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RAILFENCE PRESS

www.railfencebooks.com

Age Group: Railfence Bunch Picture Books:
Kindergarten – First Grade (ages 5-7),
Spruce Valley Novels: Grades 3-5 (ages
8-11).

Cost: Railfence Bunch Picture Books: \$12.95
each, Spruce Valley Novels: \$12.95 each.

by Valerle Schuetta, M.Ed.

What it is: A series of wholesome picture books for younger children along with a collection of novels for older children. Both sets focus on the joys of country living and farm life.

As a first-grade teacher, I always have my "teacher" eyes open at the beginning of a new school year, especially for

new and exciting children's literature to introduce to my students. I am also a Reading Specialist. Included with this regal title is my love and passion for reading and books, especially children's books. I am also passionate about teaching children to learn how to read.

When teaching first grade, I have to be especially careful. You see, I am still teaching the mechanics of reading. The last thing I want my children to do is despise reading! I want them to develop a love for reading, like I did at their age. I want them to believe that learning to read and reading in

itself will be one of the most fun things they will ever do! This is why I do read-alouds each day, and this is what I plan to do with the Railfence picture book series by Carolyn J. Morris.

I have had the wonderful opportunity to read and review this beautiful and captivating collection of children's literature. I was immediately struck by the wonderful watercolor illustrations in the picture books, by Richard McNaughton. They bring the adventures of Chick and Duckling to life, who appear on almost every page. I know as a child, I would have trea-

sured these books!

As a teacher and a parent, I saw many benefits and ideas for reading these amazing stories to my children! The first book I read, *Good Morning Railfence Bunch*, introduces the Railfence Bunch (Chick and Duckling) to the young reader. Each page is rich with rhyming words. This is a vital phonemic awareness skill that children should master early when learning to read. For example, some words have the same ending sounds, but the beginning sound is different. The text of the story is captivating, and when shown with

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the illustrations, will definitely capture the reader's attention. I would suggest that parents read the story once, taking their time, while pointing out details in the illustrations as they read. At the bottom of each page, you will find a rhythmic verse. The same verse appears on each page. For example, in *Good Morning Railfence Bunch*, the verse is "peep, peep, cheep, cheep, quack, quack, whack, whack. As a teacher, I would do a second read and encourage the children to chant the verse along with me. This will keep them engaged and hone their comprehension skills.

There were very many other aspects of this book that I loved. Each page talks about a different farm animal and names not only the animal, but teaches the name of its baby. For example, "Good morning goat. Good morning kid. Good morning snack, oats in a sack."

The subsequent books also have many wonderful opportunities for teachable moments and extension activities. *Winter Ride*, is a great seasonal story when read in the winter. I am also an English Language Learner teacher (ELL). Many of the children I taught last year were from Mexico, and although they knew what snow was, they had never experienced it. This story does a wonderful job of showing Chick and Duckling having fun in their little red sleigh. Chick dons a fuzzy blue hat, and Duckling sports a bright red scarf so they may keep warm during their adventurous ride. Fall is a wonderful time to read *Country Fair and School Days*. What a great way to begin the school year with Chick and Duckling hiding in a child's backpack because they are eager to experience school! *Country Fair* is a great way to teach children that the Country Fair is so much more than rides and cotton candy! This little gem of a story reminded me of my own children's childhood experiences at the fair. They loved to visit all the different buildings that housed all the categories of displays. Each year, they would enter something they made, such as a doll quilt or cookies. They were so anxious to visit that building to see if they won any ribbons! They also loved visiting the animals in the 4-H show. A trip to the local country fair would be a great way to introduce this story!

Tapping for Sap is an amazing way to introduce new vocabulary, such as spile, and agriculture. Reading this book is a wonderful way to teach children about maple trees and the science behind making maple syrup. Math can also be an extension of the story stemming

from the line: The sap to syrup ratio is 40 to 1, an agricultural fact just for fun! I would be tempted to make actual maple syrup with the children as a culminating activity for this story!

Happy Birthday Canada is a wonderful way to teach about the traditions, culture and the history of Canada. Children can also learn geography by learning about the three territories of Canada and locating them on a map.

Into Town is an excellent story to use for a Social Studies lesson. After reading about Chick and Duckling's trip into town, it would be a wonderful idea to take children on an excursion into their own town. They can compare and contrast what they saw with what Chick and Duckling saw when they went to town. They could draw pictures or create a Venn Diagram about similarities and differences.

One of my favorites, *Community Garden*, will show children the joys and the rewards of growing your own food through the eyes of Chick and Duckling. Personally, I would read this sweet little story in the spring. The extension ideas are limitless, including teaching children the growth cycle, planting their own seeds or an actual garden, and even making soup from garden fresh vegetables.

Railfence Books also has a wonderful, interactive website that is a vital companion to the picture books. The website is <http://www.railfencebunch.com>. Here, after children read *Good Morning Railfence Bunch*, they can hear barnyard animal sounds. After reading *Happy Birthday Canada*, they can go to the website to click and drag pieces to create a map of Canada. There are several other engaging games children can play such as Find the Object, ABC Match, or Match Scene.

If you are in need of a book series for children eight years and up, Carolyn J. Morris also has written a fantastic series of fiction books called *Spruce Valley Novels*. There are four books in the series. These include: *Mourning Dove*, *Barn Swallows*, *Pine Warbler*, and *Chickadees at Christmas*.

The first book in the series, *Mourning Dove*, will introduce you to the main characters. These include Billy Robinson, his parents Ben and Marion, grandparents Vera and Earl Robinson, and his best friend, Kenny. *Mourning Dove* finds eleven-year-old Billy trying to cope with the death of his beloved father, who he was very close to. He relives many of the memories of his father up in the tree house that his father built for him the year after he was born. *Mourning doves* can be heard cooing in the background. This heartwarm-

ing story shows how a family struggles with their grief separately, while trying to cope and be supportive of each other's grief. Billy spends time on his grandparent's farm, which helps him deal with his grief. There is a feeling throughout this book of "We can get through this together". This is an excellent book to help children who have lost a parent, whether it be through death or even divorce.

Barn Swallows, introduces a new character named Gus, who happens to be a girl. This book also details the adventures and ways of life on a farm. My favorite chapter was *Blueberry Pie*. In this chapter, Billy's grandmother Vera takes his friend Gus under her wing and shows her the how to make her special award-winning blueberry pie, revealing some of her tricks of the trade, that all grandmothers have when making their special recipes. Gus is touched, as her own grandparents aren't really a part of her life. Your child may want to make their own homemade blueberry pie after reading this chapter!

The last two books are equally enthralling. *Pine Warbler* details the magic of each season and the wonders they hold. This book reminded me why I love all four seasons equally, especially fall and the Country Fair. I can't imagine any child not experiencing the wonderful things that happen at the fair and the memories it will create for them. This story also promises new beginnings for Billy.

Finally, *Chickadees at Christmas* will show children what it is like to have an old-fashioned Christmas that includes Christmas carols, animals on the farm, sleigh riding, and trimming the tree with popcorn and cranberry strands, and attending church on Christmas eve. I love the fact that Billy hand makes a very special gift for his mother. After reading this book, you may want to have children string their own cranberry or popcorn strands for your family Christmas tree!

There were so many aspects of Carolyn J. Morris's books that I love. For instance, the fact that reading them took me back to my own childhood, and even my own children's childhood. This was a world without computers, cell phones or a lot of television. This was a world that included animals, lots of fresh air, creative play outside, and catching fireflies in the summer. All of these books are great for children to read or for read-alouds by parents and teachers. I also love that the author brings the richness and her own love of country living to life, giving children a real-life knowledge that there is a beautiful life to be had without material things and technology. After all, isn't this a lesson we want all our children to learn? V.S.