



FAMILY

The kid listener

Storyteller David Steinberg never knows how his audience-shaped tales will end

By Brenda Rees, Special to The Times

April 1, 2004

David Steinberg has a great way to stay in shape. Creative shape, that is.

His secret? Listen to kids.

As a Disney feature animation executive, Steinberg has been flexing his personal artistic muscles beyond the celluloid screen recently with what he calls "improvisational storytelling for kids," which involves plenty of pint-sized input.

In libraries, schools and shopping centers, Steinberg and his young squirming audiences invent magic lands, silly episodes, heroic acts of bravery and ridiculous scenarios.

And unlike traditional story times where an adult reads from a book or a performer does a set routine, Steinberg's storytelling thrives on the unknown. Taking cues from kid suggestions, Steinberg weaves tales that come out of the creative air of the moment.

"Sometimes we are in outer space or exploring the bottom of the ocean," he says, adding that "the stories are always new and fresh. Those kids keep me in shape."

There are many reasons for Steinberg to be in shape, not merely for his animation job but also for his new role as children's book author. Steinberg is celebrating the release of his first book, "Grasshopper Pie and Other Poems." Another book is due out this summer; four more are in the pipeline.

The books, Steinberg says, grew out of his storytelling experiences and are honed with kid feedback. "I try out new material on the kids all the time," he confesses. "They are the best and honest critics."

"What David does best is remind kids that reading is a joyful action," says Deirdre Reyes, reading specialist at Los Flores Elementary School in Bellflower, where Steinberg made a recent appearance.

Reyes was amazed that Steinberg could hold the school body's attention for 45 minutes that included not only collaborative storytelling but also an inspirational plea for students to "follow their talents and believe in themselves."

Later in a poetry workshop for the upper grades, Steinberg worked with and created verse with the students. "Our students thought he was hilarious and really enjoyed being a part of the process," says Reyes. Steinberg says he often made up stories to entertain his three sons when they were younger. They still are his most demanding and adoring fans, he says.

Steinberg credits Daniel, 7, for pushing him into his improv storytelling role.

Years ago, when he brought his son to synagogue school, Steinberg sheepishly admits, "Daniel was so clingy; I used to stay with him. Then one day, the teacher asked me to tell the kids what I did for a living."

That was all it took. Steinberg vividly described the stories from movies he worked on, including "The Land Before Time," "An American Tail" and "The Secret of NIMH" as well as the Disney flicks "Hercules," "Mulan" and "Tarzan." From there, he simply started "making stuff up" and "taking requests."

"When [David] is on, he has those kids rocking and rolling," says Sylvia Lowe, children's program coordinator at the Jewish Community Library, where Steinberg has appeared numerous times around various Jewish holidays.

Lowe says that even though Steinberg's storytelling is dynamic, it's his own personality that the kids enjoy. "David is just a big kid at heart," she says. "He likes to play. The kids respond to him like I've never seen before."

Steinberg says the storytelling fuels all aspects of his career, including his animation life. "I'm a big proponent of getting feedback on stories from kids early on," he says. "When it comes to creating a story, there is a danger of a bunch of adults trying to amuse ourselves. We need to find out from the kids what they think is funny and appropriate."

Case in point is the new Disney flick "Home on the Range," on which Steinberg was associate producer. A focus group of children viewed the film near the end of production - and some of the laughs were missing. "Where we adults laughed, they didn't," he says. "At places that never got a laugh in the studio, the kids howled." Additions were made and scenes cut: The kids had had their say.

Steinberg is developing a TV series for the Disney Channel as well as working as an associate producer for the new Disney feature animation project, "A Day With Wilbur Robinson," based on the William Joyce book.

If Steinberg has his way, adults will pay more attention and listen to kids early in the process, whether it's in composing a book, creating an animated film, developing a TV show or improving a story.

"Four- and 5-year-olds are great," he says. "They aren't thinking logically -- the rules of the world are not baked in reality for them yet. They literally have minds that can go anywhere."

Brenda Rees can be reached at weekend@latimes.com

David Steinberg Reading

Where: Children's Book World, 10580 W. Pico Blvd., L.A.

When: Next Thursday, 4 p.m.

Info: (310) 559-2665

Storytelling (Passover tales)

Where: Storyopolis, 116 N. Robertson Blvd., Plaza Level A, L.A.

When: April 11, 2 p.m.

Info: (310) 358-2500