Second Reaction: Simplicity Does Not Mean Plain


*Julie Stepp*

*Owl Sees Owl* by Laura Godwin follows a young owl as he quietly leaves the nest one night to go out on his own and observe the world around him. With no more than four words on a page, the simplicity of the text should not deter anyone from using this book. In fact, upon closer review, readers should find something unique—the story is told in a reverso poem. In this type of poetry, text turns around in the middle of the poem (in this case, of the book), then repeats the lines of each stanza in reverse, giving new meaning to the words and story. In Godwin’s book, each line is only one word, meaning the entirety of the text is reversed. Some stanzas take the owl’s observations and turn them into exclamations of sorts—“moon beam” becomes “beam moon”—while other stanzas reverse his actions.

I would be remiss not to appraise Rob Dunlavey’s illustrations. As with any good picture book, the illustrations support the text well, providing readers with a balanced experience between the text of the story and the dive into visual literacy. Dunlavey uses a variety of media to create dark yet vivid illustrations with realistic details. He does not anthropomorphize the young owl or other animals, which supports the book’s strong informational text direction. Many young readers tend to use illustrations to help determine the quality of characters through their actions, facial expressions, and body posture (Willson, Falcon, Martinez). With the lack of human qualities, readers will need to think more like the animals than like the humans.
It is interesting to note that the users’ guide for the book from the parent publisher (Random House Teachers and Librarians) states that the owl startles himself upon seeing his reflection, bringing about the reversal. That reaction was not obvious to me at first; I didn’t take that away from the image. However, I did and do see the need to discuss with readers what makes the owl reverse his exploration of the evening, which brings on the reversing of words.

What makes *Owl Sees Owl* even more exceptional is all that can be done with such a story. For emergent preschool readers, the text and illustrations provide an experience with uncomplicated poetry and, even though there are only 30 words used, distinctive vocabulary. Some early readers will be pulled back to the imagery, both textual and visual, for multiple readings. Older readers may be encouraged to try their own reverso poems (the users’ guide provides a reproducible to help with this) and to consider how they might use figurative language. They may write about owls to parallel Godwin’s work, but the poetry style lends itself to so many possibilities. Additionally, this simple read-aloud could become an exploration of grammar elements such as onomatopoeias, imagery, and sentence (or phrase) types. It’s interesting to see how reversed words can make the difference between declarative and exclamatory statements.

The scientific aspects also make this book an exemplary informational text for young readers. They may explore autumn colors and what the changing leaves mean for trees, the different species of owls, and the nightly activities of the various creatures represented in the illustrations. Readers may also wonder about the owl being up at night without his family, especially if they’ve heard the phrase “night owl,” which opens the opportunity to see how the different species of owls actually live in the real world. This uncomplicated work is truly rich with possibilities in the hands of caregivers, teachers, and young readers.

**Works Cited**


**About the Author**

Julie Stepp is the primary professor for the graduate concentration in School Library Science in Tennessee Tech University’s College of Education. She has proven to be an avid book pusher and an audiobook fiend. Her students will tell you that both collaboration and the idea that lifelong readers are lifelong learners best describe highly successful librarians and teachers.