

AUTHOR STUDIES

By Kathleen Crane

“Please, please, pleeeeee just read a little bit more” or “I’m going to read every one of her books.” Such responses are common in classrooms where teachers and students share quality children’s literature and authors. Children’s literature today has grown exponentially beyond the beloved read aloud period to be in the forefront of the curriculum. This is because high quality stories provide solutions for two vexing classroom challenges: 1) How can the curriculum connect children to the experiences of their own culture while helping them to understand and appreciate the culture of others? 2) How can components of a language arts curriculum be integrated to better manage time constraints?

One literature-based reading and writing strategy that can become a culturally enriching experience and allows for the integration of curriculum is an AUTHOR STUDY. An author study is an in-depth look at a selection of books, conducted through, but not limited to, any of the following approaches:

1. To study one genre, using one or several authors
2. To study one author and/or illustrator
3. To study a period of history
4. To study a particular place
5. To study authors from a chosen culture or race

6. To study a particular message (e.g., Honesty is the best policy.)
7. To study a concept (e.g., Addition)
8. To study content (e.g., Geography)

Why Conduct an Author Study?

The purposes for conducting an Author Study are countless! Any English/Language/Literacy standard and the slew of skills teachers want students to utilize in the learning process can be met by implementing an author study. As teachers capitalize on children's excitement to know and share the chosen books, the relevant tools of communication and comprehension emerge from children's skills – whether it's reading, writing, or the arts. Students come to understand the purposefulness of skills when they are taught in broader contexts and are more likely to apply them in new situations. Skills become strategies.

Below is a sampling of what can be achieved through an author study.

THE WORLD OF WRITING AND ILLUSTRATING

- Professional writers and illustrators become real people.
- Students learn about the style and scope of authors and illustrators.
- Writing as a process is clearly understood as children begin to study authorship.

- Students are invited to change endings and innovate on the text.
- Students are invited to write in the selected genre through a writing process approach.

CULTURE

- Children's literature can affirm the lives of students and their families.
- Children's literature can help students understand and appreciate the cultures of others.

ART

- Students are exposed to a wide range of mediums.
- Students are given opportunities to experiment with various art mediums.
- Illustrations develop students' artistic sensitivity.
- Students are invited to respond to the literature through art (puppets, theatre, clay, murals, collage, crayon-resist, etc.)
- Artistic students gain recognition for their talent.

LANGUAGE ARTS:

- The literature serves as a model for the student's own language development.
- Students respond to stories in **RESPONSE LOGS**.
- Students share their thoughts and reactions in **DISCUSSION GROUPS**.

- Students become familiar with different genres: nonfiction (diaries, biographies, etc.) and fiction (fables, folktales, fairytales, etc.)
- Students write puppet shows based on a favorite story.
- Students write letters to the authors.
- Students study the author's techniques for creating vivid images, for creating suspense, how to write exciting leads, the use of similes and metaphors, character descriptions, etc.
- Students list words that may be from a foreign language.

MATH:

- Students survey children about their favorite authors and books, with findings presented in GRAPHS.
- Students order all books by copyright date.
- Students tally how many times a certain phrase appears.
- Students create timelines of the story.
- Students sequence the story events or content.
- Teachers use the story to create math problems for the students to solve.

SOCIAL STUDIES:

- Students learn the technique of MAPPING.
- Students compare their lives with characters' lives.
- Stories illuminate family traditions.

SCIENCE:

The specific books will determine these activities. Depending on the content of the story, teachers may have opportunities to plan for a cooking experience, to have the students note cause and effect, or conduct an experiment.

TECHNOLOGY

- Students prepare summaries of their favorite stories and present biographies of the featured author using Kid Pix and/or Power Point.
- Students research the featured author, using search engines.
- Students share their findings with other students throughout the world.

The appeal of an author study is that it can be tailored to meet students' needs and become as extensive as a teacher chooses. An author study should not be viewed as an addition to the existing curriculum framework. For example, reading aloud and silent reading periods are already present in a teacher's daily schedule. The resources to support these two periods could feature one author or one genre.

Simple exposure to an author could be the goal of such an approach. Depending on the age of the children, teachers could then post prepared charts where children record certain story elements, language conventions, character descriptions, etc. These charts can then be discussed and used in large/small group settings.

A more involved approach would entail the teacher and students planning extension activities to meet the needs and interests of students and to teach concepts and content defined by the individual school. For some, these extensions can become the work that is planned in learning centers and as work for small, independent groups. When a teacher embarks on an author study, it is important to remember that not every book needs to be extended.

All extensions afford teachers and students numerous opportunities to reflect upon and assess their understandings and growth related to literacy. The wide variety of work that the students produce throughout an author study is multifaceted. It includes both process and product, and accounts for multiple intelligences. The evidence of learning that the teacher garners from these many contexts gives a comprehensive profile of the students' development and comprehension levels. There are many assessment and evaluation strategies that are popular with teachers. These include running records, the collection of writing samples, checklists, artwork, anecdotal records, and conferences. The list is extensive and any strategy may be used in the context of an author study.

Example: An Author Study of Verna Aardema

The story where Maggie visits the continent of Africa offers the opportunity for an exemplary author story. Verna Aardema is well known for her African stories. Students quickly want to devour all her

books, which are beautifully illustrated and are full of humor and tricksters. Conducting an author study featuring Verna Aardema is two-fold; her favored genre is folktales, and the genre of African legends can also be developed. The two genres are distinguished as follows:

- The setting of a folktale is generic (“Once upon a time...”) and the stories are not presented as history or true. Goodness triumphs over evil, making the stories tools to teach children values and lessons in behavior. The story line is frequently a pattern of recurring actions and plots usually involving quests or tasks to accomplish. Significant characters include both humans and animals.
- The medieval Latin word *legenda* means “things for reading.” The distinguishing features of a legend differ somewhat from a folktale. The setting is more specific as the plot deals with deeds of past heroes and historical events. Legends are presented as true, but are actually a mixture of fact and fiction. Legends portray human heroes.

A partial list of Aardema’s books and an offering of extensions follow. At the conclusion of this paper, you will find a list of books and extension activities featuring African legends. Enjoy!

"ALL PURPOSE" ACTIVITIES

- **Author Study Folders:** Sew two large pieces of tag board to make an Author Study Folder. Children can decorate the fronts with the name of the author or the genre. Other visuals can be added. All work that is produced throughout the study is saved here. Parents love them!
- **Reader Response Logs:** Create a log specifically for the Author Study. Store them in Author Study folders.
- **Attribute charts:** List the books down the left hand side and the attributes above. A few attributes which relate well to Aardema's books are: artist's technique, opening sentences, and patterns: story structure, language, and visual, ideophones (sound effect words), country/tribe, trickster, message, expressions/favorite words, and African words. Any of these attributes can also be recorded in list form on separate sheets of paper. An attribute chart for Verna Aardema can be found in Appendix 1. Print enough copies for the students to have their own. It's always a good idea to keep a few "cells" open so that the students can contribute their own ideas.
- **Map of Africa:** Write the title of the book in the country from which it originated. Also record the name of the tribe. If the students research individual tribes, they can post their findings around the map. Use string to connect their text to the map.

You may find that tribes inhabit more than one country. Find a small map of Africa that can be copied for the students so that they may also have a record. A simple research frame is provided in Appendix 2. There is space at the bottom for illustrations.

- **Compare and contrast charts:** Students can compare stories, characters within or among stories, themselves with a character, their lives with a character's life. A blank compare and contrast chart can be found in Appendix 3.
- **Semantic webbing/story frames:** These graphic organizers help students record story information, which can aid in the recall of information, organize concepts, sequence story events, and show cause and effect. Two graphic organizers, "Story clock" and "Story chart" can be found in Appendix 4 and Appendix 5.

BOOKS BY VERNA AARDEMA

Who's In Rabbit's House: A Masai Tale (Pied Piper, 1997).

- Students research the Masai. Where do they live? Class and individual maps are labeled.
- This book is presented as a play. Make similar masks and scenery. Students can present it to other classes as a culminating activity.

- Make a list of the words used to describe how every character talked (protested, fumed, demanded, snorted, etc.) Use as a mini-lesson to open a writing process period.

Koi And The Kola Nuts: A Tale From Liberia (Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 1999).

- Reader Response Logs: Would you like Koi as a friend? Add other questions.
- Complete the character web of Koi (Refer to Appendix 6.).
- Expression: Do good and good will come back to you-- in full measure and overflowing.
- Note patterns in clothing and snakeskin, for example.
- Math exploration (Refer to Appendix 7).
- Illustrations are rendered in oil paint.

Oh, Kojo! How Could You! An Ashanti Tale (Dial Books, 1984)

- Students research the Ashanti. Where do they live? Label class and individual maps.
- Invent other situations where Kojo's mother might say: "It isn't one thing. It isn't two things. It's Anase!"
- Observe the artist's technique: lead pencil, colored pencils, and watercolor.

Anansi Does The Impossible: An Ashanti Tale (Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 1997).

- Students research the Ashanti. Where do they live? Label class and individual maps.

- Analyze the expression: “I fear you are taking a morsel too big to fit in your mouth.” Have you ever felt like this? Children respond in Reader Response Logs.
- Observe patterns in clothing, story structure, and the python’s skin.
- Have the students copy the artist’s technique to make their own Anansi and Aso. They could post their art with summaries of the story.
- Math exploration (Refer to Appendix 8.).
- Observe the artist’s technique: Oil glazing, cut paper and other materials.

Traveling To Tondo: A Tale Of The Nkundo Of Zaire (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1991).

- Observe these patterns: title page, story structure is cumulative, story events occur in the order that the characters appeared.
- Use Reader’s Theatre to retell the story.
- Students discuss the expression: “Sometimes between friends there is too much consenting. If a thing is not wise to do, it is best to say, ‘N-YEH!’” Students can then summarize discussion in Reader Response Logs. Add expression to their chart.

Bringing The Rain To Kapiti Plain (The Dial Press, 1981).

- Observe the pattern: Story is cumulative, bow, feathers, spelling patterns. A word study activity that focuses on spelling patterns is found in Appendix 9.
- Note the artist's technique: Painted in gouache.
- Identify and discuss meanings of homophones such as "plain" and "plane."

Sebgugugu The Glutton: A Bantu Tale from Rwanda (Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993).

- Students research the Bantu. Where do they live? Label class and individual maps.
- Note the pattern in the story structure.
- Reader Response: Do you know anyone like Sebgugugu? What have they done? What do you think "glutton" means?

The Lonely Lioness And The Ostrich Chicks: A Masai Tale (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1996).

- Students research the Masai. Where do they live? Label class and individual maps.
- Before reading the story, discuss the Masai proverb: "Even the ostrich, with its long neck and sharp eyes, cannot see what will happen in the future."
- Note the pattern in the story structure.

Bimuli And The Zimw: A Tale From Zanzibar (EP Dutton, 1985).

- Make a chart of the song in the story, using enlarged print. Use for choral reading.

- Have the students compose a tune to the song.

Rabbit Makes A Monkey Out of Lion (Puffin, 1993).

- Ask the children to think of other animals to fool. What do they do to make a monkey out of that animal? How will they get away? Compile a classbook.
- Children produce an illustration to post with their text.
- Observe the artist's technique: pencil drawings and watercolor.

Anansi: Finds A Fool: An Ashanti Tale (Dial Books for Young Readers, 1992).

- Reader Response Logs: "When you dig a hole for someone else, you will fall into it yourself." What does this mean to you?

Why Mosquitoes Buzz In People's Ears: A West African Tale (Dial Books for Young Readers, 1975).

- Children can create a little eight-page book to sequence the events.
- Note the artist's technique: watercolors applied with an airbrush, pastels rubbed by hand, and india ink.
- Note this pattern: The story structure is cumulative.

How the Ostrich Got Its Neck: A Tale From The Akamaba of Kenya (Scholastic, 1995).

- Students research the Akamaba. Where is Kenya? Label class and individual maps.

- Students write their own pourquoi stories. Read Kiplin's *Just So Stories*.
- Have the children make masks of the central animal in their stories.

“ODDS AND ENDS” – Miscellaneous Activities

- Create a class graph of the students' favorite stories. Students write why the book is their favorite and add an illustration. Post with graph. Send your students' work to Maggie's Gallery.
- Each student or a small group of students reproduces one pattern found in Aardema's books. Create a bulletin board with this heading: *We've been reading Verna Aardema's books. These are examples of patterns we have discovered.*
- Send pictures of your students wearing their masks and copies of their pourquoi stories to the Gallery. (*Send work to Maggie's Gallery, P.O. Box 1850, Middleburg, VA 20118 or to jessica@missmaggie.org*).

AFRICAN LEGENDS

Each book listed below offers factual information about the origins of the African legend. Children can use the research frame in Appendix 2 to share what they have learned.

Zimani's Drum: A Malawian Legend (Retold by Melinda Lilly. Troll Communications L.L.C., 1999).

- Before reading the story, discuss the Malawian proverb: “Everyone’s equal at the start of a race in the sand.” Bring students back to the proverb after reading the story. How does it relate to the story?
- Note the pattern: drum, clothing, story events occur in the order that the characters appeared.

THE PRINCESS WHO LOST HER HAIR: AN AKAMBA LEGEND

(Retold by Tololwa M. Mollel. Troll Associates, 1993)

- Compare this book with *BRINGING THE RAIN TO KAPITI PLAIN* by Verna Aardema.
- Make and paint calabashes of papier mache balloons.
- See the pattern in the clothing huts.
- Compare and contrast the princess from the beginning of the story to the end of the story (Refer to Appendix 3.).

WANYANA AND THE MATCHMAKER FROG: A BAGANDAN

LEGEND (Retold by Melinda Lilly. Troll Communications L.L.C., 1999).

- Before reading the study, discuss the Bagandan proverb: “Be kind to me and I will be kind to you.” Bring students back to the proverb after reading the story. How did it relate to the story? Can students think of others? Perhaps, “Do unto others, as you would have others do unto you.”
- Observe the Simile: Round as a coffee bean.

TALK, TALK: AN ASHANTI LEGEND (Retold by Deborah M. Newton. Troll Associates, 1993.)

- Students can think of other objects of nature that “talk.”

KWIAN AND THE LAZY SUN: A SAN LEGEND (Retold by Melinda Lilly. Troll Communications L.L.C., 1999).

- “Vocabulary Hunt:” Small groups of students hunt for all words associated with light in the book (e.g., shimmered, shine, shone, bright, star, sun, darkness, shadowy, reflections, dimly, gleams, glowed). Groups share as teacher writes a master list. The words can be classified by noun, verb, adjective, and adverb. Students choose one from each heading and use it to write sentences.

GIFT OF THE NILE: AN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN LEGEND (Retold by Jan M. Mike. Troll Associates, 1993).

- Do a mini-research project on lotus flowers. Where do they grow? What do they look like? Collect pictures of lotus flowers. Invite students to paint one.
- Throughout the book are fanciful letters. Ask students to create one, possibly using the first letter of their name.
- Reader Response Logs: What does this book teach you about love and friendship?

SPIDER AND HIS SON FIND WISDOM: AN AKAN LEGEND (Retold by Melinda Lilly. Troll Communications L.L.C., 1999).

- Before reading the story, discuss the Akan Proverb: “No one should gather wisdom in a bag, put it in a box, then stand on a road and say, ‘Teach me wisdom!’” Bring students back to the proverb after reading the story. How does it relate to the story?
- Reader Response Logs: How would you describe Ananse?

SPIDER AND THE SKY GOD: AN AKAN LEGEND (Retold by Deborah M. Newton. Troll Associates, 2001).

- Try these cooking experiences: Fry plantains. Bake yams.
- Compare this story with *Anansi Does The Impossible: An Ashanti Tale* (by Verna Aardema. Athenum Books for Young Readers, 1997). (Refer to Appendix 3.)

WARRIOR SON OF A WARRIOR SON: A MASAI LEGEND (Retold by Melinda Lilly. Troll Communications L.L.C., 1999).

- Before reading the story, discuss the Masai riddle: “What looks like a butterfly? The beaded cloak of a Masai girl.” Bring students back to the riddle after reading the story. How did it relate to the story?
- Share other riddles with the students. Have them write their own. Compile the riddles in a class book.
- Note these similes: The walls are like a warrior’s shield. The roof is as strong as the roof of Sky God’s palace.

Compare this story with *Who’s In Rabbit’s House: A Masai Tale*. By Verna Aardema. (*Pied Piper*, 1997). (Refer to Appendix 3.)

The author acknowledges the wonderful book *THE AUTHOR STUDIES HANDBOOK. HELPING STUDENTS BUILD POWERFUL CONNECTIONS TO LITERATURE* by Laura Kotch and Leslie Zackman (Scholastic, 1995). Much of what has been offered here is based on their work.