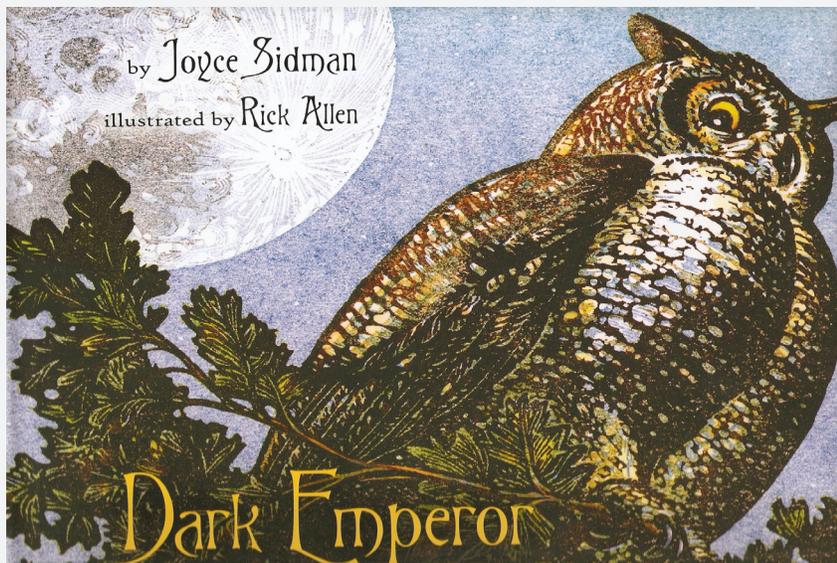


Second Reaction: Combining Efferent Reading and Aesthetics to Enhance Student Appreciation

Sidman, Joyce. Illus. Rick Allen. *Dark Emperor & Other Poems of the Night*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010.

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While many animals we are familiar with go about their business during the day, there are also some who work the night shift. *Dark Emperor & Other Poems of the Night*, written by Joyce Sidman and illustrated by Rick Allen, focuses on the five senses to explore the night activity of eleven not so well-known nocturnal animals through a collection of imagery-rich poems alongside high-interest scientific facts. This format allows students to appreciate the uniqueness of each animal through the eyes of a scientist as well as through the eyes of a poet. Sidman focuses an aesthetic appreciation by using the tools of a poet with sensory verbs such as crawl, creep, buzz, chirp, hoot and peep. We cannot see so well at night, but we can hear “the forest sing” (6).

As we move through the night, we “feel” the “slick trail of silver,” “tiny sandpaper tongue” and the “dark, moist body” of the snail (8). Students may want to close their eyes as the poem is read to invoke the imagery of other senses. As the poem ends, we move to

the opposite page to learn fascinating facts. Did you know that woodland snails “ride on a cushion of slime which protects them from sharp objects” or that young snails “...add a layer to their shells each night” (9)? Of course, this is the kind of information that both children and adults love to know. By allowing us to experience the mystery and beauty of night creatures from two perspectives, Sidman lets us fully appreciate the mystery and beauty of each.

Since animal stories have always been a high-interest subject for the children I have taught, I chose to share this book with Zoe, my 10-year-old granddaughter who is in fourth grade. We first examined the cover to discover what the book could be about. I asked her why she thought the author chose the word emperor instead of king to describe the fierce owl which takes up much of the cover. She replied that she thought emperor was a fancier word and better vocabulary.

We also made some discoveries about the end pages both front and back. At the beginning we see two opposing pages of purple, but at the end of the book we see those pages expressed in peach. It seemed to foreshadow how the book would flow; not in a normal way of day to night, but rather it would go from the night into day.

There are identical two-page illustrations of a wooded background—one at the beginning of the book and one at the end. Zoe was the one who noticed that the first illustration had some pink in the sky just like when the sun sets and night is beginning. She also noticed that the sun on the horizon at the end of the book was much larger and more orange. In addition, she showed me that the owl on the night page is swooping, but the owl at the end is sitting in the tree. After we had finished reading, we looked back and observed that indeed the beginning illustration featured some of the other animals such as the Primrose Moth, the Dark Emperor, and the Wandering Eft. Illustrator Rick Allen has used the process of relief printing which entails transferring ink onto a block of wood or in this instance a piece of linoleum. The tracings page describes his process.

Both illustrator and author invite their audience to see the night in different ways. The poet invites us to “...feel the cool and shadowed breeze,” “...to smell your way among the trees,” and to “...touch rough bark and leathery leaves” (6). Zoe noticed that the poem’s words form the outline of the Dark Emperor. She noticed a reflection of the moon in the owl’s eyes, which motivated her to make a comparison of her own. She described her own hair “as brown as a chocolate bar.” She also enjoyed knowing the “why’s” that the author included from the scientific viewpoint. For example, she now knows that the oak tree sleeps at night in order to repair itself (15). She also knows that the same tree gives beetles and bugs a home (14). Zoe noted, “The tree does everything and never gets a break.”

Zoe’s favorite night animal was the Night-Spider, because she liked the idea of life being a circle like the spider’s web. Her favorite poem, however, was the “Moon’s Lament (an ubi sunt).” We looked in the glossary in the back of the book and found out that ubi

sunt is the name of a style of medieval poetry that laments. Zoe read the poem as a lament, a complaint, and thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to become the moon and use various hand gestures and a whiny voice to bemoan the fact that when day comes the moon's glory must go away (28).

I believe this book provides many opportunities for children and adults to enjoy, reflect, and appreciate the various ways we can talk about nature. The poet creates imagery and integrates a variety of styles of poetry into her collection, such as the ubi sunt style, shape poems, free verse, couplets, and various rhyming and rhythm patterns. However, she also provides us the "whys" and the "hows" for creating these nature poems. Joyce Sidman is a Caldecott Honor Book winner who has authored many fine books of poetry. Illustrator Rick Allen is able to provide captivating and mysterious prints. Because of its duality both in audience and purpose, I believe *Dark Emperor & Other Poems of the Night* will be well-received by teachers and their students.

About the Author

Ann Koci has taught self-contained classrooms in Tippecanoe County and fifth and sixth grade language arts in Houston, Texas. She is the current coordinator for Purdue University's Media for Children course.