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# Using Crossover Picturebooks to Discuss Emotions

by William Bintz and Shabnam Moini Chaghervand

I, William, teach graduate courses in literacy education. Typically, my students are K-8 classroom teachers pursuing a master's degree in reading specialization. Once a week, students attend my reading theory and practice class online after a long teaching day at their respective schools. At one point in a recent class, I started to notice something more than just students' exhaustion from taking a graduate class after a full day teaching. I sensed unease, even anxiety, among many students. I asked a simple question at the beginning of each class session: *How are you all doing?* Their responses were enlightening. One student stated:

I appreciate you asking us. Nobody asks teachers how we feel at my school. I, for one, do not feel successful as a teacher in this pandemic. I am doing everything I can at our school to be a healthy and successful teacher, but I also am worried about the health of myself, my family, and my students. Wearing masks and maintaining social distance from each other has taken a lot of joy out of the classroom. It is taking a toll on me as a teacher. I worry about what toll it is taking on my students.

This response made a profound impression on me. My students seemed to need opportunities to discuss the emotions they were feeling. I could have shared a similar response, if someone had asked me the same question. I, too, was experiencing anxiety as a teacher educator. I taught all my classes online. I did not have to teach face-to-face, adhere to distancing, wear a mask, or worry about exposure. At the same time, I felt great angst about teaching online. I prepared for every class, but while teaching, and certainly afterwards, I felt disappointed, unsuccessful, and defeated. I did not look forward to teaching my next online class.

I shared this experience with a colleague, Shabnam, who also struggled with online teaching because of

the pandemic. As we talked, our experiences gave us a larger perspective. We began to realize that many teachers and students are dealing with a wide variety of emotions related to complex problems associated with the COVID pandemic, many of which are difficult to understand much less discuss. Some of these emotions include depression, loneliness, sadness, grief, and anxiety. As teacher educators in literacy, we believe reading and discussing literature can give teachers and their students much-needed opportunities to discuss the range of emotions they may be feeling.

This article describes crossover literature, particularly picturebooks—a genre that appeals to both youth and adult audiences at the same time—that teachers and students can use to discuss emotions. We begin by introducing crossover literature as an innovative genre for better understanding emotions. Then, we share specific examples of crossover picturebooks, along with instructional strategies teachers can use to help students explore a range of emotions.

## Crossover Literature

Crossover literature is an innovative genre of books with a rich, international literary tradition (Rosoff, 2007). This literature crosses between age boundaries (Shavit, 1986) and is often referred to as dual audience literature (Falconer, 2008) and “all-age books” (Evans, 2015, p. 10). Crossover literature “transcends the conventionally-recognized boundaries within the fiction market and blurs the borderline between children’s literature and adult literature” (Beckett, 2008, p. 112). Harju (2009) states, “Traditional reading boundaries exclude, segregating readers into distinct camps—literature for children vs. literature for adults. Alternatively, crossover literature offers an open invitation to story, attracting readers of all ages by reflecting a continuum of experience between child and adulthood” (p. 17). As such, crossover literature is an excellent genre for

students and teachers to read together and engage in discussions around emotions.

Crossover literature often appeals to a wide range of readers, provides different perspectives, and helps readers gain insight and new knowledge, allowing readers to better understand their own lives and the lives of others (Griffin, 2015). Instructionally, crossover literature consists of insightful, challenging, and complex texts that require students to read closely, analytically, and critically.

Crossover picturebooks is a sub-genre of crossover literature. It includes picturebooks that can be read by people of any age, not just children (Beckett, 2008). Crossover picturebooks are based on the notion that “the age of the implied reader is questionable and whose controversial subject matter and unconventional, often unsettling style of illustration, challenge readers, pushing them to question and probe deeper to understand what the book is about” (Evans, 2015, p. 1). These picturebooks are often referred to as bridge books, or books that link together picturebooks with longer writing (Rosen, 1997) and “kiddult” books which are books intended for both adult and child audiences (Falconer, 2008). Like crossover literature, crossover picturebooks address a diverse audience; the audience extends beyond a specific age limit and speaks to the ageless reader on “equal terms” (Harju, 2009, p. 363).

Crossover picturebooks are both similar to and different from traditional children’s literature. Crossover picturebooks maintain similar characteristics, including book length (approximately 32 pages), minimum text, language and pictures, and appearance of peritext (endpapers, etc.). They differ, however, in definition, audience, and purpose. Traditional children’s literature is commonly defined as text that uses two sign systems (language and illustration) and each system has meaning potential (Sipe, 2002). Crossover picturebooks are defined as text that uses three systems (language, illustration, and design) (Bader, 1976). Traditional children’s literature has a single audience, namely, children; however, crossover literature has multiple

audiences, including children and adults, and every age in between.

## **Examples of Crossover Picturebooks & Instructional Strategies**

In this section, we share crossover picturebooks that deal with a range of emotions and include instructional strategies that teachers can use with either crossover or traditional picturebooks. Each crossover picturebook was selected for two reasons: 1) the picturebook deals with an emotion that can be worrisome for students and teachers, and 2) we have read these picturebooks to students and, based on our experience, these books have potential to help young people discuss emotions.

### **Depression**

*The Red Tree* (Tan, 2003) is an internationally recognized crossover picturebook that deals with the issue of depression in the lives of children. This picturebook is a sensitive and insightful story about a young girl who struggles with depression. It begins with the girl stating, “sometimes the day begins with nothing to look forward to...and things go from bad to worse.” From morning to night, she feels overwhelming darkness, a lack of voice, and total confusion. Once home again, however, a surprise awaits her at the end of the day, one that conveys the power of hope, not hopelessness.

For this picture book, we recommend using an instructional strategy called *Fleshing Out a Character* (Allen, 1999). This strategy invites readers to gain a deep and broad understanding of an important character and to explore what depression can feel like and look like from a variety of ways. Figure 1 illustrates the use of this strategy to analyze the main character in *The Red Tree*.

### **Loneliness**

*Fox* (Wild, 2006) is a crossover picturebook that uses innovative design elements to tell the story of two friends, a magpie and a dog. Both live with physical challenges. Magpie has a burnt wing and can never fly again. Dog has only one eye and cannot see very well. Despite the challenges, they help each other and learn to live happily together in the forest. One day, they meet a fox who eventually convinces Magpie to hop on

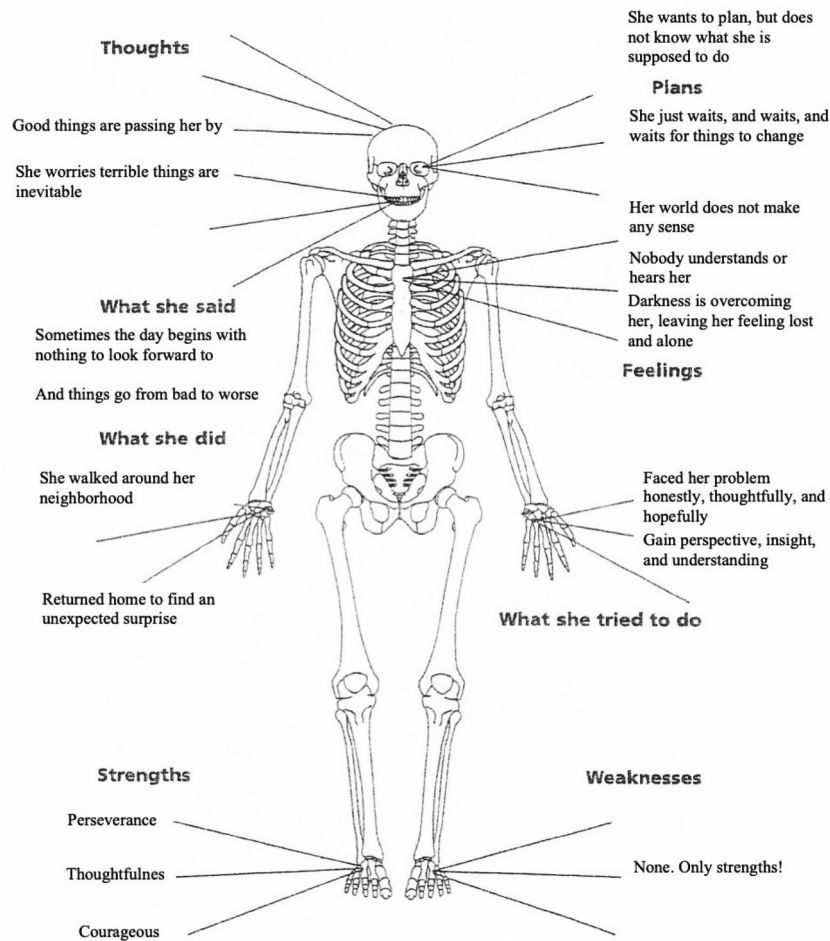


Figure 1. Fleshing Out a Character

his back and leave with him because he can run faster than Dog. Magpie does but later learns an important lesson about the meaning of loneliness.

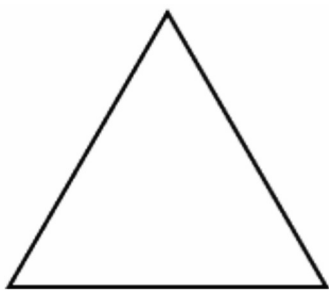
A useful instructional strategy for this text is called Circle, Triangle, Square (Shock, 2013). While engaging

in this activity, readers use three shapes to reflect on and record personal understandings of a story, from what stood out to them, what they are still thinking about, or what they agree with. Figure 2 illustrates the use of this strategy while discussing *Fox*.



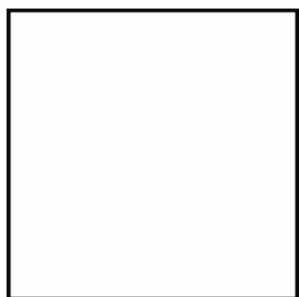
### Something that is still going “around” in your head

I am still thinking about why Magpie decided to leave with Fox. Magpie was wounded and feeling lost and alone. Dog befriended her, even though they had nothing in common except their physical challenges. Their friendship grew stronger and stronger each day and every year. And yet, despite their friendship, Magpie abandons Dog, ignores their friendship, and goes with Fox. Why did Magpie do that? Dog gave her friendship and a partial solution to her loneliness. Fox fooled her. In the end Fox didn’t want to be friends with Magpie. He wanted her to be lonely just like him. I keep thinking that being lonely is very difficult for people and makes them do unreasonable things.



**Something “pointed” that stood out in your mind**

The thing that made a real impact on me was the kindness of Dog. Like Magpie, he only had one eye. I would not have been surprised if he were angry and resentful because of his problem. I also would not be surprised if he were insensitive to others, no matter what problem they had, or even if they didn’t have any problems at all. And yet, he was the opposite. He was kind to Magpie and empathized with her inability to fly and her feeling lonely. He set aside his own problems to help Magpie feel better about herself and not be so lonely. I really admire Dog. He is inspiring to me and to other people who look beyond their own problems and needs to take care of others who are also in need. This lesson is what really stood out in my mind.



**Something that “squared” or agreed with your thinking**

I found myself better understanding the idea that loneliness is a difficult problem for many people, especially mentally. It’s just hard for people to be alone, no matter the reasons behind why people find themselves lonely. People are social. I know some people are loners, but most people want to have other people in their lives. I also better understand that loneliness can have long-term, negative effects on people. Fox is a good example. Instead of finding friendship for himself, he resented the friendship others found for themselves. Fox wanted everybody to be lonely just like him. I think it is very hard to fight loneliness, much less get over it. Fox could have started getting well if he would have accepted Dog and Magpie as real friends.

Figure 2. Circle, Triangle, Square

**Worry, Fear, and Courage**

*Parachute* (Parker, 2013) is a crossover picturebook that tells the story of Toby, a boy who puts on a parachute each morning because he has a fear of heights. Wearing the parachute makes him feel safe and gives him courage to face fears, dangers, and tricky situations. One day his dog, Henry, gets stuck on a high branch above a tree house and needs rescue. Despite the height, Toby courageously rescues Henry, but unfortunately, he also loses his parachute in doing so. Though he lost the item that helps him feel brave, Toby slowly climbs down a rope ladder and finally conquers his fears.

To support children’s discussion of this text, we recommend using an instructional strategy called Consensus Board (Short, 2012). To do so, teachers place students in small groups to record their own reactions to a text, as well as reach a consensus about one or

two questions that remain in their minds (Short, 2012). Figure 3 illustrates the use of this strategy with *Parachute*.

**Sadness and Grief**

*The Bird House* (Rylant, 1998) is a crossover picturebook that tells the story of a sad, lonely young girl who is homeless and who goes unnamed through the story. One day, the young girl comes across a bright blue house beside a river, and suddenly her sorrow disappears. She notices that birds love this house. They sit on windowsills, sleep in the chimney, and fly in and out, happily and gracefully. The girl stays hidden and watches the house from a distance. Eventually, she discovers that an old lady lives in the house. When the lady opens the door, the girl runs away every time. She remains sad but something about the bright blue house and the little old lady that comforts her. Magically, the birds inform the old lady about a girl behind

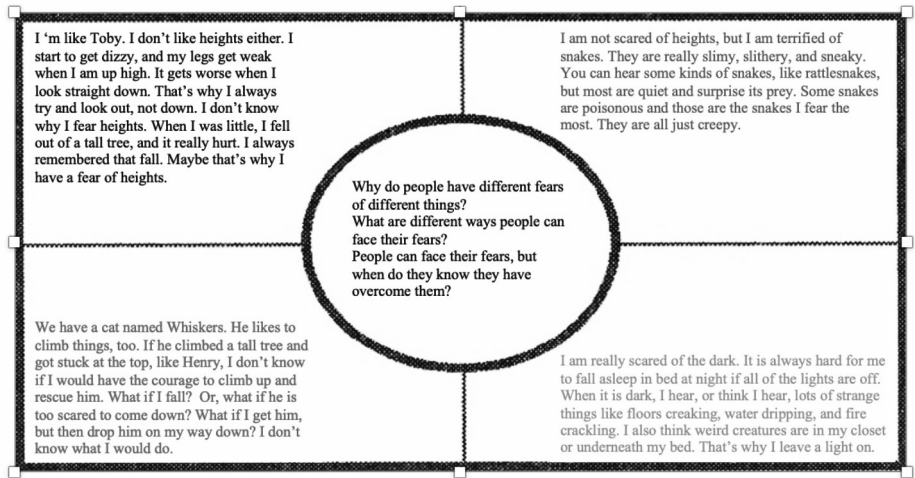


Figure 3. Consensus Board

the trees. Eventually, the lady and the girl live together in the bright blue house.

“Notice and Wonder” (National Council of the Teachers of Math, n.d.) is a useful strategy to use with this text. This instructional strategy invites students to use

a T-Chart to record ideas they notice as interesting, important, confusing in the left-hand column and ideas that make them still wonder in the right-hand column. Figure 4 illustrates the use of this strategy with *The Bird House*.

<i>What Do I Notice?</i>	<i>What Do I Wonder?</i>
<p>Lots of different species of birds loved a bright, blue house by a river. They were always flying by the house, sitting on windowsills, and sleeping in the chimney.</p> <p>There was a young girl hiding behind a large tree who saw all the birds at the house and her face lit up.</p> <p>The girl was homeless, without family, and very sad for a long time.</p> <p>A woman opened the front door, came out in the yard, and all the birds scattered.</p> <p>The girl returned the next day and the same thing happened when the woman came out of the house.</p>	<p>I wonder why birds were attracted to this house. Does it have anything to do with the color of the house being blue? If not, what else could be the attraction?</p> <p>I wonder who this girl was. Why was she glad to see all the birds? Was she a birdwatcher?</p> <p>I wonder if her parents died and she has no brothers or sisters, and that is why she has been sad for a very long time.</p> <p>I wonder if the woman has a family inside or lives alone. Why did the birds scatter but then came back to the house? What connection, if any, does the woman have with the birds?</p> <p>I wonder if this happens every day. Does the woman come out and feed the birds? Does she see the girl?</p>

<p>The third day the girl returned but the birds did not scatter; they formed together in the sky to spell the word: GIRL.</p> <p>The girl did not return to the house for many days, fearing the woman would find out about her.</p> <p>She returned because she loved the birds but ran away again when the woman came out because she didn't want the birds to write anything in the sky again.</p> <p>She returned, but this time the birds did not scatter. They remained perfectly still, except an owl who flew on to the girl's shoulders, holding her in place.</p> <p>The woman took the young girl from the owl and into the house. They lived together ever since.</p>	<p>I wonder how the birds knew how to do this together. Does the woman have power or control over the birds, and she made them spell the word to welcome the girl?</p> <p>I wonder why this girl does not want the woman to find her. Is she running away from some place or from some people?</p> <p>I wonder if the birds comfort her, but she can't afford to be found. Why is she so fearful of the woman, or anybody, to notice her?</p> <p>I wonder if the owl is acting alone or is controlled by the woman. Why is the owl keeping the girl from running away?</p> <p>I wonder if the woman did not have a family and now, she has a daughter. Did the woman experience the same thing as the girl when she was young? How would she know that?</p>
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Figure 4. Notice & Wonder

### Anger

*When Sophie Gets Angry-Really, Really Angry* (Bang, 1999) is a crossover picturebook based on the notion that many people, especially young children, get angry and frustrated. Moreover, young children often do not know how to best handle their anger and frustration, so the problem often gets worse. This delightful picturebook uses colorful illustrations to explain to children that there are many different ways to deal with anger and frustration. It provides children and their caregivers a welcoming door to not only discuss anger and frustration, but also provides practical and constructive ways to control them.

With this text, we suggest using an instructional strategy called Biographical Poems (Westby, 2019). By writing biographical poems on characters, students have the opportunity to think about the emotions of the main character deeply and thoughtfully. Figure 5 illustrates

the use of this strategy using the book *When Sophie Gets Angry-Really, Really Angry*.

### Anxiety

*I Go Quiet* is an innovatively designed crossover picturebook that tells the story of an anxious and introverted young girl who sees the world as overpowering and hostile. Her world is a paradox. Every day, she hides in silence. She feels isolated, lonely, insignificant, and misunderstood, electing to read books rather than communicate with people and connect to the world. And yet, every day, she seeks to find her voice and make her voice heard. In the end, the girl realizes that when she is ready to be heard, her voice will ring loud and true.

To support students in thinking about and discussing anxiety after reading this picturebook, teachers might consider providing prompts that invite students to

Biographical Poem	
(Line 1) First name	Sophie,
(Line 2) 4 adjectives that describe the person	angry, intense, explosive, volatile,
(Line 3) Important relationship	mother, caring, patient, understanding,
(Line 4) 2-3 things, people, or ideas the person loved	Sophie, cat lover, toy lover, stuffed animal lover,
(Line 5) Three feelings the person experienced	aggravation, frustration, infuriation,
(Line 6) Three fears the person experienced	experiencing anger, causing fear, and losing
(Line 7) Accomplishments	control,
(Line 8) 2-3 things the person wanted to see happen or wanted to experience	learning to reduce frustration, control anger, and
(Line 9) His or her residence	regain composure,
(Line 10) Last name	at home with family,
	Sophie.

Figure 5. Biographical Poem

reflect and then respond. Using prompts that encourage readers to pause and reflect after reading a text before recording a written response may help broaden and

deepen their current understandings of the emotion. Figure 6 illustrates the use of this strategy on *I Go Quiet*.

**I already understood** some things about being an introvert. My friend has been an introvert all her life. She is very quiet and reserve, electing to read and listen more than talk and discuss. She also doesn't like to be in the limelight; that is, she doesn't like a bright light shone on her even though she is very accomplished and successful.

**Now, I understand** that introversion is much more complex than I originally thought. It's not about being silent, but finding voice, especially when a person feels that no one appears to be listening. I also now understand that introversion can cause great anxiety in a person from morning to dark. For some with extreme cases, the anxiety can almost be paralyzing.

**I still don't understand** the harmful effects anxiety must have on a person. I feel anxious on certain occasions, but not every day, all day. It must take an enormous toll on a person. I also don't understand how a family member or friend could help an introverted person. What would help look like?

**I am most curious about** how prevalence of introversion. What percentage of people are introverted? Is the percentage greater in females than males, or vice versa, or is it relatively balanced? I am also curious about how to recognize a person who is an introvert as opposed to a person who is naturally quiet and comfortable being alone.

**My new inquiry questions are:** What is the origin of introversion? Is it biological? Is someone born



being an introvert? Is it psychological? Does someone become an introvert after a traumatic event, a humiliating experience, or a significant loss? Are there medicines or therapies that can help people who are introverts? Is there such a condition known as extraversion?

**If I could talk with the girl, I would ask her:** Why do you believe no one seems to listen to you? Why do you feel insignificant and misunderstood? How do you best deal with your anxiety? What could people do to help you better deal with anxiety? What should people not do?

Figure 6. Reflection & Response Prompts

## Final Thoughts

The purpose of this article was to describe crossover literature, particularly picturebooks, and to identify instructional strategies teachers and students can use to analyze and understand different emotions. We hope the crossover picturebooks shared will raise some new questions, foreground some new voices, and start some new conversations.

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