

COME AND PLAY!

Invite the reader to play, and create an outstanding picture book.

by
Shutta Crum

Don't you just hate getting those rejection letters that say "This is a perfectly fine story, but . . ." *But what? But what!* (That's you screaming to yourself.) Then the letter goes on to conclude by saying something like ". . . we don't think it will stand out among so many similarly good stories." Then you crumple the letter in disgust—only to retrieve it from the trash, flatten it out and ponder over what it is *exactly* that gives one good picture book the edge over another.

After working 25+ years as a storytelling librarian in a constant frantic search for the best picture books to keep large groups of preschoolers entranced and attentive every week, and after writing and selling ten picture books of my own, I've learned that an important factor in how successfully a picture book "works" is the degree to which the author invites the reader/listener to step into the story and participate. (I am specifically addressing storied picture books and not interactive toy-type books like pop-ups, lift-the-flaps, or other novelty books.)

Below are the titles of books—new and old favorites—that use various methods to pull children into the story through the invitation to play. Consider adapting your manuscript by using one of these "added value" approaches to make your story interactive. After all, what child can resist the call to *come and play*?

In addition to having fun playing, perhaps your "perfectly fine" story will become the "outstanding" one among so many good stories on an editor's desk.

Ask riddles—invite the child to guess, or answer, one big riddle/question or multiple riddles/questions.

- WHAT DO YOU DO WITH A TAIL LIKE THIS? by Robin Page (HM)
- WHO TOOK THE FARMER'S HAT by Joan L. Nodset (HarperTrophy)

Challenge with rhyme games — invite the child to finish the rhyme.

- I AIN'T GONNA PAINT NO MORE by Karen Beaumont (Harcourt)
- A HUNTING WE WILL GO by John Langstaff (Aladdin)

Include refrains—(in prose or verse) invite the child to join in at anticipated spots in the story.

- Verse: MY LITTLE SISTER ATE ONE HARE by Bill Grossman (Dragonfly)
- Prose with sidebar chorus: TRASHY TOWN by Andrea Zimmerman (HarperCollins)
- Song within prose: THE GUNNIWOLF by Wilhelmina Harper (Dutton)

Use onomatopoeia—(similar to a refrain) invite the child to make the sounds in the story.

- BARNYARD SONG by Rhonda Gowler Greene (Aladdin)
- TOO MUCH NOISE by Ann McGovern (HM)

Give away secrets—invite the child to be in on a secret not known to the character(s).

- THE DAY THE BABIES CRAWLED AWAY by Peggy Rathmann (Putnam)
- KNUFFLE BUNNY by Mo Willems (Hyperion)
- BRAVEST OF THE BRAVE by Shutta Crum (Knopf)

Play with words—invite the child to manipulate words, even after the cover is closed.

- SHEEP IN A JEEP by Nancy Shaw (HM)
- RUNNY BABBIT: A BILLY SOOK by Shel Silverstein (HarperCollins)

Break the invisible “wall” between reader and book—invite the child to interact with the characters. In this approach the characters look directly out of the book—off the page—to address the reader. (Breaking the 4th wall in theater parlance.)

- DON’T LET THE PIGEON DRIVE THE BUS by Mo Willems (And other of his Pigeon books. Hyperion)
- The framing story (pun intended) of Jon Scieszka’s THE TRUE STORY OF THE 3 LITTLE PIGS! (Viking)

Add mini-plots or activities in the illustrations—invite the child to count, search, or discover additional mini-stories in the pictures.

- SOMETHING FROM NOTHING by Phoebe Gilman (Scholastic)
- Many concept books by Tana Hoban
- THE STORY OF CHICKEN LICKEN by Jan Omerod (Walker)

Create physical interaction with the illustrations (other than through novelty, pop-up, lift the flap, etc.)—invite the child to see the world of the story as the characters would . . . sometimes this is done by rotating the book, flipping it over, or looking at the illustrations differently.

- MY FRIEND RABBIT by Eric Rohmann (Roaring Brook)
- THE GREAT FUZZ FRENZY by Janet Stevens and Susie Stevens Crummel (Harcourt)
- ROUND TRIP or REFLECTIONS by Ann Jonas (Greenwillow)

Don’t end the story (the never-ending ending)—invite the child to continue the story’s circle by imagining what happens after the cover is closed.

- CHICKA CHICKA BOOM BOOM by Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault (Aladdin)
- BUBBLE GUM, BUBBLE GUM by Lisa Wheeler (Megan Tingley)
- IF YOU GIVE A MOUSE A COOKIE by Laura Joffe Numeroff (Laura Geringer)

Shutta Crum was the recipient of the Michigan Library Association’s, Award of Merit as Youth Librarian of the year, 2002. She is also an educator, a national conference speaker, and the author of BRAVEST OF THE BRAVE (above), listed on the Chicago Public Library’s Best of the Best, 2005 list. She has two forthcoming picture books with Clarion, and one with Hyperion. For more information, visit her website at www.shuttacrum.com.