

Participation Books and the Library

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Silly Sally and the Snowman, Frank M. Tierney. Illustrated by Perry G. Timleck. Borealis Press, 1975. Unpagged. \$4.95 paper.

Rainsploosh, an Empty Book, Merilyn Read. Illustrated by Wendy Irvine. Borealis Press, 1975. Unpagged. \$4.95 paper.

If Snowflakes Fell in Flavours: Songs of Sandy Offenheim. Berandol Music Ltd., 1974, 1976. 36 pp. \$3.50 paper. (Record, Tape Accompaniment, and Teacher's Guide also available.)

Libraries used to be a place for silent reading and quiet meditation. All too often a grim-faced librarian might frown if a quiet giggle or an outburst of laughter escaped. Fortunately, this situation no longer exists today. Plays and puppet shows have invaded the children's storyhours, as well as lessons in crafts and sessions in creative drama. Authors, as well as librarians, are beginning to realize that books can lead to creative thought and to participation on the part of the reader.

Two books which encourage participation from children are *Silly Sally and the Snowman* by Frank M. Tierney and *Rainsploosh* by Merilyn Read. Both writers obviously have had close contact with children and understand the kinds of humour that appeal to children. (The book covers tell us that Frank Tierney has seven children and Ms. Read is a former school teacher.) Each book in its own way involves the reader in an empathetic response which in turn leads the child to some very creative and original ideas.

Rainsploosh is part of a series of "empty books" funded by a Canada Council Exploration grant. "Empty" is a rather misleading term: the author tells us that the book has spaces left blank for the child to fill in with his own imagination. The book has a structured story, but there are places where the reader must fill in or complete the development of the story with imaginative details.

Briefly the plot is about the difficulties a little nonconforming raindrop has because she makes a different sound from the others when she lands. Grey Cloud, who sends off the little raindrops, is displeased until he realizes that *Rainsploosh* can make people angry or frightened with her strange sound. He then promotes her to be his assistant. But *Rainsploosh* is unhappy—she wants to make people *warm* and *happy*. She finally finds a temporary solution which pleases everyone. However, each time she is blown to earth she will have to find a new solution because she will land in a different place each time. The child-reader is encouraged to write other stories about her landings in other times and places.

I read the story in a storyhour, and I asked the children to give me ideas for the blank spaces. The group response seemed to help the slower, quieter children understand the book. At the point where a blank space asks

the children to make up another verse to Grey Cloud's song, the "Thunder-sneeze Rock", we used Orff instruments to make the music for the dance of the raindrops as they fell to earth. The rhythm and the movements helped the children lose their inhibitions and they discovered making up another verse was easy and fun. At another point, Miss Read gives only half of a phone conversation between Grey Cloud and a strange new character called Sunny Face. Because Miss Read has given us insufficient information about this character, we had to discuss "Sunny Face", and then the children paired off and made up their own conversations about her.

Although most of the empty spaces were provocative, there was one empty space that the children found confusing. The response was not truly open-ended. Instead, if the children did not *guess* the correct answer the rest of the story would not fall into place.

Rainsploosh faces a dilemma—how to please Grey Cloud and still make people warm and happy. Stumped for ways to help Rainsploosh solve this problem, the children explored various possibilities: we pretended that Rainsploosh might have a friend to whom she could tell her troubles. The children paired off and gave this a try, but no solutions appeared, and they were anxious to continue hearing the story to find out what happened. They were delighted with Miss Read's solution of making a mud puddle in the park for the children to play in. This solution pleased Grey Cloud because it made such a mess, and it pleased the children, too.

When the story was finished, I found that the children could come up with all sorts of difficulties that Rainsploosh might encounter when falling in the future, but solutions were harder to find. The children decided poor Rainsploosh would always be a victim of fate. Some days things would work out well, like the times she would bring water to the thirsty plants, but leave the ground muddy or the times she would drown out the earthworms so the children could play with them. But there were always other times when she would bring unhappiness to people because she couldn't help landing on new hairdos, on packages wrapped for parties, and on children wanting to swim. In conclusion, the children realized that you can't please everyone all the time no matter how hard you try. Many times things that appear to be a misfortune can be good fortune in disguise if you use a little imagination. And that's what the book was all about after all—getting kids to use their imagination.

Silly Sally and the Snowman is a book that the children liked more than I expected them to. It turned out to be particularly suited to story-hours because there is so much action which can be pantomimed. The children themselves noticed something that should have been designated in text—that everytime the print fact changed to italics, the actions being described could be pantomimed. Months after I read this book during a library storyhour, the children still look to see if the book is in the library so that they can check it out.

The plot is very simple. Silly Sally and her friends build a snowman with a celery nose and big round tomato eyes. After the children make legs for the snowman, he comes alive and takes them to a snowhill where they spend a pleasant afternoon around a magic snowwell. The children dip in

their pails and bring out favourite treats which they share with each other. When it is Silly Sally's turn, she spills her bucket of strawberry ice cream all over the sky. The children have to blow the sky clean before they can slide home. There is a lot of opportunity for pantomime action, and most of the children spontaneously began to pretend they were Silly Sally and her friends as I read the story. Even the shy, timid children joined in.

Although the children enjoyed having the book read to them, they were not happy with the illustrations, particularly the idea of a snowman with tomato eyes. One disgusted kindergartener told me quite plainly that his mother wouldn't let him use tomatoes for eyes because they would be too messy and too expensive. Besides, who ever heard of a snowman with red eyes! The children were also disappointed with the drawings: the faces of the children were unappealing and the perspectives were often distorted. In fact, they asked me to keep on reading, but not to bother showing them the pictures.

The book ends with the children in the story looking up and discovering that strawberry snow is floating down. This started a discussion of their favourite flavours, and I closed the storyhour by letting them listen to the song "If Snowflakes Fell in Flavours", a delightful selection from Sandy Offenheim's book by the same name. What child would resist these lyrics?

Wouldn't it be super if snowflakes fell in flavours
Of chocolate, peppermint, cinnamon and lime?
And if it were really true that snowflakes fell in flavours
I'd walk along in winter with my tongue out all the time—
Think of how delicious it would be to build a snowman
Or slide your tobaggan over lemon-flavoured snow.

Being a mother, however, Mrs. Offenheim can't resist warning the children that snow really isn't good to eat. Her last verse goes like this:

This is just a wish song.
'Cause snowflakes aren't flavoured
They're not strawberry, butterscotch or lime
And it isn't really true that snowflakes fall in flavours—
They're covered in dust, pollution, and grime.

I was delighted with the way that this song closed my storyhour.

Both *Rainsploosh* and *Silly Sally and the Snowman*, as well as *If Snowflakes Fell In Flavours*, are Canadian paperbacks. The two storybooks are rather expensive, but the children certainly enjoyed the creative experience of being involved in the plot and the books acted as a catalyst for creative thinking. I recommend that you try these books in your storyhour. Make your library a place where the action is. You may be surprised at the results.

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