

## **All New Very Easy Stories: A Picture-based First Reader**

**Heyer, Sandra** (2006). *All New Very Easy True Stories: A Picture-Based First Reader*. White Plains: Pearson Education.

Michael Coggins

The cover of Sandra Heyer's *All New Very Easy True Stories* invites the prospective reader to open it and begin flipping through. Being a book of true stories, the people pictured in the photographs appear eager to relate some narrative from their own lives. This reliance on imagery and pictures is appropriate, given the intended audience of absolute beginners and students with low literacy levels. As the second in the *True Stories* series at this level, it is one of the stated goals of this book to provide additional material for students who wish or need to remain at this reading level a while longer, particularly those with highly developed oral skills but underdeveloped reading skills.

While the table of contents itself does not readily suggest a syllabus for a potential reading class, it does offer several choices for teachers to add to their lesson plans and keep their lessons fresh, as intended. This is apparent on first glance at the variety of unit titles, some of which intimate their being used as complements to other lessons on topics such as phone etiquette and novice computer literacy. Each unit starts with a pre-reading picture, followed by a story board of further pictures accompanied by each line of the upcoming reading. Then with only a photograph of the main character or characters, the text itself is presented for the teacher to read aloud and the students to read along respectively, followed by post-reading exercises on pronunciation, vocabulary, comprehension, speaking, and writing.

Each reading is a grammatical and lexical simplification of a real newspaper article, presumably taken from American or Western news sources. This is apparent in the topics of some of the readings (e.g., computer usage, single-family dwellings, snow skiing, American football), the countries overtly mentioned in some stories (e.g., England, Australia, Scotland), as well as the clothes and racial makeup of the people in the drawings and photographs. We see exemplified such values as the acceptance of women in official positions, interracial friendships, single retirees living alone, and individual-oriented recreational sports. The cultural load of these pictures is quite clearly American/Western.

The post-reading exercises can be used with low-level readers with developed oral skills. In the pronunciation section, students are asked to listen and repeat; in the subsequent vocabulary section, oral skills are pressed into service for spelling. The comprehension exercises exploit these oral skills to reinforce comprehension, but it is in the speaking and writing sections that the material becomes personalized by students adding their own experiences or preferences.

The strength of this book lies not only in its being an additional resource from the already successful *True Stories* series, but also in its own organization and content. The units each have enough material from pre- to post-reading that a teacher could use one as a major part of his or her lesson plan without the need to cannibalize it for parts. At the same time, each unit is open enough to be expanded upon depending on the teacher's purposes and lesson goals. The book's major weakness is the cultural load of the material. It would be nice if more Asians and Hispanics were represented in the pictures. After all, these are probably much of the book's readership. Part of the value of these true stories, however, is in their veracity.

There could be a limitation of available sources or the risk of compromise if there was a refocus to reflect the true faces of immigration. That said, *All New Very Easy True Stories* is a wonderful resource for teachers in need of a first reader.

**Reviewer**

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