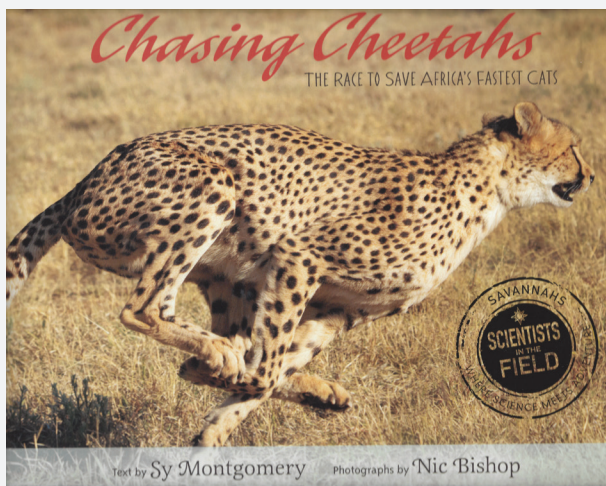


Second Reaction: Chasing Teachable Moments by Chasing Cheetahs

Montgomery, Sy. *Chasing Cheetahs: The Race to Save Africa's Fastest Cats*. Illus. Nic Bishop. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014. Print.

Aaron Hamilton



The fastest predator on earth is showcased in this excellently photographed nonfiction book, *Chasing Cheetahs*. The team of Sy Montgomery, Nic Bishop, and Rachel Newman definitely had kids in mind when creating this book, which includes a small stamp of a cheetah running in the bottom corner where page numbers are usually located. The format of the book is reader friendly because the chapters are of reasonable length for middle-grade, the book's focus group. The fact sections within the chapters are popular with young readers. A fun element is Hi-Fi, the mysterious wild cheetah that roams the grounds of the compound. Hi-Fi's story alone can keep a reader hooked, wondering when he will show up again. The variety of elements this text includes makes it a good choice for teachers, classrooms, and school libraries needing nonfiction books focused toward high level readers (4th grade and up).

As a fourth grade teacher, I will use this book more as a mentor text for its literary aspects. The author, Sy Montgomery, hooks the reader from paragraph one, pulling the reader into the story by referring to what's to come as a "parade of wonders" (9). The similes the author uses are also very engaging, and they help the reader take something unfamiliar and make it real. For instance, the opening paragraph mentions thorny acacia trees with straw nests of weaver birds looking "like Christmas ornaments" and "termite mounds as tall people, pointed like turrets on sand castles" (9). Foreign ideas like warthog crossings are explained by comparing them to signs American students would recognize such as deer crossing signs.

For further mentor text ideas, I would focus on text features like chapter headings and pictures with captions. These provide an opportunity for mini-lessons on how to read and write an informational piece. The most fun heading—“Cooking with Poop and Toasting Hair”—caught the attention of several students (41). The photos by Nic Bishop are truly fantastic, especially action shots of the cheetahs on pages 14, 23, and 49.

As great as Montgomery’s use of text is, there are some areas that would concern me if I chose to use it in student instruction. Without putting the book in front of a student and saying, “Hey, try this book out!” I am not so sure many children would pick it up and read it. The small text, wordy pages, scientific names, and unfamiliar African countries make this book a bit difficult to follow for some students. I see it more as a book that potentially sparks interest with the title and pictures, but upon trying to read it, students would probably eventually give up.

There were also moments as I was reading that I just wanted to know about cheetahs! With a title like *Chasing Cheetahs* a reader might expect this book to be strictly on tracking down cheetahs in Africa in order to save them. Montgomery sidetracks the reader at times in order to go on wild game counts, learn about poop testing in a lab, or get familiar with Laurie, the scientist fighting hardest for these creatures. These moments zoom in for extra detail, but may be over the heads of some students, especially the DNA section where most people have little prior knowledge.

Chapter two’s side story about Laurie seemed quite random at first, but if used correctly, Laurie’s story can provide proof that women have a big part in the science community today. While her story is just one, the background of how she got interested in science could potentially lead young students to the same type of career.

Throughout the class preview of the text, a select handful of fourth grade students tried out a few chapters on their own. The description on amazon.com puts the text complexity at a Lexile level of 1,000 (6.5 Accelerate Reader level according to arbookfind.com), but even having students jump into the middle of the text, many were able to pick up an acceptable understanding of what was going on. Students were very intrigued by the idea of the cheetahs being in danger and a group of animal scientists going to help them. They wanted to keep reading to find out if the cheetahs were saved or not. All students I spoke with said they would want to continue reading because cheetahs are “awesome,” “fun to read about,” and they want to know more about their “favorite cat.”

After reading a chapter, students answered a few questions about the text. They discussed how they felt about the cheetah’s situation and what more they would like to know. Students’ answers posed during discussion did indicate there was a struggle to grasp some details of the text. One student said, “I learned that these scientists need a lot of gadgets to work with DNA, but I’m a little confused on the vocab. They don’t explain what it is.” I would have to agree as there is no glossary and few attempts for defining uncommon words.

Here are a few final thoughts on utilizing this text in that classroom: I believe that by carefully selecting portions of this text young women may be inspired to become scientists, and it can also create awareness in all students of the Cheetah Conservation Fund's (CCF) goals. If students connect with the text it may spark an interest for future scientists and create a movement of understanding, just like the students in the schools of Namibia have. Also, Common Core standards really push informational text reading and writing. This is a very good informational text. It happens to be composed of great descriptive writing while using figurative language in a non-fiction book that definitely brings an element of fun to reading it. I would use the book as a mentor text to pull sample pieces from. While students may never hear the whole story, they will get great ideas to fit into their own writing. The bonus is that they could develop more interest in this book and want to read more of it on their own.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Aaron Hamilton is in his fourth year of teaching fourth grade at Wyandotte Elementary in Lafayette, Indiana. Growing up playing soccer led to coaching soccer, which led him to the teaching profession where he can contribute to students' educational development. When not working to create problem-solving, book-loving, life-long learners at WYE, he loves spending quality time with his wife of five years and two young sons.