

Introduced by Roxanne Dixon/Reviewed by Judith Thomas-Solomon

The Story of Ferdinand

Written by Munro Leaf
 Illustrated by Robert Lawson
 New York: Viking Press, 1936/1964

Walter the Wolf

Written by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat
 Illustrated by Kelly Oechsli
 New York: Holiday House, 1975

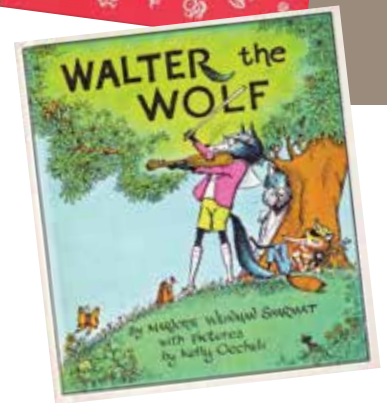
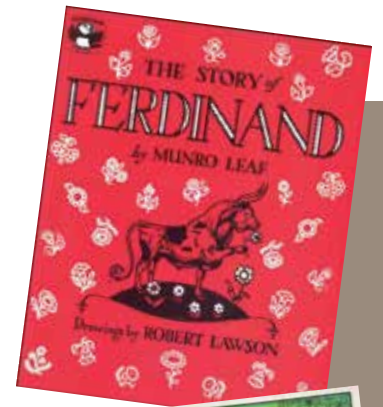
Children's literature often functions as an artful, disarming way to speak about cultural or human themes that are at once timely and timeless. Beloved Orff teacher Judith Thomas-Solomon recommends two such delightful children's classics, both of which share themes of being true to oneself and peace as a matter of choice.

Originally published in 1936, *The Story of Ferdinand*, written by Don Munro and illustrated by Robert Lawson, is the tale of a strong bull who from his youth prefers sitting quietly and smelling the flowers to running and jumping and butting and fighting. One day, while five men visit the field to select a bull for the bullfight in Madrid, peaceful Ferdinand is stung by a bee. "Wow! Did it hurt!" He reacts wildly, exciting the men who believe Ferdinand to be the "largest and fiercest bull of all." When Ferdinand is released into the bullfighting arena, he sees all the beautiful flowers the women in attendance are tossing into the ring and sits down quietly to smell. Despite their best efforts,

the banderilleros cannot provoke Ferdinand. Finally, they give up and return him to his home by the cork tree where he can sit, smell the flowers, and be happy. The line drawing illustrations are funny and charming, the text simple and clean.

When *The Story of Ferdinand* was released in 1936, a civil war was breaking out in Spain, Hitler was ravaging Germany, and the world was already heading toward WWII. *The Story of Ferdinand* quickly caught fire, in 1938 outselling even *Gone with the Wind*, also published in 1936 (Hearn 1986). A message of being oneself and choosing peace, in the form of a humorously rendered flower-smelling bull, struck a chord, even as it was interpreted as a metaphor for a variety of people, places, and organizations at the time. *The Story of Ferdinand* has been published in 60 languages, and 30,000 copies were printed and freely distributed in post-war Germany to promote peace (Hearn 1986). More timeless than timely, the themes of self-identity and peace continue to resonate strongly through AOSA's 1968 founding to today.

As Orff teachers, we strive to create a safe space where children are welcomed and encouraged to grow and blossom as their own unique selves. Children can explore this theme through movement—take turns creating a solo pathway while others move as a group. Move



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- *Reverberations* is included in *The Orff Echo* publication.
- Training and Projects (TAP) Fund is established by AOSA to assist members teaching elementary and junior high school students in low-income populations.
- AOSA publishes *Orff Schulwerk: A Brief History, Description, and Issues in Global Dispersal* by Mary Shamrock.

as Ferdinand, move as the other bulls or the banderilleros, or each child can create his or her own unique “walk.” Musically, they can experience solo versus ensemble playing, or students can improvise or compose peaceful “breathing” music versus jumping, playful music versus butting, fighting music. The concepts of tempo, energy, and legato/staccato/marcato can also be beautifully explored through both creative movement and musical improvisation—how does Ferdinand move? How does Ferdinand move when stung by the bee? How can we create music that sounds like Ferdinand? The bee? The other bulls?

The second book, *Walter the Wolf*, written by Marjorie Sharmat and illustrated by Kelly Oechsli, is currently out of print, but available used from online vendors. Another delightful character, Walter is a spectacle-wearing, violin-playing, poetry-writing wolf that has never used his two perfectly-matched fangs on other animals or people. “I like peace,” says Walter. Despite his mother’s admonitions, Walter is lured by Wyatt the Fox to open a biting business. Ultimately, Regina the Beaver bites Walter to help him learn that biting hurts, and he closes his business. In addition to themes of peace and self-identity, *Walter the Wolf* also explores the interesting theme of being perfect—before Walter’s biting business, his mother says “Walter is perfect.” After the biting business closes, she says, “Nobody’s perfect forever. You lasted a long time. Now let’s go into the house and rest.”

Both Ferdinand and Walter’s mothers accept and support them for who they are. In this way the two books can make an interesting pairing for students, particularly older ones—sometimes, as with Ferdinand, we know who we are all the way through. Sometimes, however, we waver. We try out other “versions” of ourselves or, perhaps yielding to social pressure, we make choices that are not our best. Even when we are not perfect (probably even *though* we are not perfect), we always have the option, as Walter demonstrated,

to learn from our mistakes.

As with *The Story of Ferdinand*, *Walter the Wolf* can inspire creative work in the Orff classroom. Particularly interesting is an exploration of theme and variation. Students can compose a short melodic theme for Walter and play with the theme, arranging variations as Walter invents and re-invents himself through the story.

Following, Judith Thomas-Solomon shares how she used material from *Music for Children* to engage her students in improvising, composing, and crafting a musical Ferdinand the Bull experience for children that would be lovely and relevant in today’s classroom or brought through to performance.

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A fourth-grade rendition of Don Munro’s classic, *The Story of Ferdinand*, develops the endearing and ageless story of a little bull whose unlikely nature it was to be peaceful. His love of flowers and beauty separates him from all the other bulls who find it easy to fight.

As he sits under his favorite tree alone, smelling the flowers, his mother sings an introductory song:

Aren’t you lonely? Aren’t you lonely?
Sitting here among the flowers?
Ferdinand you — could be playing,
with your friends for hours and hours.

Work with students to create a 3/4 la pentatonic melody for the text over a dotted half-note I (EB)-VII (DA) shifting harmony.

When an errant bee causes him to “lose his peaceful cool,” and the bullring managers spot him and subsequently take him to a bullfight ring, the Malagueña harmony found in *Music for Children*, Volume IV (Orff & Keetman, 1966, p.

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124) sets a Spanish scene as a basis for recorder improvisation. The student-composed “Aren’t You Lonely” melody returns when Ferdinand discovers the flowers being flung at him in the bull ring, and he finds himself lying placidly down, enjoying the fragrances; he is thus allowed to return to his home and his peaceful life.

This book, as well as *Walter the Wolf* by Marjorie Sharmat, explores the nature of beasts—while subliminally serving as a metaphor for the bestial qualities in humans—and points out one can overwhelm unpeaceful attributes. The concluding line in *Walter the Wolf* comes in a sign Walter paints after suffering the “biting business,” heralding his resumption of his preferred peaceful ways: “I Have Big Fangs, But Did Not Choose Them, But I Can Choose, Not to Use Them.”

Let’s hear it for these marvelous “old” books, which “back into” peaceful themes in such delightful ways and are so relevant today! ■

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