stood out to them and why? What utility might the poems have in field placement classrooms?

Their reactions were thoughtful and nuanced. I admire and value the practical and critical eye they brought to our discussion which follows.

**Discussions with Student Teachers**

Lauren thought *Forest as a Song* was “a beautiful book that might work best with students who have already been introduced to poems. The poems range in size—which is ideal—and the point

14
of view switches and transfers. Different types of poems are written throughout the book—making it perfect for a lesson on poetry forms.” Clearly the book has both aesthetic and academic value. Many student teachers thought its poems were appropriate for any grade K–6. And because, as Katie explains, “there are poems about nature, plant and animal growth, and the weather,” student teachers saw multiple opportunities for integrating poetry selections into science curriculum.

Here are some sample favorite poems and suggestions for classroom application from this book, by student teachers. First, “April Waking”:

Ferny frondy fiddleheads
unfurl curls from dirty beds.
Stretching stems they sweetly sing
greenest greetings sent to Spring. (10)

Taylor chose this poem for its language. She reported, “I would use this in my classroom to show students how to provide a rich description of something in just a few lines. Its strengths are that it uses strong descriptive words…the words [the poet] uses are very uncommon and unique, which children will enjoy. [However, we may need to] read the poem aloud and walk through it so children are not confused.”

Katherine scoured the book for language arts and literacy connections. Her favorite pick was “Lady’s Slipper” because, she said, “I love the text-to-text connection and personification of the flower as if it were the story of Cinderella.”

“Lady’s Slipper”
Were you at the Forest Ball?
Were you having fun?
When the clock struck midnight
did you have to run?
Did those footmen follow fast?
Did you hide from them?
Did you leave your silky slipper
balanced on this stem?

Forest Cinderella—
why?
You didn’t even say goodbye. (13)

Another student teacher, Amber, envisioned math curricular connections for this short piece, “Spider”:
A never-tangling dangling spinner  
Knitting angles, trapping dinner. (14)

Reflecting on its potential, Amber said, “I actually loved this. It’s short, but it provides rhymes, and encompasses words that could be a “gateway” to new subjects, such as math (“knitting angles”)—this could introduce geometry into the classroom. Teachers could teach about angles, and the students could construct a web using different angles with degrees labeled as acute or obtuse.”

Still other student teachers found poems perfect for introducing character building activities, and, perhaps most prevalently, cross-curricular science connections. Dorian chose the poem “First Flight” for those reasons. She says, “I would use it to talk to students about not being scared to do things (you can’t succeed if you don’t try). Also, it could open a mini-unit about owls and expand into other concepts including language arts concepts (of course).”

“First Flight”  
Mommy, I’m scared to be this high.  
All owls are scared on their first try.

My tail feathers feel so tingly with fear.  
You can do it. Calm down. Careful now. Steer.

I can’t see a think through all this black.  
Just go to Spruce and come right back.

FLAP FLAP FLAP FLAP FLAP FLAP—WHOOSH!  
FLAP FLAP FLAP FLAP FLAP FLAP—SWOOOSH!

Look, Mom! I made it! Wow! I can fly!  
I knew you could. You were born for sky. (17)

The student teachers agreed that Forest Has a Song would work best as a read aloud for 1st–4th grade students. One student teacher, Bethany, thought at the core “the poems were whimsical and fun for kids.” Many were written familiarly from a child’s point of view, like “Dead Branch”:

Spongy springy stick.  
I pick it into thin bits.  
Slivers sail the wind. (6)
Poems like these could also entice children with limited exposure to nature. As Bethany noted, “some students may not have ever had an experience in the woods; however, the poems were descriptive enough with great pictures to build background.” This rich description of what it’s like to walk across “Moss” is a great example:

Barefoot on this emerald carpet  
Toe-by-toe I squish across.  
I softly sing in velvet green.  
Oh how I wish for socks of moss. (18)

Other poems will guide adults towards hands-on experiences that can be shared with children and might spur a classroom fieldtrip. For example, “Puff,” about puffball mushrooms, can only be understood by stomping on one personally:

Puff!  
I found one.  
Puff!  
It’s plump.  
Puff!  
Come see this mushroom pump.  
Puff!  
It’s spitting spore on spore.  
Puff!  
I’m squeezing more and more.  
Puff!  
Smoke scatters summer air.  
Puffball babies everywhere!  
Puff! (23)

The student teachers I shared the poems with appreciated the multiple perspectives found in Forest Has a Song. Some poems seemed “co-written” by children and forest residents. Lauren found the poem, “Chickadee,” useful for that reason. She said, “I would use this poem to show different points of view to young children, maybe using different voices for the child and the bird. It may also help young students understand how a small animal may feel hesitant towards them.”
“Chickadee”
Come!
Fly here.
I have some seeds.
Fly here.
Sit on my hand.
I will not hurt you
Chickadee.
Fly here.
It’s safe to land.

I’m watching.
I’m thinking.
I’m scared of you
Child.
I’m used to flying free.
But you are small.
Your hand is still
Are all those seeds
for me? (7)

Other poems like “Proposal” were written solely from an animal’s point of view. The tree frog in “Proposal” says:

Marry me.
Please marry me.

A tree frog calls
from tree to tree.
Hoping.

Hopping.
High above.
Crooning.
Plopping.
Finding love.
Pick me now.
Make me your choice.
I'm one great frog
with one strong voice. (12)

Because *Forest Has a Song* centers on nature, there is immense potential for cross-curricular science connections. Bethany saw potential in planning classroom cross-curricular activities, saying, “I would use this with kids in lower elementary and incorporate it into science lessons or lessons about changing perspectives—several poems are from the point of view of animals or plants.” Katie agreed: “You could use it as part of a science unit because there are poems about nature, plants and animal growth, and the weather.” Indeed, many of Amy Ludwig Vanderwater’s poems bring plants and rocks to life in imaginative ways, like “April Waking” and the enthralling “Fossil”:

“April Waking”
Ferny frondy fiddleheads
unfurl curls from dirty beds.
Stretching stems they sweetly sing
greenest greetings sent to Spring. (10)

“Fossil”
I dug in the creek bed.
I dug and I found
a grandfather fossil
asleep underground.
He whispered a story
of creatures in sand.
I listened as trilobites
Filled up my hand.
For one flicker-minute
They tickled my palm.
Alive for an eye blink.
Forever dead calm. (11)

Though Bobbin Gourley’s illustrations in this book are beautiful, they do represent a specific audience. One student teacher, Dorian, thought the book was “very fun, [with] educational poems and beautiful illustrations. I would definitely pair it was science curriculum,” she said. However, Dorian also offered an important critique on the illustrations, which centrally feature two white children: “I do think that the people [in the illustrations] could be more diverse, al-
though they appear to be a brother and sister, so I would tell my class [this book] is about these two children’s experiences in the woods [rather than a typical image of who can enjoy nature].”

Collectively, the undergraduate student teachers and I agree this book has cross-curricular potential, is aesthetically lovely, and is worth including in the classroom library.

**About the Author and Student Teacher Participants**

**Christy Wessel Powell** is a PhD student and undergraduate instructor in the Department of Literacy, Culture, and Language Education at Indiana University’s School of Education. Prior to coming to IU, she began her teaching career through the Teach for America program, where she taught K–2.

The undergraduate student teacher contributors (**Lauren Brown, Bethany Herring, Katie Sicking, Dorian Villanueva, Amber Cooper, Katherine Browne, and Taylor Brune**) are elementary education majors at Indiana University’s School of Education. They are currently enrolled in X460: Books for Reading Instruction/Trade Books in Elementary Classrooms. They are completing a field placement this semester in Martinsville, IN.