

First-timer in Children's Literature

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Liz Perona

Thesis Advisor

Kathi Wittkamper

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kathi Wittkamper". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'K' and a long, sweeping underline.

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Templeton's Party, Boris' Plan, and the Fancy Fountain

Written by: Liz Perona

Illustrated by: Erin Luebke

4/5: Today was one of the hottest days that the animals living in the forest near 118th Street had ever experienced. By lunchtime, Templeton the Turtle, Boris the Bear, and Posie the Porcupine had just about had enough of the “playing outside to get rid of their energy” that their parents insisted upon. The friends had already played hide and go seek, capture the flag, and ring-around-the-rosie at least three times. They were hot, tired, and red in the face. All of the animals needed a cool break.

6/7: Templeton the Turtle decided to invite everyone over for a party at the family lake house, because it was just too hot to be outside in the heat. He went home to help his parents get ready for the party. There was much to be done before the party began. He and his mom made Templeton's Top Secret Seaweed Popsicles. The recipe had been handed down from generation to generation, and it was certainly delicious and nutritious.

8/9: After the popsicles were hardening in the freezer, Templeton went outside to help his dad get the lake ready. They set up the diving board, cleaned off the picnic table, and picked up the trash around the shore. After this, the lake was almost ready for the first swim of the season. The only thing left to do was to check the water temperature. Templeton stuck one toe in, two toes in, three toes in...PUSH...

10/11: SPLASH! The next thing Templeton knew, he was in the water...with Boris. Luckily, for Templeton's shell, the water temperature was just right.

12/13: The rest of his friends arrived a few minutes later. The fun began. All of the kids started playing an exciting game of Marco-Tailo. After everyone had a turn, they jumped off the diving board. Splash, Splash, Splash! Posie managed to create quite a splash because of her quills. Boris, who liked to be a show off, was next on the board. He always performed flashy dives, and this one was no different.

14/15: He ran to the end of the board as fast as he could, bounced three times, twisted twice, flipped once...and landed bottom first in the water with quite a lot of speed. The crowd erupted with laughter, but it slowly died out as Boris came up to the surface.

16/17: Boris came up to the surface looking rather curious. He had a spring on his head, a tire around his middle, and an old thimble on his tail. By this time, the crowd was silent, except for the littlest one—Posie. She said what everyone else was thinking, “How did all of this junk get in the lake?”

18/19: Due to the discovery of trash in the lake, the youngsters were not allowed back in the water for the day. Disappointing as this was, it gave the friends even more reason to find a solution to the pollution. Boris was especially bothered by the trash and determined to get every last piece of it out. The friends spent the rest of the day jumping, splashing, and eating seaweed popsicles near the sprinkler.

20/21: After dinner, the friends camped out in their secret tree house to decide what to do. They made a long list of ways to clean out the lake. It began with scuba diving to collect trash and ended with putting hungry fish in the lake to eat the trash. Both of these, and all of the ideas in between were not very reasonable ideas. The friends put their heads together one last time. “I’ve got it!” exclaimed Templeton as an idea suddenly came to him, “If EVERYONE brought a fishing pole to the lake—we could fish the trash out!”

22/23: After discussing all of their ideas with their parents, the final plan to fish out the trash was decided upon. All there to do now was to get ready for the big day. The animals painted signs to tell all of their neighbors and fellow animals about the “First Annual Clean-Up the Lake Day.” As the trio painted, they all hoped for a hippopotamus-sized turnout.

24/25: Luckily, the very next day was a warm, sunny day, and EVERY animal came to the lake with a fishing pole. Pole after pole could be seen around the edges of the lake. Each pole was ready in the lake, waiting for some trash to bite. Animals from every part of the forest spent the whole day fishing piece after piece of trash out of the lake. Of course, parents were around to supervise, and there were even different kinds of poles for beginning fisheranimals. Some poles had magnets, some had typical hooks, and some even had hinges like a mouth to chomp down on trash.

26/27: The piles of trash from the lake were getting bigger and bigger and bigger. The animals began to realize how much stuff they had been throwing in the lake. Each animal thought they were the only one throwing stuff in the lake, but that just wasn’t the case. They all contributed to a big polluted mess.

All the animals were tired and hungry, and rightfully so because the sun was beginning to set as Boris fished the last piece of trash out of the lake. Now the question was, what were they to do with all of this trash?

28/29: The littlest ones knew just what to do. It took them quite a few days of gluing, painting, and glittering, but they ended up with quite a masterpiece.

30/31: Now the middle of the lake contains a fancy fountain made from all of the animals’ junk. On top of that fountain is the very spring that started it all. The fountain stands tall, as a reminder to all that trash should be thrown only in trashcans—not in ANY beautiful lake. Even today, that lake in the forest near 118th Street is still one of the cleanest lakes within approximately 648 square miles. There is one other new addition—a sign that reads, “The littlest ones often make the hugest difference.”

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Abstract

Liz's thesis was a children's book written about environmental issues. She used her previous knowledge from children's literature and educational reading classes to aid her in the creation of this project. Liz included a copy of the text in her final submission. A copy of the final, printed children's book can be found in her partner, Erin Luebke's thesis project.

Acknowledgments

- I want to thank Mrs. Kathi Wittkamper for advising me through this project. She was extremely helpful in both the writing and creation process.
- I would also like to thank my dad, Tony Perona, for helping me with the editing process and encouraging me every step of the way.

As a future elementary school teacher, I am very interested in children's literature.

Engaging children in reading at an early age is very important to their development as readers and writers later on in life. Literature *can* change lives. All of us can think back on books that have made a difference in our lives, whether this occurred at a young or old age. Children need stimulating children's books with characters that they can relate to. They need to be so engaged while reading that they feel like they are one of the characters. Students need to be introduced to real-world problems on a smaller, childlike scale. Finally, children need to be inspired and encouraged while reading. Authors that can do all of these things write meaningful children's literature that changes generations. While I know I have probably not written the next Caldecott Medal winner or Young Reader's Choice Award, I hope to have touched on some of these qualities in the course of my children's book.

As it came time for me to choose a medium for completing my honor's thesis, I knew that I needed to do something creative. I know that I am able to write research papers, as I have done this my entire college career. I needed more of a challenge in something that interested me and in which I possessed some background knowledge. Writing a children's book met all of these qualifications. I am interested in children's literature, and I have some background knowledge on the topic from various children's literature and educational reading courses. The last part of the equation was a challenge, and writing creatively is most certainly a challenge. Furthermore, I grew up as the daughter of a murder mystery author, so I have been exposed to both the trials and successes of the 'book business' throughout the majority of my life. He has always encouraged me to read and write, and I knew that he would be proud if I gave it my best shot as a creative writer. Writing a piece of children's literature seemed to be

the best way for me to express my creativity while combining my interest in children and education.

I should be honest in admitting that I thought writing a children's book could not be that difficult. I knew writing a book was something that interested me, and after doing some research it appeared that I did not need more than a thousand words for a 32-page book (Writing for Children: How to Write Picture Books). As I started writing, I discovered how important each one of those words proved to be. I had to make every word count in order to make the most of so few words. I had to pare down the details because the majority of details should be found in the pictures not in the text (Writing for Children: How to Write Picture Books). As a somewhat 'wordy' writer, this was difficult to do. Furthermore, I discovered how hard it is to "dumb down" my writing. It is impossible to use the 'interesting synonyms' I have been taught to use for years. Young children simply do not have a large vocabulary, and while it is important to introduce them to new, challenging words, they must still be able to understand the story. For instance, I had to settle on the words, *said* and *hot*, where in other writing those might be altered to *declared* or *sweltering*. This proved to be especially challenging for an author's daughter who has had good word choice drilled into her from a young age.

After deciding on the medium of writing a children's book, I needed to decide on a topic. Recycling, reusing, and taking care of the Earth are hot topics right now. We are bombarded with messages about the environment all over TV, magazines, and the Internet. Many of these messages are negative and involve spending a good deal of money on the next best car or washing machine. It is important to send some positive messages about taking care of the

planet to children. These messages need to be inexpensive or free things that children can do by themselves or with parental supervision to help clean up the Earth. There are simply not enough books about this topic written for children, and this needs to change. After all, children are the future and they can make a difference!

As I selected the topic of the environment, I knew I wanted to take a lighthearted approach in my writing. Animals in a forest seemed like an appropriate way for me to do this. There are so many beloved children's books that include animals: *Winnie the Pooh*, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, *Lyle, Lyle Crocodile*, and *The Hungry Caterpillar*. Animals seem to be engaging to young children. During my time tutoring a kindergartener, I found this to be especially true. My student avidly read a book if it involved animals and allowed him to talk and write about different kinds of animals. This did not seem to be the case when reading about people or objects, such as houses or feet. Beyond the use of animals, I wanted to write as if these animals were young children. These young animals make a difference in their habitat by not only discovering a 'fishy' problem but also coming up with a solution to clean it up all with minimal help from adults.

When I sat down to write the story, environmental ideas were swarming around my head. I wanted to cover every single topic that I could brainstorm and introduce it to children. These ideas ranged from wasting water to depleting the ozone layer. My first thought was to have four or five different animals that were all friends but resided in different habitats throughout the forest. Each of these animals would discover something that was happening to their home. Together, the animals were going to come up with solutions to each problem and present them to the rest of their 'animal community.' However, after trying to map out a

possible plot, the story was far too complex for young readers. It would not have been possible to wrap up the story in 32 pages, nor would it have been readable by students under the age of nine.

I searched for a new idea. After looking at all of the environmental problems I had brainstormed, I began to think about what was the most realistic thing for students to accomplish. Young children ARE capable, but the idea of them walking a long distance to school instead of driving or completing all of their errands in one trip is preposterous. They are still at the mercy of their parents, and they must go where their parents ask when their parents ask. Also, children do not typically have control over the thermostat. They do not have the ability to turn the temperature down in the winter and up in the summer.

Some things adults have control over, whether children like it or not, but there are things that children can easily do. This brought me to the idea of picking up trash. Regardless of age, picking up trash is an easy, free, selfless thing anybody can do. However, I wanted to take it a step beyond this. Everyone can see trash lying around in streets, medians, yards, and parks, but what about trash in places that cannot easily be seen? Pollution in our rivers, lakes, and streams is a problem as well. Because of this, I decided on creating a lake polluted with trash that the young animals would discover and generate a plan to clean.

Next, I had the task of coming up with how the animals were going to discover the problem. A lake party on a blistering day in the middle of summer seemed like a natural idea. The animals could all jump off of the diving board without nearing the bottom of the lake polluted with trash, except for the biggest and heaviest, Boris the Bear. After jumping off the diving board, he would come back up to the surface covered in trash—a tire around his middle,

a spring on his head, and a thimble on his tail. This simple sight would gain the attention of the other guests, and the children would be moved to find a solution to this disconcerting situation, especially after it interrupted their lake party.

I wanted the children to come up with a way to clean out the lake by themselves. I decided that they would brainstorm all of these ideas in their secret clubhouse removed from the adults. This was to play into the idea that the children can create an idea and make a difference with minimal help from adults. The young animals imagined many ideas and decided upon fishing the trash out of the lake with fishing poles. The use of fishing poles for this purpose was my interesting and unique way to bring creativity and imagination to the magical world of fiction.

After meeting with our advisor, she said that she liked both the idea that they fished the trash out of the lake and that the children were doing this on their own. However, she stated that sometimes children try to emulate what they read in books. She was concerned that this might pose a safety hazard, and encouraged us to include parents helping with the actual fishing event. The illustrator and I took this a step further and created imaginary types of poles with both magnets and “teeth” to chomp down on trash. Including parents in the fishing and using different imaginary poles help to add both to the creativity and safety of the readers. I am glad that our advisor stated this, because the idea of “safety” in a book had not occurred to me. During my student teaching, I constantly had to worry about my students’ safety, but the idea of safety in a book was foreign to me. I never thought that students would attempt to recreate a fictional story.

Finally, after all of the trash had been removed from the lake. I believed that it was important to make something positive come about from this dirty situation. A creative “glued, painted, and glittered” fountain was my solution. The children would create this fountain and with the help of some adults, place it in the center of the lake, as a reminder to all that trash belongs in a trashcan not in any of nature’s beautiful lakes.

After finishing the writing, complete with several edits, I had the opportunity to read the story to approximately 50 fourth grade students. I selected fourth graders because the story is aimed to first, second, or third graders, and I felt that students at the fourth grade level are mature and capable enough to analyze the writing and produce constructive criticism. The illustrator and I wanted to see what a child would think about the story, and we wanted to take to heart their suggestions and adapt our story accordingly. First, I was very pleasantly surprised by their response to my story—I practically received a standing ovation, and I admit, this did make me feel better about the story I had taken so much time to write and rewrite. After reviewing all of the comments, I compiled a list of strengths and weaknesses. There were three changes submitted multiple times that we felt needed to be changed. The first was the turtle’s name. Originally, the turtle was named Todd. However, the students felt that this name did not coincide well with the other names, Boris and Posie, included in the story. Todd was changed to Templeton. The students also stated that they felt the signs written in the story should be changed to look like young children’s handwriting, complete with misspellings and letter reversals. This was corrected in the final draft. Finally, the fourth graders suggested that some of the words might be too hard for young readers. I looked through the story and found easier synonyms for a few of the words I deemed to be too difficult.

Writing a children's book gave me the opportunity to interact with the world of children's literature in a way that was new and exciting to me. It allowed me an inside perspective on the decisions that authors make as they write material for children. My hope is to share this knowledge with my future students. I have created a powerful teaching tool, in which I have written creatively and moved through the different stages of the writing cycle. My students will see that I practice what I preach. I am not asking them to do anything that I have not first done myself. I have taken the time to think through the process of creative writing—from prewriting to editing—and I have actively participated in every step towards the creation of a final “published” work. Because of this, I will be more approachable with questions, as they know I have been in their shoes and understand their struggles. I will be a greater, more understanding and patient resource to them after completing this project. I now better empathize feeling writer's block, working out details so the story makes sense, implementing excellent word choice, and editing and proofreading over and over again.

This project certainly helped me to grow as an individual. I learned that it is necessary to “put yourself out there” when writing a piece of creative writing. I felt much more exposed participating in this type of a project versus a research paper. A research paper does not express one's own creativity or personal ideas. It was somewhat embarrassing for me to allow others to read this creative work because it felt like a piece of me, exposed and vulnerable. I was hesitant to read this book to fourth graders, let alone my friends and family for fear of being judged and ridiculed. Fortunately, everyone has been positive and encouraging when reading my story, especially my dad. I now understand the pressure some students must feel when asked to read a piece of their own writing aloud to the entire class. I hope to remember

this when it is my turn to be a teacher. If a student feels embarrassed or uncomfortable reading in front of the entire class, accommodations should be made. This project has allowed me to grow not only as a writer, but also as a teacher. I did not originally expect that welcome realization!

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