

The Sky Painter –Louis Fuertes Bird Artist

Author: Margarita Engle

Illustrator: Aliona Bereghici

Publisher: Two Lions, NY, 2015.

Note to educators grades 2-4, ESL and Special Needs students-

***Can also be integrated in support of STEM Science Teaching Engineering and Mathematics . Highly recommended as a K-1 enrichment and as a STEAM Stem with ARTS enhancement. The works of Fuertes represent a perfect fusion of art sketching, illustration, and science observation. In addition , through inclusion of actual trading cards done by Fuertes and used by Arm and Hammer in the early twentieth century, it inherently includes a potential Birds Trading Card project that is supported by archival artifacts. The fact that Fuertes approached his bird watching and art as a scientist accesses the science of ornithology to all learners including newcomers and visual learners.

Created and developed by Dr. Rose Reissman , Recipient of the Pennsylvania Social Council Award for Curriculum Design-2014, Newmast participant, author of Project Based Literacy (Infoage 2016) and founder of the Writing Institute.

This informational picture book in which Margarita Engle uses poems blended with the exquisite watercolor and ink illustrations of Alliona Bereghici is an excellent one for grades 2-4 where the educator is seeking to effect the bridge between fictional literature and informational literature. The engaging narrative deliberately told by Engle in young reader accessible poetry, is build upon her research of the life of Louis Agassiz Fuertes (1874-1927) who is considered the Father of Modern Bird Art. Yet in sharing his story accompanied by a design which places the young readers in his “upended” sky watching various gorgeous birds fly high, Engle and Bereghici inspire readers to become lifelong science watchers and thinkers, a necessary focus for 21st century wildlife conservation and nature celebration. As Louis in evolving his own methods and strategies for successfully conveying the details of his birds and their flight, becomes a wildlife conservationist rather than an artist who can only paint from dead subjects, young readers become aware and engaged in 21st issues of protection of natural habitats and wildlife conservation. Although inspired by Audubon’s work, Fuertes used what is now taught in 21st century problem solving to develop other approaches for effectively observing and getting to publish his birds’ flight patterns. Not only does this work support introduction of key science informational and science issues through use of picture book and poetry formats, but it also can be used to authenticate young reader mapping and research using sketches, paintings and photos of various birds introduced in the text. The book invites its young readers to map birds in their own geographic area and examine even as young elementary students professional bird guide books in print and online. Finally a key emphasis in education literally from K-12 now is preparing student for college and careers. In that sense Fuertes and Audubon were ahead in the 19th and 20th centuries of 21st century animal scientists, wildlife advocates, nature writers, nature photographers, painters, documentary film writers and more. This work can and will inspire future wildlife conservationist advocates and others to work

full time or to contribute to these causes so that the birds whose “wild beauty of wings” Louis Fuertes spent his life documenting will continue to soar high and to inspire us to look admiringly at the sky.

Before:

Below are a few potential introductory activities the educator may want to do with the entire class or give out as differentiated ones if students read this work from a classroom learning center or library or individuate for students as needed. The work is so rich that there are unlimited introductory activities , these have worked well for the guide author.

To really get students thinking and imagining- before even starting or introducing the story, give them the title-“Sky Painter” and have them explain what they think that title may be talking about and what kind of story- real true information/facts or fiction story, this book will tell. Write down and let them draw their ideas-Once the story is finished they can return to these ideas and see which correctly anticipated the story.

1. Front and Back Cover preview-

Show the students or student the front cover and ask them to list left center right the images and text on it- As they list what they see, use an experiential chart or Smart Board to record what they say- Target their viewing and elicit many details by asking-Who ? What ? Where/ When?(Is this Now or Long Ago)- Ask them also whether the work seems to be more focused on the birds of Louis and facilitate them to reference the size and positioning of the birds on the outside cover. If the students are more mature or very visually astute, ask them to look at the amount of space the oval inset image of Louis Fuertes gets on the back cover in comparison with the space on the back cover devoted to the bird and nature images. Have them anticipate and discuss (in doing so they are engaged in Common Core Speaking and Listening) what this amount of space given in terms of art images to birds versus the human bird scientist Louis tells them about how important nature is compared to man, as far as the author and the illustrator are concerned,

Ask students to anticipate

Is this for real or imaginary? How do you know? Question them about what hints of what type of story- informational or fiction this will be and how they can tell from the cover?

For students who can go beyond this in terms of visual and critical text (illustrations are a text plus cover titles) , also show them the inside title page cover illustration.

Ask same questions as above and then ask who is missing from the front cover on the back cover- What is happening and when might it be happening on the back cover? How do the words on the back cover begin to help us understand what the illustration is showing? Note all student responses on an experiential chart . These responses will be referred back to and discussed after the students have finished the book.

If this approach is taken BEFORE the book is read, the students should return to review the charts and the ideas they came up with AFTER they have completed the story. They should as a group or as individuals without the help of the teacher talk about how their predictions using the illustrations and the text were accurate or not and why. This will give them a powerful sense of the craft and the ways reader engagement can help them “comprehend” the craft, message and information of any book.

2. Picture Walk – pre-tell the story by just showing students the illustration pages alone. Have them provide themselves a text for each illustration and note it down on an experiential chart. Once they have sequenced texts they provided to “explain” or “tell about” each illustration, have them read the work. AFTER reading the book, they should return to the text they suggested and compare/contrast it with the printed text. It will be citing for them as readers to see how their text compares with Margarita’s. But what should be emphasized is that there is no SINGLE correct text for any image and as long as their texts are based in data from the images, they can be part of the story.
(ENRICHMENT) If the teacher desires, the class can be challenged further during this picture walk by asking them if Margarita the author or Aliona the illustrator had to reference or look at any other print or online or actual works to create as a team- Margarita the text and Aliona the images- this book. Ask as they look at the illustrations alone in the picture that they look for evidence that the author and illustrator had to reference other works to do the images. Facilitate them to note the very specific gender and text labeling of the birds and their geographic labeling all of which suggest that they are being referenced to a factual source. This focusing of students on a graphic as an informational data source with explicit factual data to be noted is in line with research and the use of diagrams and graphics as informational sources which students will engage with as they progress through elementary school and beyond. Facilitated by the teacher student discussion as a whole group can prepare students for text and document complexity engagement discussions they will have in later elementary grades and do this preparation through profusely illustrated and scientifically accurate bird art.
3. Since the students will be studying an ornithologist and bird artist, challenge them before they read about what he did to anticipate what birds they as 21st century local citizens could observe and how they would be able to record their observations. Specifically have them list the types of birds they might observe easily in their neighborhood without visiting any pet store, sanctuary, zoo or conservation center and what tools- from pen, pencil, watercolor, sketchbook, ink, camera, digital camera, cell phone or other they would use to record their observations. Challenge them further as 21st century citizens to consider how they would share their bird observations and think about using them. List the answers they brainstorm which might include: a Power Point display with audio and imported images, a video, a recording of bird sounds, poetry about birds, graphic art, an expo and a bird watching hike in the neighborhood.

During a reading- either the whole class or as prompts for use in a reading center or library:

1. Ask that students try to capture words/vocabulary they can use for an ABC or glossary of Bird Watching or Fuertes inspired Bird Conservation study. This addresses Common Core focus on science special domain vocabulary. Among these words might be: ornithology, habitats, motion, expeditions, birdwatching, wildlife conservation, loon, migrating geese, macaws, tundra, tundra swan, mallard duck, padding, webbed feet, and more. Tell them they should also note what images will be needed to draw these letters. In some classes, students might even be challenged to think about performing the alphabet or glossary for other classes as a book expo event or for family day. If they have access to video online research and/or a video library they can create a video glossary of terms and bird breeds for the book.

2. Poetry- Personally Me- While Ms. Engle deliberately chose to use poetry to tell the story of Fuertes's lifelong love of bird painting and illustration as well as bird science, many of the poem titles with young readers' experiences as learners, helpers and rescuers of animals (birds, dogs, cats, turtles, pigeons, library users looking up huge photographic guides to places they love, museum goers and travelers). They can pick a poem title that resonates with their interests or life and write a poem combining their sense of the title with their emotions and their knowledge. That is anchor writing and if they can explain how they anchored their poem in the book text that satisfies the Common Core requirement for being able to write using original writer formats as inspiration.

3. Map it- Fuertes traveled from Ithaca, NY to Africa, South America, Puerto Rico, Alaska, Paris, Switzerland and more. Students should be challenged to mention all the places and birds listed and then AFTER will be able on their own to access their own note taking for accurate details. A class mural decorated with the geographic sites and bird types and perhaps actual copies of original Fuertes art/bird illustrations will make for a fabulous geographically aligned information document that is owned by the student readers and then can be enhanced with data about the status of the birds in that location in the 21st century.

4. ENRICHMENT Fuertes finds that many of his bird artists work from hunted and dead birds to create exact art and illustrations, but he favors modifying his methods to allow birds to live as he paints them more quickly. Ask students which approach, hunting down and killing birds to paint them accurately or changing one's technique to rapidly paint them as they live, they like better and why. Have them consider whether today, Louis would have the same challenges or not and how new technologies might have helped birds live today. Obviously today cameras and video can capture bird sounds, sights and more and be replayed again and again for artists with no threat to birds. That technology did not exist in the 20th century or if it was just starting out, it would have been too expensive for the general public.

After:

In addition, to revisiting any of the Before activities so students themselves can assess and express the reading, historical concept, and diagram interpretation skills they learned from this work, teachers might have students create an END PROJECT THEY OWN inspired by this book.

Among potential projects:

A Celebration of The Sky Painter by having an Expo/ Museum in school with: student bird and expedition site maps inspired by the reading and updated with 21st century bird facts, a staged reenactment of the story of the work or a podcast reading of it with authentic bird sounds found on the Internet, a class or family hike in the neighborhood or at a local bird sanctuary/conservation site with professional bird watcher support and a student printed bird/ornithology glossary.

Students can research using archival photos, National Geographic Society, and Arm and Hammer Trading cards the models of Fuertes Bird Trading cards or which one is shown in the Historical Note at the back of the book to inspire creating using a simple Word Doc Template their own updated photographed local bird trading cards. They can laminate their cards and sell them to raise funds for a local bird sanctuary or wildlife preservation or an Avian local hospital facility.

Students can choose to undertake a Stem research project and compare and contrast the lives of Audubon using a story such as Jacqueline Davis's The Boy Who Drew Birds (HM, 2007) and Fuertes and also look at Peggy Thomas's For the Birds- about Roger Tory Peterson (Calkins, 2011). They can identify shared ideas about birds and methods not shared.

They can do an author study on the ways Margarita Engle uses various genres to write about animals and those who study and help them. Included in this author study of a range of texts would be: Summer Birds- the Butterflies of Marian Merian, and Where You Wander plus Mountain Dog. This study could focus on ways students can use science and their own ability to advocate for animals in society to make a difference for the good in our world.

Ultimately in engaging students through the art and vision upward of sky painter Louis Fuertes to capture the magic of natural varied bird flight, Engle and Bereghici engage students in science fact rich print and illustrative texts that inculcate them into 21st STEM global conservation of nature. What a crucial sky painting for all readers and educators!!

Sites:

www.birdwatching.com