Douglas Florian: From Purrrsian Cats to Hi-bear-nation in Poems and Paintings

by Anne Davies

Elementary school

Douglas Florian is a poet and artist who finds the beginning of the artistic process in careful, deep observation. But if his work begins in observation, it soars on the strength of imagination and a sense of humor that takes note of odd details and funny connections between situations, creatures, facts, words, colors, and sounds. Whether his subject is the “awe-some” colors of “awe-tumn” leaves, the special skills of baseball bats (“They’re very good at catching flies”), a pet-igreed purrrsian cat, a coyooote, or a Sigh-clops, Florian seems always to be playing as he is exploring, and his poems and paintings are an irresistible invitation to join him on his adventures through our world.

Teaching Strategies

Areas to touch on in a classroom study of books by Douglas Florian could include:

- **Watching Our World**: Florian’s poems are full of humor and imagination, but they are often grounded in careful observation of the natural world. In fact, Florian often turns to field guides for inspiration. After exploring the balance of observation and fact with playful imagination in several of Florian’s animal poems, invite children to delve into some field guides on their own. Encourage them to respond to what they find with sketches, doodles, exploratory rhymes, and other fragments (p.23 in See for Your Self shows a handwritten page of Florian’s poems and doodles and could be shared with students). From those fragments, ask children to create their own animal painting and poem.

- **Playing with Words**: In addition to being a careful observer of the natural world, Florian is a careful observer of language. In many of his poems—and sometimes even in his art—he plays with words, spellings, and sounds. Challenge pairs or small groups of students to read through a collection of Florian’s poems and compile examples of his wordplay. Are there devices he uses more than once? Which do your students find the most compelling or funny? You may or may not want to introduce the “official” names of the poetic devices Florian uses, but even if you don’t, you might ask students to think about how to group the different examples of wordplay they find and make up their own names for these devices. The next step is trying these devices in their own writing!

- **Illustrating Poems**: Invite students to respond to a poem by making it into a small picture book. Depending on the age of your students and the time you want to spend on the project, you could preselect two or three choices of poems and prepare mini-books that are ready for illustration (two 8½-by-11-inch sheets of paper folded in half make a 6-page “book”; three sheets of paper make 10 pages), with lines from the poem already in place on the pages. Or you could let students take responsibility for selecting their own poems and deciding how to spread the text through their books. Remind students that on their cover they’ll need a title, an illustration, and author and illustrator credit lines. When the books are finished, keep them in a special book basket for sharing, or have a group reading. Note: A mini-book template with Florian’s poem “Winter and Spring” can be downloaded here as either a PDF or a Word document.

- **Mixing up Words and Images**: Perhaps not surprisingly, the line between words and images is not always a sharp one in Florian’s work. Nearly all of his collections include at least one or two concrete poems. The shape of words often matters, and sometimes the words are right on paintings (as with “Geeese Piece” in Autumnblings or “Sled” in Winter Eyes). Moreover, in his watercolor and collage artwork there are often letters and even words in the art. After exploring some of the ways Florian mixes words and images, invite your students to create...
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AD: In your new autobiography, See for Your Self, you suggest that aspiring authors or artists might want to keep a notebook or sketchbook. Can you describe how you use these tools?

Florian: When I was young I drew constantly in my sketchbooks to learn to see things. My first teacher in school, Gilbert Stone, taught me that you have to see things as they are first. Then you can distort, exaggerate, or re-create the world. I sketch in a small, unobtrusive sketchbook or on any paper at hand. I write on canary yellow tablets or any scrap available. I’m constantly doodling, even while editing my kids’ homework, much to their chagrin!

Getting to Know Douglas Florian

Douglas Florian grew up in Manhattan and still lives in New York City today with his wife and five children. His father was an artist and encouraged his son to draw and observe the world around him. Florian’s mother was an avid reader and helped him appreciate words and poetry. Florian studied art in college and began publishing some of his drawings in the New York Times while still a student. He started illustrating children’s books in the 1970s and is now the author-illustrator of more than 40 books. The following is an interview with Florian about his work.

AD: Your academic training is as an artist, and you started working on children’s books as an illustrator. Now you are a poet, too. Can you talk a little bit about that evolution?

Florian: I studied art at Queens College, taking very few courses in literature. But I’ve always loved reading poetry and grew up enjoying the so-called beat poets, Ginsburg, Kerouac, and Corso among them. The poems of Ogden Nash also inspired me, having first seen his work while browsing in a library when I was in the sixth grade.

AD: What were some of your other favorite books when you were in grade school?

Florian: I liked the adventure books of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, but my favorite was Sherlock Holmes, because I was really keen on observing things.

AD: You have written a number of narrative nonfiction books, but poetry seems to be your focus now. Can you talk about that?

Florian: Narrative nonfiction was not my forte. I always wanted to let my imagination run free, and the facts sometimes got in the way. At one point I wanted to illustrate Jack Prelutsky’s enchanting poems. Unable to do that, I started devising and improvising my own poems, very raw at first. I immersed myself in verse, writing reams of stuff until it gelled.

AD: How do you see the relationship between images and words in your books?

Florian: The words and images must be married to each other, and yet each should be able to stand on its own as an integral work. The art has to have a life of its own and not merely illustrate. I’ve always felt a great illustration can make a good poem even better. That’s the advantage I have in illustrating my own work—I have the freedom to leap far from the poem.

AD: When you are working on a group of poems, do the words come first? Do you ever start with an image?

Florian: Actually the research comes first. When I have a good knowledge of my subject with facts and observations, then the poem can write itself, so to speak. Occasionally I will see or draw an image that leads to a poem. Sometimes the sound of a word gets things started. The word chihuahua already sounds like a bark to me. So I extended it to “¡Chi-hua! ¡hua! ¡hua! ¡hua! ¡hua! ¡hua! ¡hua! ¡hua!”

AD: You write many more poems than end up being published in your collections. How do you decide which poems to include? Is it hard to let the others go?

Florian: With time some poems just fall by the wayside. Other poems get better over time with revision, revision, revision. My ladybug poem took 10 minutes to write but was 10 years in the making. And my editor weeds out weak poems. On rare occasions an editor will be enthusiastic about one that I may feel lukewarm about. “The Wallaby” from Zoo’s Who was like that.

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Bibliography

Monster Motel. 1993. 32p. Harcourt, $15 (0-15-255320-7); Voyager, paper, $6 (0-15-201386-5). K–Gr. 4. Monster Motel was Florian’s first collection of poems, and its subject matter—the silly, surprising, and not overly scary monster residents at the “horribly horrid Monster Motel”—is sure to delight. It’s true that the Brilly eats traffic signs and the Purple Po (despite otherwise impeccable manners) eats its guests, and the Bleen even steals, lies, and says nasty things, but for the most part these are monsters readers will likely wish they could meet, or at least read about again.

Beast Feast. 1994. 48p. Harcourt/Voyager, paper, $7 (0-15-201737-2). Gr. 1–5. Florian calls Beast Feast one of his favorite books, and it’s no wonder. With this collection he found a rich vein to mine for poems and paintings: the creatures all around us. Here his choices are wide-ranging, from boas (“Just when you think you know the boa, / There’s moa and moa and moa”), to barracudas, sloths, caterpillars, and toads. Each poem appears on its own page opposite a watercolor portrait of the creature. The creatures are painted with attention to their true anatomy, but their amusing surroundings are suggestive of the poems’ contents rather than their real-life habitats: the “clever everchanging chameleon,” for example, appears holding an artist’s palette and paint brush, while the anteater appears with a one-way sign suggestive of the lines “A thousand termites riding in, / But no one riding out.”
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Gr. 1–5. Here Florian turns his attention to the creatures many of us love best: cats and dogs. The 11 dog poems begin with “Dog Log,” a wonderful staccato account of a dog’s day, and move on to portray nine domestic breeds (from puddles with “oodles and oodles of curls” to pointers who play at Frigidaires instead of hunting), as well as the wolf, the dog’s wild cousin. With the cat poems, Florian leans more toward the wild side, with creatures such as the cheetah, the ocelot (“Why ocelots have lots of spots puzzles ocelot”), and the jaguarundi holding center stage. Not every child will find his or her favorite breed represented in the collection, but that presents the perfect chance for student poets to follow Florian’s lead and add to what’s here.


Gr. 1–5. In this collection Florian features a range of creatures, from the familiar, such as the polliwiggly polliwogs, to the exotic, like the komodo dragon. But as several poems suggest, the line between the familiar and the exotic isn’t always sharp: the gila monster, after all, looks suspiciously like a composition book, and the red-eyed tree frog, rare as it may be, is “Swallows bugs / Lives on T-shirts and coffee mugs.” With this book, as with any in the animal series, you might think about initially giving students copies of the poems without their titles and with the name of the animal (if it appears in the poem) whited out or covered up. Challenge them to try to match the poems to the titles and to fill in the name of the creature. If you are lucky enough to have access to a color photocopier, you could use reproductions of the images as further clues. Otherwise, the paintings can be a treat to explore once children have identified the creatures.


Gr. 1–5. Readers who love Florian’s wordplay will find a special treat in the collage artwork in Zoo’s Who, which extends and expands on the play in the poems. The painting for “The Snake” includes many letter s’s, as well as a bit of paper with “Terra” written on it, followed by the letters BL and then the E from the snake’s name. “Terra” echoes the line, “On ground,” but the BL and E go beyond that, introducing a new pun (terra-BLE) and further commentary. Within the art for “The Shrew,” astute observers will find a list of synonyms for the word small, with some words overlapping and sharing letters, and even a second acrostic poem waiting to be discovered. The paintings are especially interesting to discuss if you’ve read See for Your Self with your class (see below) and started a conversation about Florian’s creative process; at times the paintings almost seem like a window into his thinking and the many possibilities each creature presented.


K–Gr. 4. Florian has found things to celebrate in each of the four seasons—from skating, sledding, ice-fishing, and warm cocoa in Winter Eyes (Greenwillow, 1999), to jump rope, dandelions, campfires, and clouds in Summersaults (Greenwillow, 2002), to pumpkins, hi-bear-nation, and, of course, leaves in Autumnblings (Greenwillow, 2003)—but reading this final installment, it seems as if he saved his favorite season for last. As he writes in the title poem, “Spring is great / For many reasons. / Spring does handsprings / Round the seasons.” Here, as in his earlier seasonal collections, Florian balances attention to nature with a child’s perspective. There are concrete poems, list poems, a fun April Fool’s Day poem, and quite a few poems that invite extension or imitation by young poets. The final poem in this book is titled “Nature Walk.” This is also the title of a picture book that Florian wrote and illustrated in 1989. The texts are similar in structure, making it interesting to compare and contrast the two. Florian’s early picture books A Summer Day (Greenwillow, 1988) and A Winter Day (Greenwillow, 1987) are also interesting to compare with the poems in these seasonal collections.


Gr. 3–5. School lunch and the trials of the cafeteria are the inspiration for one of the poems in this collection, and here as in the earlier Bing Bang Boing (Harcourt, 1994), food is a rich theme (there are poems about what the moon likes to eat, about eating the planets, about monster meatballs, about pizza, and more). But if you are looking for playful poems about smelly feet, pollution, or poetry itself, you won’t be disappointed.

Comets, Stars, the Moon and Mars. 2007. 56p. Harcourt, $16 (9780152053727).

Gr. 3-5. This large-format book looks at astronomy through the magnifying, clarifying lens of poetry. Each broad double-page spread features a short, accessible poem about a subject such as the sun, each of its planets, a comet, a constellation, or the universe, set within an impressive painting. Stamped type, cutout pages, collage elements with printed papers, and sweeping brushstrokes all figure prominently in the expressive collage artwork, which ably illustrates the verse.


Gr. 2–5. In this recently published addition to the excellent Meet the Author series, Florian shares stories and photographs from his childhood, drawings he did as a child and in art school, and wonderful details about his creative process as a writer and artist. The pictures of Florian doing research and working in his studio are ideal to share as part of an author study or in a writer’s workshop discussion about where ideas come from and how the drafting and editing process works. See for Your Self is written with second- to fifth-graders in mind, but younger children will certainly be interested in some of the photographs and in hearing sections or a synopsis of the text. An alternative would be to share Florian’s earlier A Painter (Greenwillow, 1993) from the How We Work series.

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