



How to? Bring Children to Books

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Article Category:

How to...

Byline:

'Book fairs and book trains are definitely NOT the way to introduce books to children and encourage them to read' says **Sue Stops**, who describes here an alternative book event designed to get children to see *why* reading is such a good way to spend their time and describes Scheherazade, a travelling book event.

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Scheherazade - a way into stories - was designed specifically as an event for about only 100 children of any age from four to twelve. If the aim is - as ours was - to allow children to find out about stories and how they are made, to share enjoyment, to become enthusiastic about books and to *want* to read, it's no good hustling hundreds of them through a selling exhibition or crowding round a famous author where all they end up with is an autograph. Reasonably sized groups, a well-planned programme which lasted no more than 75 minutes, a focus on a small number of selected titles which the children could buy or not as they wished: that, we decided, was the way to do it and also to make the teachers who brought children to Scheherazade feel that their efforts had been worthwhile and that they had something to take away to build on.

When the children arrived there was a puppet show that lasted about 15 minutes. It was called 'The Night the Knight's Knees Knocked' and had been written by me and a group of secondary school children with characters and settings chosen by infants - a ghost, a castle, a knight, etc. I made the puppets and they were worked by six pupil volunteers from the school we were in. They picked up the idea quickly with only a short rehearsal beforehand and if there were a few mishaps no-one seemed to mind. The storyteller was in front and read the rhyming story. Through the puppet play we hoped to draw attention to the essential components of a story: a good idea, interesting characters, a time, a place and a narrative line with a beginning, a middle and an end.

After the puppet show twelve children and one teacher were chosen to dress up in costumes contained in large bags. The teacher was always given the monster costume - usually to much laughter. The rest included a ghost, a witch, a clown, Robin Hood, Supergran, Anansi, Cinderella, The Queen of Hearts, a pirate, a farmer, a dragon, a Red Indian. When we had a full line-up of characters, I introduced and we talked about particular books which represented each category - these included Pienkowski's **Haunted House**, Dupasquier's **Going West**, Dick King-Smith's **Saddlebottom**, **The Twits**, **Mother Goose Comes to Cable Street**. Robin Hood and Cinderella allowed us to bring in general categories like legends and fairy stories and refer to collections. The children contributed their own favourites for scary or funny stories. This usually lasted for about ten minutes.

The children were then free to wander around the exhibition from the Schools Library Service, plug themselves into headsets to listen to tapes of Alan Ahlberg's **Please Mrs Butler** poems, play with all kinds of puppets or do giant floor

jigsaws which we had made. They could also sign the visitors' book, add a joke or comment to our graffiti wall or buy a book from the bookshop stocked and manned by an enthusiastic local bookseller. Teachers could pick up book lists, read recent articles about books and reading which we had on display, and collect information about every organisation concerned with the promotion of children's reading.

About 15 minutes before the end we gathered the children together on the carpet for a storytime. Almost every story was told although we had two 'book stories': a short one, **The Hairy Monster**, and Adrian Henri's **The Punk Cat**, useful when we had groups of older children. We finished *every* session with **Some of Us** (Ljiljana Rylands, Dinosaur) which in one minute made the perfect finale. The whole event, by the way, was free.

For us, Scheherazade was a travelling book event. We went to six different venues in three weeks, taking generally four groups a day. In all we did 54 sessions, met 6,000 children and about 500 parents and teachers from 51 schools. We were financed partly by the LEA and partly by the local Festival for Children. I am an infant teacher and last term I was seconded for a term to investigate ways of promoting reading in the primary school in any way I chose. Scheherazade was part of the investigation. I've been encouraged by what happened. Bringing children to books and reading is essentially a subtle, complex and continuous process that involves a partnership between parents, teachers, librarians and bookshops. Book events can be a catalyst to get things going or move things along; if badly organised, they can be demotivating and even give out the wrong message - that it's all about *buying* and not about *reading*. We hope that Scheherazade gave children a chance (or another chance) to find the excitement, the pleasures of stories.

We could have taken it to double the number of schools. Equally any one school or group of schools with a few enthusiastic teachers or parents could do the same think for themselves or each other with very little cost - most of our expenses were for a paid helper and transport costs. You don't need a lot of money or famous authors or competitions - just some people with enthusiasm for books and the time to think through how best to open the magic door to reading.

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