

Lesson Plan

Teaching Anisfield-Wolf Winners' Children's Picture Books

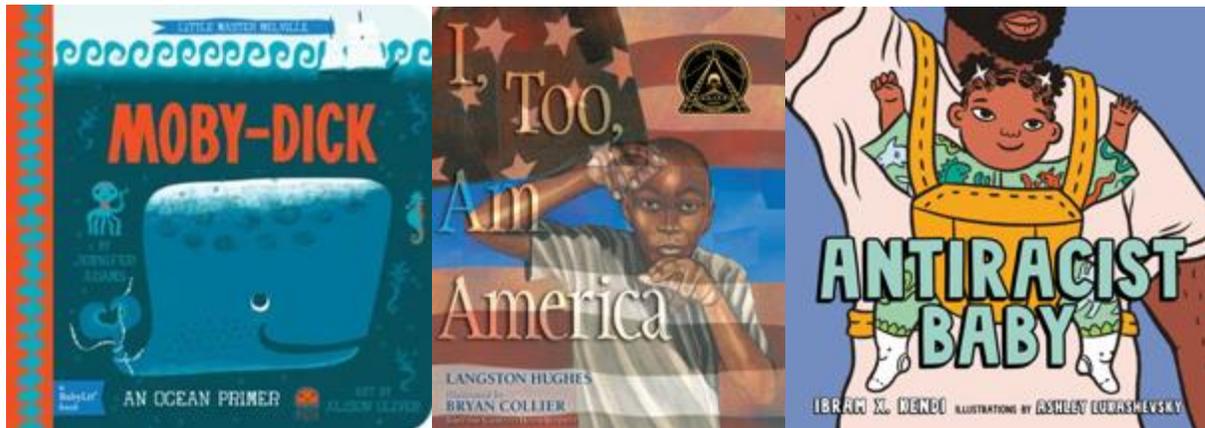
Reading Anisfield-Wolf Winners' Children's Picture Books

Anisfield-Wolf Lesson Plan

- Level: Young Adult/Adult
- Type: Lesson Plan

This lesson plan guides educators in teaching children's books to young adult and adult learners. In addition to offering some general advice about teaching children's picture books, lessons about Toni Morrison's *The Big Box*, Edwidge Danticat's *Eight Days: A Story of Haiti*, and Junot Diaz's *Islandborn* are included.

Teaching Children's Picture Books to Young Adult & Adult Learners



Teaching children's picture books to middle school, high school, college-age, and adult learners is an engaging (and often surprising) way to strengthen students' ability to do both textual and visual analysis. By asking students to analyze how illustrators use specific colors, shapes, and styles to depict the scenes and characters, to consider the impact of the author's word choice, and to consider how the children's book compares to books in other genres, teachers can support students' understanding of audience, visual cues, and poetic forms.

Revisiting classics from one's childhood or diving into new releases that reflect the contemporary issues can promote conversation and creativity. While books like *Goodnight Moon* and *The Cat and the Hat* might seem simple, careful attention to the details in the books and to the subtle messages they present uncovers more complex themes. Comparing children's picture books to works for adults can also provide a compelling way for students to make arguments and claims about either texts. For instance, comparing Herman Melville's canonical *Moby Dick* to Jennifer Adams and Alison Oliver's board book for babies titled *Moby-Dick: An Ocean Primer* can help students analyze the effect of how books are distilled to their most basic plot or elements for the youngest readers. What is lost from the classic and what is the purpose of this adaptation?

When studying the picture book *I, Too, Am America*, which presents Langston Hughes' 1926 poem "I, too" and adds Bryan Collier's thought-provoking illustrations, students who are visual learners can make new connections between the verses and art, gaining a richer understanding of the poem. Reading a poem presented in a picture book also slows down the reading process, helping students take in the language slowly for better comprehension.

There are also many writers who are primarily known for their writing for adult audiences who have written work for children as well. Ibram X. Kendi is best known for his 2019 book *How to be an Antiracist*, but in 2020, he created an early primer called *Antiracist Baby*, which presents some of the same ideas in board book form. Once again, analyzing the picture book can promote a conversation about how children are taught about complex topics and can offer clarification on points that students might find more confusing when presented in a longer book.

The depth and complexity of children's picture books can surprise the most confident close reader while also encouraging students who are more hesitant about their literary analysis skills. Studying children's picture books can lower the barrier of entry for students who are timid about discussing complex literary devices or social issues. When introducing picture books in a classroom setting, I would encourage educators to take time to set up their student's expectations and help provide some context about the books.

Studying a Picture Book Step-by-Step

1. Begin by having students discuss their own background with picture books. Did they read them as children? When was the last time they read a picture book? What assumptions do they have based on their own experiences?
2. What do children need from picture books? What are words you would use to describe a child?
3. Introduce the picture book. Study the cover. If you have not read this picture book, what are your expectations of the text from the cover art and title?
4. What purpose do you think this book serves? Do you think it was written to educate? Entertain? Teach a specific moral or lesson? Something else?
5. Ask students to reflect on two questions as they read the picture book:
 - a. What do you wonder?
 - b. What do you notice?
6. Then, read the book aloud.
 - a. As most picture books are short, this does not take much time, but slow down the process by pausing for at least 30 seconds after reading the text on the page so students can look carefully at the images. If the picture book is wordless, spend at least 30-45 seconds on each page.
7. After reading the picture book, give students time to discuss the book in pairs, in small groups, and/or in a large group. Have them focus on what they noticed or wondered.
8. Develop a list of questions about the book.
9. Consider bringing in a similar text for adults to compare to the picture book. For instance, when reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, follow these steps when

reading her book *The Big Box*, but then compare the big box to Sethe's home or compare the child characters in *The Big Box* to Denver.

In addition, studying picture books can provide an opportunity to discuss representation and readership. [Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Debbie Reese, and Kathleen Horning](#) offer the following questions which can help a reader decenter themselves as a the central audience for the text and think about the intended readership:

1. Who will be reading the book?
2. Is the imagined young reader of these historical stories a White, middle class cisgender heterosexual, able-bodied student who was born in the United States, or are child readers from all backgrounds being kept in mind.
3. What kind of story is being told in the book?
4. What makes the story difficult?
5. Who is it difficult for?
6. Does the nature of that difficulty differ depending on the demographic makeup of a classroom, school or community?

Resources:

- [From Cover to Cover: Evaluating and Reviewing Children's Books](#) by Kathleen Horning. Harper Collins, 2010.
- [The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature](#) by Perry Nodelman. Johns Hopkins Press, 2008.
- [Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art](#) by Scott McCloud. Harper Perennial, 1993.
- [Why You Should Read Children's Books, Even Though You Are So Old and Wise](#) by Katherine Rundell. Bloomsbury, 2019.
- [Children's Picturebooks: The Art of Visual Storytelling](#) by Martin Salisbury and Morag Styles. Laurence King: 2020.
- ["The Importance of Picture Books"](#) by Vanessa LoBue from *Psychology Today*, 2018.
- ["Much Ado about a "Fine Dessert": The Cultural Politics of Representing Slavery in Children's Literature"](#) by Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Debbie Reese, and Kathleen Horning from *Journal of Children's Literature*, 2016.

Picture Books:

- [I, Too, Am America](#) by Langston Hughes & Bryan Collier. Simon & Schuster, 2012.
- [Antiracist Baby](#) by Ibram X. Kendi & Ashley Lukashevsky. Kokila, 2020.
- [Moby-Dick: An Ocean Primer](#) by Jennifer Adams and Alison Oliver. Gibbs Smith, 2013.

Picture Book Information Sheet Handout

Adapted from Kathleen Horning's From Cover to Cover

Title of the book:

Author:

Illustrator:

Publisher:

Year Published:

What kind of book is it? Is it a textbook (a book meant to explain concepts and define terms), a storybook, a magazine?

Describe the book's cover:

What is the typeface (font) like?

Describe the book's title page:

Does the book include endpapers?

What information do you receive on the copyright page?

Does the book include a preface? A foreword? Epilogue? Afterword? Appendix? Glossary? Source Notes? Bio? What does this information tell you about the book? If the book does not include any of these, why?

What are other distinguishing features about the book?

What do you think the author's intent was in writing the book?

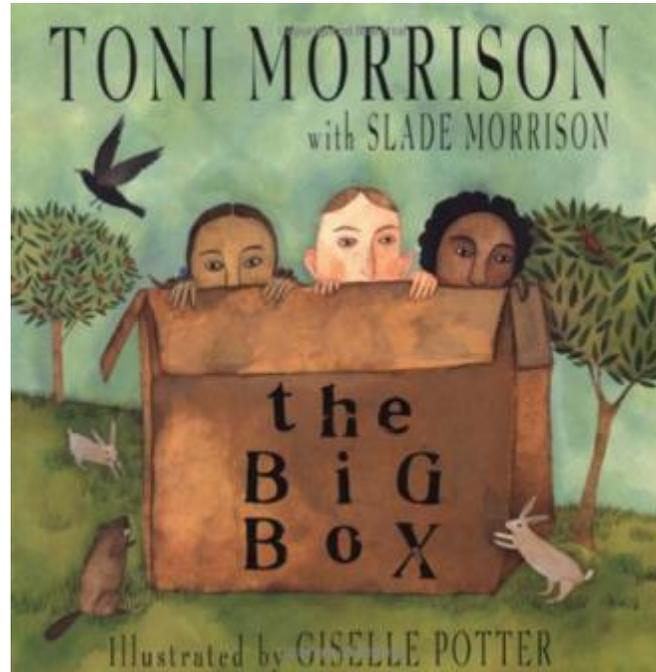
Why did the illustrator choose this particular style?

What do you notice?

What do you wonder?

The Big Box

written by Toni Morrison with Slade Morrison & illustrated by Giselle Potter



Background: Toni Morrison, the 1988 Anisfield-Wolf fiction winner for her novel *Beloved*, has co-written a number of picture books with her son Slade throughout her career. They wrote a series of picture books based on Aesop's fables, as well as books about children enjoying cooking with their grandmother and exploring the public library. However, her first picture book is her most striking and lends itself to dynamic conversations about agency, power, and childhood. This book also pairs well with *Beloved*, as both books challenge readers to think about the role literary children play in shaping narratives.

About the book:

The Big Box tells the story of three children, Patty, Mickey, and Liza Sue, who live in a "big brown box" where "the door has three big locks" and "only open[s] one way." Each child was placed in the box because they violated a rule (like singing in class or not playing with dolls) and the adults around them thought it best to keep them contained so they can better learn "how far [they] can go so the grown-up world can adore [them]". The Big Box has all sorts of treats, toys, and foods for the children to enjoy, but they are restricted from leaving. Morrison shared in an interview that she was inspired to write this book when her son Slade was punished in school and his teacher told him that he "couldn't handle his freedom" - which is a phrase she puts into the book.

Discussion Questions:

1. Compare the stories of Patty, Mickey, and Liza Sue. What do you notice about each child? What differentiates them from each other?
2. What are the social violations that each child commits? How do the adults explain why they are being placed in the box?
3. What are some other “big brown boxes” that children live in?
4. Are the parents protecting the children or punishing the children? What is the difference?
 - a. Consider Toni Morrison’s answer, which she gave to a version of this question in an interview: “Both. Precisely. The point of the story (and one of its points) is the difficulty we have in distinguishing between the two [punishment and protection]. One of the refrains in the book is “those kids can't handle their freedom.”
5. How is the natural world illustrated and described in *The Big Box*?



6. Compare the picture book to the poem Morrison first published in *Ms. Magazine*. What do you notice about the illustrations? Compare the cultural references and endings. How do these changes impact Morrison’s themes/message?



By Toni Morrison
in collaboration with
Slade Morrison

Patty and Mickey and Liza Sue
Live in a big brown box.
It has carpets and curtains and beanbag chairs
And the door has three big locks.

Oh, it's pretty inside and the windows are wide
With shutters to keep out the day.
They have swings and slides and custom-made beds
And the doors only open one way.

Their parents visit on Wednesday night
And you should see the stuff they get:
Pizza and Lego and Bubble Yum
And a four-color TV set.

On Christmas day
They got a picture of the sky
And a butterfly under glass
An aquarium thing with plastic fish
Made so it would last.

Oh, sea gulls scream
And rabbits hop
And beavers chew trees when they need 'em.
But Patty and Mickey and Liza Sue—
Those kids can't handle their freedom.

Now Patty used to live with a two-way door
In a little white house quite near us.
But she had too much fun in school all day
And made the grown-ups nervous.
She talked in the library and sang in the class
Went four times to the toilet.
She ran through the halls and wouldn't play with dolls
And when we pledged to the flag, she'd spoil it.

So the teachers who loved her had a meeting one day
To try to find a cure.
They thought and talked and thought some more
Til finally they were sure.
"Oh, Patty," they said, "you're an awfully sweet girl
With a lot of potential inside you.

But you have to know how far to go
So the grown-up world can abide you
Now the rules are listed on the walls.
So there's no need to repeat them.

We all agree, your parents and we,
That you just can't handle your freedom."

Patty sat still and, to avoid their eyes,
She lowered her little girl head.
But she heard their words and she felt their eyes.
And this is what she said:

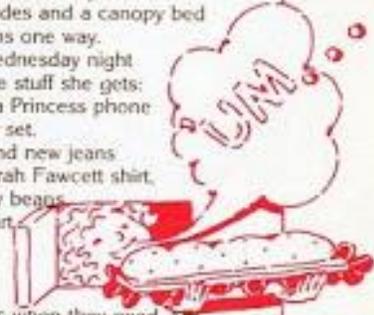
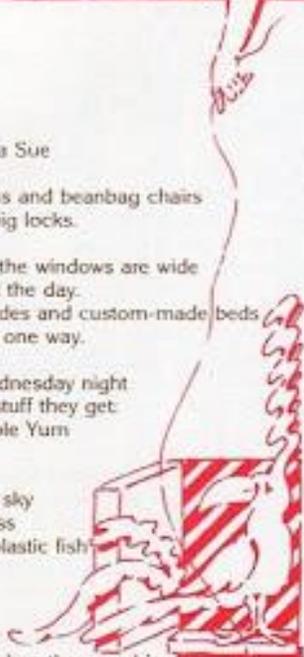
"I fold my socks and I eat my beets
And on Saturday morning I change my sheets.
I lace my shoes and wash my neck,
And under my nails there's not a speck.
Even sparrows scream
And rabbits hop
And beavers chew trees when they need 'em.
I don't mean to be rude: I want to be nice,
But I'd like to hang on to my freedom.
I know you are smart and I know that you think
You are doing what is best for me.
But if freedom is handled just *your* way
Then it's not my freedom or free."

So they gave little Patty an understanding hug
And put her in a big brown box.
It has carpets and curtains and beanbag chairs
But the door has three big locks.

Oh, it's pretty inside and the windows are wide
With shutters to keep out the day.
She has swings and slides and a canopy bed
But the door only opens one way.
Her parents visit on Wednesday night
And you should see the stuff she gets:
Barbie and Pepsi and a Princess phone
And a Japanese stereo set.
On Easter she got brand new jeans
With Pumas and a Farrah Fawcett shirt,
Marzipan eggs and jelly beans
And a jar of genuine dirt.

Oh, parrots scream
And rabbits hop
And beavers chew trees when they need 'em
But Patty and Mickey and Liza Sue—
Those kids can't handle their freedom.

Now Mickey used to live on the eighteenth floor
With two elevators to serve us.
But he had too much fun in the streets all day
And made the grown-ups nervous.
He wrote his name on the mailbox lid
And sat on the super's Honda



7. While this book juxtaposes children and adults, there are ways in which Patty, Mickey, and Liza Sue's stories resonate with the adults who feel trapped and censored as well. What boxes do adults find themselves in?
 - a. Consider the following quotation from Morrison about her college students:
"I'm sort of in an environment in which I see the consequences of [shielding children from the world]. Teaching at Princeton and even where I was at Albany and Yale, I see the consequences of children when they are 17 and 18 years old who, by the time they get to university, their only job is to win; their job is to not fail. You keep wondering and you want to scratch them a little bit to see what's really underneath that enormous burden and commitment. And sometimes that pressure is too great for them because it's not about learning. And when you learn, you have to experiment and you have to sometimes make mistakes, but they aren't allowed to make mistakes. They're trained to do it right the first time."
8. How would you compare Morrison's word choice in this picture book to some of her novels? Compare Denver to Liza Sue.

Additional picture books by Toni Morrison:

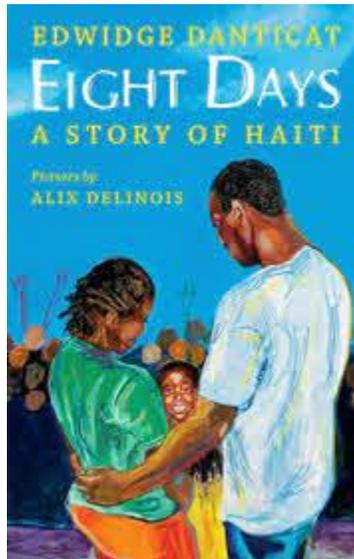
- *The Book of Mean People*. Illustrated by Pascal Lemaître. Hyperion, 2002.
- *Who's Got Game? Poppy or the Snake?* Illustrated by Pascal Lemaître, 2003.
- *Who's Got Game? The Ant or the Grasshopper?* Illustrated by Pascal Lemaître, 2003.
- *Who's Got Game? The Lion or the Mouse?* Illustrated by Pascal Lemaître, 2003.
- *Remember: The Journey to School Integration*. HMH Books for Young Readers, 2004.
- *Peeny Butter Fudge*. Illustrated by Joe Cepeda, 2009.
- *Little Cloud and Lady Wind*. Illustrated by Sean Qualls. Simon & Schuster, 2010.
- *The Tortoise or the Hare*. Illustrated by Joe Cepeda. Simon & Schuster, 2014.
- *Please, Louise*. Illustrated by Shadra Strickland. Simon & Schuster, 2016.

Cited/Additional Resources:

1. Toni Morrison's [Anisfield-Wolf page](#)
2. [The Prindle Institute for Ethics Guide to *The Big Box*](#)
3. Ariel Winters' ["Toni Morrison's *The Big Box*"](#)

Eight Days: A Story of Haiti

written by Edwidge Danticat and illustrated by Alix Delinois



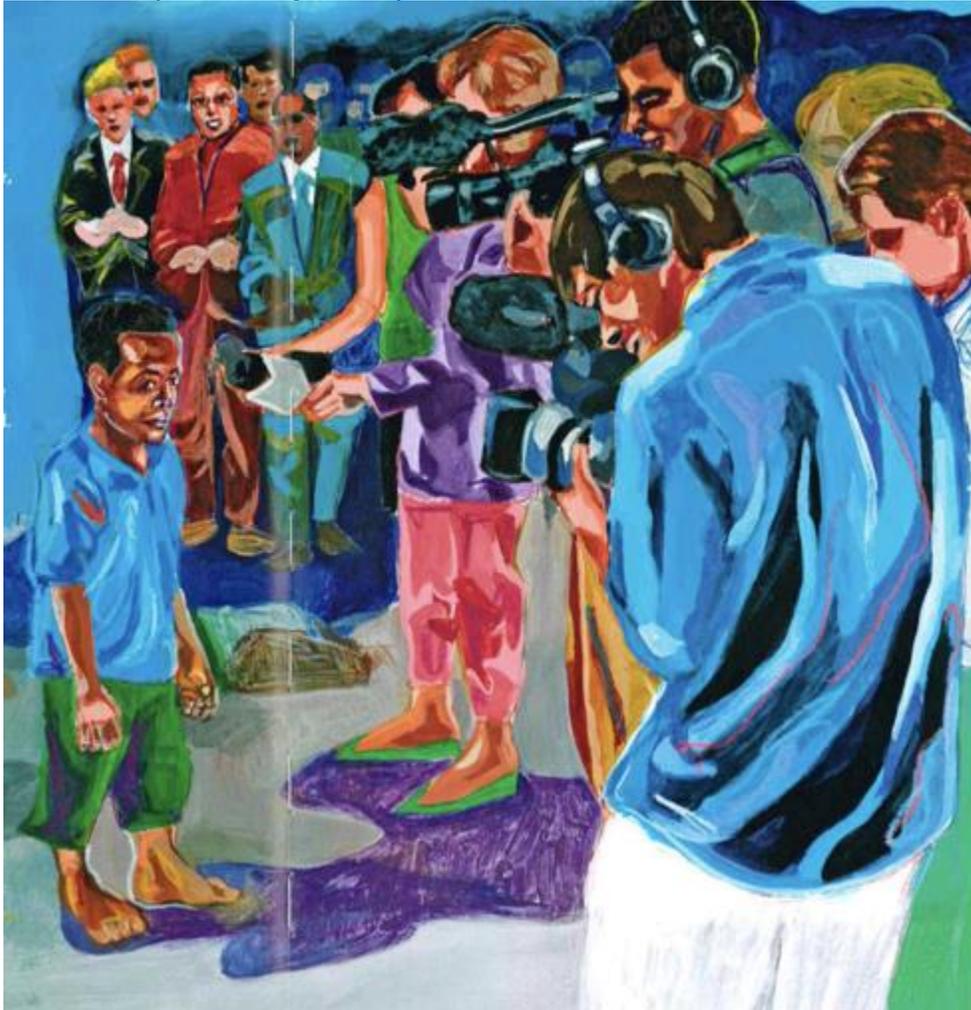
Background: Edwidge Danticat, the 2005 Anisfield-Wolf fiction winner for her novel *The Dew Breaker*, has experimented with several genres, including memoir, fiction, and middle grade historical fiction. However, one of the lesser known genres she has contributed to is the genre of picture books. The impetus for penning her first picture book *Eight Days: A Story of Haiti* came when she learned of a massive earthquake that hit her home country of Haiti. While she immediately thought of her relatives and those she knows who live there, she also worried about the children of Haiti (as she explains “[n]early half of Haiti’s population is under fifteen”) and about the feelings of her own children who are connected to the Island. Danticat explains that it was her daughter Mira, who was five-year-old at the time, who inspired her to write this picture book as a way to turn “what was an extremely dark time into a moment of creation and hope.” Her daughter’s questions, fears, and concerns, many of which mirrored her own, inspired her to write a book for children that celebrates and honors their insights, their determination, and their very being.

About the book: In *Eight Days: A Story of Haiti*, seven-year-old Junior shares some of his favorite activities, including singing a solo in a children’s choir, playing soccer, and riding his bicycle around the Champs de Mars Plaza. However, readers learn that these moments are imagined as Junior tries to survive for the eight days that he is trapped underneath his home after an earthquake. Despite the harrowing situation that Junior just survived, the story he recounts and the illustrations emphasize Junior’s dreams instead of his reality. Illustrator Alix Delinois, who, like Danticat, was born in Haiti and moved to New York City as a child, illustrates joyful images of Junior playing in his

home, in the Champs de Mars Plaza, in his father's barbershop, and in a field. The paintings use bold colors, with lots of blues and greens emphasizing the cloudless skies and the tropical plants in Haiti. While the book ends with a happy reunion between Junior and his family, we learn that one of his friends who was trapped with him died on the fifth day he was trapped.

Discussion Questions:

1. Junior tells this story to a group of reporters who ask him to recount what it was like to be trapped under a collapsed house for eight days. How does this audience shape the way he explains his survival narrative?



2. What is the significance of the places Junior imagines while trapped under the house?
3. In the starred *Kirkus Review* for *Eight Days*, the reviewer comments on the seriousness of the picture book, noting Delinois's "emotionally charged playscapes." What does the reviewer mean by this? Do you agree with the reviewer's assessment?

4. Compare Danticat's vision of Haiti in *The Dew Breaker* to the Haiti she writes about and Delinois illustrates in *Eight Days*.
5. Study the endpapers (the pages connected to the front and back cover of the picture book). What is emphasized in the artwork? What do they tell you about the text?
6. In her author's note for *Eight Days*, Danticat states: "[W]hen you look into the eyes of any child, you are looking at much more possibility than words can ever express." How does Junior reflect this sentiment? How does writing a children's picture book help her capture the power of a child's gaze?

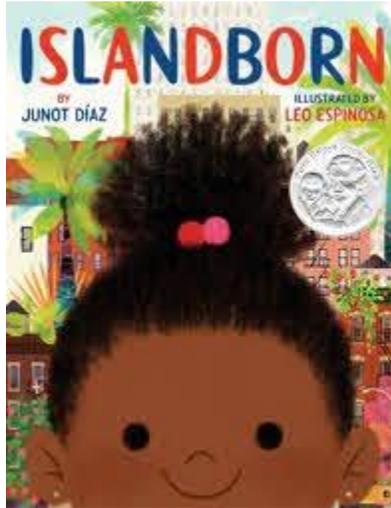
Additional children's books by Edwidge Danticat:

- *Anacaona: Golden Flower, Haiti, 1490*. Scholastic Inc., 2005.
- *Behind the Mountains*. Scholastic Paperbacks, 2004.
- *Eight Days: A Story of Haiti*. Orchard Books, 2010.
- *Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation*. Dial Books, 2015.
- *The Last Mapou*. One Moore Book. 2013.
- *My Mommy Medicine*. Roaring Brook Press, 2019.

Cited/Additional Resources:

1. Edwidge Danticat's [Anisfield-Wolf page](#)
2. "Eight Days" [Kirkus Reviews](#).
3. ["Haiti's survival stories no shock to experts"](#)

Islandborn written by Junot Diaz & illustrated by Leo Espinosa



Background: Junot Diaz, who won the 2008 Anisfield-Wolf Award for fiction for his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, wrote his first picture book, *Islandborn*, in 2019. Diaz wrote the book to celebrate his own memories of growing up in Dominican Republic, an island in the Caribbean. While Lola, the child protagonist in *Islandborn*, does not remember the island, Diaz has rich memories of living with his grandparents on their farm where they grew coffee and raised chickens, goats and pigs. He had an especially close relationship with his grandfather, whom he greatly admired.

About the book:

In *Islandborn*, Lola lives in a bustling city and goes to a school where all of her classmates are “from somewhere else.” Her classmates are from stony villages and hot deserts, but Lola is from “the Island.” Unlike her classmates who remember their home countries well, Lola does not remember her birthplace because she left when she was a young baby. When her teacher asks her to draw a picture of her home country, she relies on her cousin, neighbors, grandma, and to tell her about the island, from the large bats to the loud music to the monster that caused many of Lola’s family members and friends to immigrate to the city and away from the country they love.

Discussion Questions:

1. On the back of the book, the phrase “MEMORY IS MAGIC” appears hovering over the city and the tropical plants. What does this phrase mean? What role does memory play in this book?
2. How would you draw where you are from? How does your heritage inform your identity?
3. Look carefully at Lola’s final drawing. What do you notice?



4. In describing his own memories of growing up on the island, Diaz explains that while there were lots of challenges, “as a kid, you don’t see any of it,” as his parents and grandparents protected him from it. Does Lola have a similar experience? Is she “protected” in the same way that Diaz explains he was?
5. What do the bats symbolize?
6. What are some of the similarities between the island and the neighborhood? What do these aspects tell us about Lola’s culture?
7. Lola’s grandmother tells her “Just because you don’t remember a place doesn’t mean it isn’t in you.” What does she mean by this? How does place function in Diaz’s other works for adults? How does place shape identity?
8. What is the significance of using a monster metaphor to discuss the political unrest and oppression that Lola’s family and neighbors faced?
9. Before this book was published, the color of the illustration of the monster was changed from black to green. Read about this change from [Teaching for Change](#)’s review and compare the two images.



Additional picture books to consider:

- [*If Dominican Were a Color*](#) by Sili Recio & Brianna McCarthy. Denene Millner Books, 2020
- [*Planting Stories: The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpre*](#) by Anika A. Denise and Paola Escobar. HarperCollins, 2019.
- [*Why Am I Here?*](#) by Constance Ørbeck-Nilssen and Akin Duzakin. Erdmans Books for Young Readers, 2016.

Cited/Additional Resources:

- Junot Diaz's [Anisfield-Wolf page](#)
- [D is for Dominican Republic Author Read Aloud: "Islandborn" by Junot Diaz](#)
- <https://socialjusticebooks.org/diaz-islandborn-before-and-after/>