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Assessing a Young Writer's Story

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Julie Patterson is associate director and writer-in-residence at the Indiana Partnership for Young Writers. Her poems, essays and articles have appeared in literary journals, magazines and newspapers throughout the U.S. She has a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from Lesley University.

Now *that's* a story!

Learn from a 1st grade writer

by Julie Patterson

The story below is one of my favorites from our 2011 anthology, probably because I envy the author a bit. Click the video below to follow along as Cody reads it, then I'll tell you why I'm jealous.



When My Monkey Got Stuck in the Tree by Cody

When this story first crossed my desk at the Indiana Partnership for Young Writers, I was drafting a story of my own. What I noticed right away was that Cody had mastered something I was struggling with -- a plot structure where a problem gets increasingly more complicated before being resolved.

In his book *When My Monkey Got Stuck in the Tree*, Cody presents a problem (his favorite stuffed animal was stuck in a tree) and then shows readers how the problem got worse (his brother threw it there on purpose, it got rained on, he couldn't lodge it loose with a football, he couldn't climb the tree because it was on his neighbor's property.) This is a popular story structure: a character wants something but struggles to get it. It seems so simple, yet it's often hard to write it well (at least for me...but then again, I always thought subtraction was easier than addition, so maybe I'm a bit backward).

I shared this story while preparing for a conference presentation last fall, and a teacher asked me what I'd teach Cody next if I saw this draft while conferring with him in an early stage of the writing cycle. Without knowing what Cody or his class had been reading lately (because I'd try to draw a lesson from a story he was familiar with if I could), I said I'd teach him something about character development next. He and his brother appear as characters in this story, but we as readers don't know much about either one of them from this book. Since his brother threw Cody's favorite stuffed animal in a tree, I'm immediately curious about the details of their relationship. Does Cody's brother aggravate him like that all the time? Did he laugh or tease as Cody looked on in anguish? Did Cody cry? lose sleep? secretly dream about destroying one of his brother's prized possessions? Cody could reveal some of these enriching details to us in his words and/or illustrations.

Learn more about how illustrations enrich text...



2012 Fall Workshop with Katie Wood Ray
Saturday, November 10, 9 am to 3 pm

Drawing on her book *In Pictures and In Words*, Katie will help teachers in grades K-5 see writing and illustrating as parallel processes, both acts of composing and making meaning. Katie will show how studying illustrations in writing workshop is essential for primary students, English language learners and middle grade writers.

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