Author Study
Mem Fox

Every child has a favorite book. Likewise, many teachers also have favorites for their students. When I was an after school teacher of 1-3 year olds, *The Green Sheep* by Mem Fox was our favorite story to read. Not only were the pictures bright, cheery, and age appropriate, but the text also allowed for interactive storytelling to make the story more engaging and enjoyable. It made for a good read to calm my class or when my students were preparing for departure.

Even though I always read her book as a teacher, I was unfamiliar with Mem Fox as an author before I started this project. I began the process of looking for an author to do my study on by previewing their books on the web. When I typed in Mem Fox, the book *The Green Sheep* appeared and my decision was made. After reading a number of her books, I have come to enjoy her style, themes, and characters in her writing.

Mem Fox, born Merrion Patridge, was born in Australia. She moved to Africa when she was six months old because her parents were both missionaries. At eighteen, she began studying drama in England after being accepted into the English Drama School. While studying drama, she decided to change majors and study literacy. She wanted to study how children learn to read and write. She developed an interest in writing while taking a children’s literacy course. As an assignment, she had to write a children’s book. This is where *Possum Magic*, her first book, originated. Sometime after returning to Australia in 1970, she became an Associate Professor of Education at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia for 24 years where she taught reading and writing to pre-service teachers. She retired in 1996. At this time literacy became her focus. After having a daughter, she realized how important it was to read out loud in order to help a child learn how to read. She enjoyed studying how children learn to read and write. From her studies, she learned that certain elements such as rhyme, rhythm, and repetition
are helpful when children are learning how to read. Many of her stories contain these elements. She has received three honorary doctorates for her work in literacy.

Mem Fox’s first book was *Possum Magic*. It was rejected nine times over five years before it was published. However, it became a best seller and is still the bestselling children’s book in Australia 29 years later. She has written over forty children’s books and several books for adults. Many of her books have been translated into nineteen different languages. Many of her books have different titles and illustrators in America after being translated. Her bestselling book for parents is *Reading Magic*. She also published *Radical Reflections*, which is a book for teachers about teaching reading and writing.

Because of Mem Fox’s success as a writer, she has received many prestigious awards. She has been awarded the Ethel Turner Prize for Young People’s Literature for *Possum Magic* in 1984, the Dromkeen Medal in 1994, and the COOL Award for *Possum Magic* in 2001, just to name a few. Despite all of her success in writing, teaching is still her first love while writing is her second love.

To become familiar with Mem Fox’s work, I read a number if her stories so I could make an accurate analysis of her work. I selected the five stories I enjoyed the most to be the focus of my webquest. The stories were *Tough Boris*, *Harriet, You Drive Me Wild!*, *Wombat Divine*, *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Patridge*, *The Goblin and the Empty Chair*, and *Koala Lou*. I chose all of these stories because they all had meaningful themes that most students can relate to. *Tough Boris* is a story about Pirates and how tough they are. They lie, steal, cheat, and fight. But when Boris’ parrot dies, he is sad and cries. The message in the story is that it is ok to cry. I feel she used some of the toughest, meanest people to portray that everyone, even the strongest people have moments of sadness and that it’s really ok to cry. *Harriet, You Drive Me Wild!* is a story about a pesky girl who is always getting into trouble. She doesn’t mean to get in trouble, it is usually on accident. Her mom always tries not to yell at her, but she gets so
fed up with Harriet’s behavior that she does. The story teaches that no one is perfect, forgiveness, and that if someone is bothering you, you should speak up. *Wombat Divine* is about a wombat that has been waiting all year long to be in a nativity play. He was always too young, and now that he is old enough he has trouble finding the part in the play that’s right for him. He is either too heavy, short, or clumsy, among a number of other shortcomings, for every role. Just when he feels there is no place for him and that he does not fit in, he is able to get the starring role in the play and finds his place among his friends.

*Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Patridge* is about a little boy who lives next to a senior home and makes friends with all the seniors there. One night he overhears his parents talking about Miss Nancy, who is Wilfrid’s favorite senior to visit and spend time with. They talk about how she has a bad memory. The next day Wilfrid goes to the home and asks each senior what is a memory. Every senior gives a different view based on their life experiences. From this, Wilfrid creates a memory box with some items and takes it to Miss Nancy to help her remember her past. Remarkably it works and she begins to recount past events to Wilfrid. In *The Goblin and the Empty Chair*, there is a goblin who felt he was really ugly so he kept his face covered all the time and isolated himself from other people. However, he begins to feel lonely. The goblin begins to notice that there is a family of people that need help and he secretly completes their tasks at night. They notice and are grateful for his help and invite him to dinner. Their story is about acceptance of other people and yourself. And finally, *Koala Lou* is a story many children can relate to if they have siblings. A koala bear feels her mother is too busy to tell her that she loves her anymore because she has new, smaller siblings that require more attention. She feels that she has to train really hard for the Olympics and win to feel her mother’s affection again. In the end she sees that her mother still loves her, always has, and always will. This is a good story for students that may have been the first born and are adjusting to sharing their parents’ attention.
After reading many of Mem Fox's books, her work seem to target a younger audience such as Pre-K thru second grade. Many of the stories were bedtime stories or they dealt with personal situations within a family dynamic. Much of her work contains repetition of certain phrases. For instance, in *A Particular Cow* she continuously used the word particular to describe not only the cow, but the actions of every character in the story. Many of Fox's works also contain rhyming words. All of her works I read were fiction. Some were realistic fiction because they dealt with real situations students can relate to. Others were fantasy because they contained events that cannot happen, like in *The Magic Hat*. She seems to use animals as the main characters in many of her stories.

There are a few websites that allow students to get more information on Mem Fox. Fox's own website, memfox.net, provides a large amount of resources to parents and students such as an autobiography, background on her stories, and an instructional on how to read aloud. She even has links on her website for teachers and writers. Another website with information on Mem fox is from Reading Rockets (http://www.readingrockets.org/books/interviews/fox/). Here they give a brief biography on Fox and provide video commentary from interviews from Fox. And finally, RIF Reading Planet (http://www.rif.org/kids/readingplanet/bookzone/mem_fox.htm) is a kid-friendly website that has an interview with Mem Fox and provides an opportunity for students to rate and review her books.

Mem Fox's works can be used in a number of different ways to teach different concepts. Through an author study, students could look for some of the same things we looked for when completing this assignment such as themes, characters, and genres. Individual books can also be used to help teach lessons. For instance, *The Green Sheep* could help teach a lesson on adjectives because there are many adjectives that describe the different sheep in the story. The story, *A Particular Cow* can be used to teach sequencing because there are a number of events that happen to the same character. *Tell Me About Your Day Today* is a great story to teach point of view. The story is about a boy asking his
stuffed animals how their day went, in the end it shows how they played together but the activities they completed were seen differently. Her books can be used in many different ways, it is up to the teacher and their level of creativity.

Conclusion

I feel the author study webquest is a valuable tool to use in the classroom because the students are able to become familiar with an author, their background, and their works. It allows them to see how a person’s life may have affected their work. It also allows them to see the similarities in the authors’ work across a number of books. They are able to look for similarities in genres, characters, or themes as they are completing the story. I feel it is also beneficial because of the technology component. Technology has become an important tool in students’ education. Having them use the web allows them to become more familiar with doing research. I feel it also gives them some independence in completing their work.

I could use the webquest as an author study. But I could also use it to teach different genres and include links to different types of works and activities. I feel the webquest website could be useful in teaching a unit or to provide supplementary activities and resources to students. I could also teach an author study the traditional way without the webquest and provide all the resources about the author through print.


