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(Study-guide generated by ETC’s Kate DeRosa, Jennifer Smith, and Faith Wohl. Special thanks: Oregon Children’s Theatre in Portland, OR and The Peace Center for the Performing Arts in Greenville, SC)
About the Story

The Velveteen Rabbit is the story of the loving relationship between a young boy and a stuffed toy rabbit he receives as a Christmas gift. The other toys in the nursery tease the rabbit because he is only made of velveteen and sawdust. While he does become the inseparable companion of the Boy, the Rabbit yearns for more—he wants to be real. His one toy friend, the wise old Skin Horse, tells him that he can only become real if he is loved by a child and gives love in return.

The Rabbit quickly learns that being real has two dimensions. One is the realness of becoming, through time and circumstance, a truly beloved toy, just as the Skin Horse had promised. The second reality comes to him through the sacrifice and devotion he gives his Boy through a long illness. After the Boy is better, and with the additional help of a little magic, the plush toy is transformed into a real woodland rabbit. Thus, the story explores the notion that loving is truly a creative act, as the rabbit becomes real, first to the Boy and then to the larger world.

Seen from that perspective, the Rabbit stands as a symbol of unqualified love and the innocence of childhood. We think it is particularly important today, in a time of war, strife and disruption, to show children the importance of love and fidelity, and the magic of stories to illuminate the world around them. To show young people an alternative to violence—how a compelling and loving relationship can bring about change and transformation—is to teach a critically important lesson. It is equally important, in our time of materialism, complexity and technology, to remind both children and parents of the value of a simple stuffed toy, as friend and companion, a faithful source of comfort.

Looking even deeper into the pages of The Velveteen Rabbit—behind its pastel illustrations and fanciful notions about conversations in the toy box—we find that the story is actually about the process of growing up. As the Rabbit compares himself to the real woodland rabbits he sees in the meadow behind the Boy’s house, he realizes that they have legs that hop and dance and jump, while his are only folded and sewed under him to help him sit straight. “Finding his legs” at the end of the show, after a magic fairy helps him become truly real, is a metaphor for how we all had to scramble to keep our footing in an ever-changing world, as we grew from children to adults. The Rabbit’s joy at being able to leap and dance through the meadow grasses with the other rabbits is not unlike our own feelings of independence as we acquired new skills and abilities.

In Enchantment Theatre’s adaptation of this classic tale, many things happen that will not be found in the pages of the book. As the Boy and his Rabbit sit reading a large book, for example, the pop-up pages come startling to life, leading to an outer space adventure, an attack by pirates and a game played amidst the cactus and cowboy hats of the old West. This was done to add to the theatricality of the show—in effect, to make visible and explicit that which was only implied or suggested in the book itself. The translation from the page to the stage required some change in what the audience sees, but our adaptation remains faithful to the essential story of the book. While it’s set in Victorian England, it remains relevant to the lives of today’s young children.
About the Author: Margery Williams

Margery Williams wrote more than 25 novels and children’s books in her lifetime, but perhaps none more famous—and more cherished—than *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Published in 1922 as her first American work, the book became an instant classic, leading to numerous adaptations for children’s theater, radio, TV and the movies.

She was born in London in 1881. As a young child, she had a vivid imagination that inspired her to create different personalities for each of her toys. When she was about seven, her father died suddenly, and shortly thereafter, she and her family moved to the United States, ultimately settling on a farm in Pennsylvania. She grew up with a love for reading and soon developed an equal passion for writing. By the time she was 17, Margery Williams had decided to become a professional writer. She began by writing children’s stories for a British company that published Christmas books. To further her writing career, she moved back to London at the age of 19. In 1902, she published the first of several novels for adults, but surprisingly, none were successful.

After World War I, having married and raised two children, Williams took her family back to the United States, seeking its safety and prosperity. She returned to writing but turned her focus back to children’s books. Watching her children play with toys and animals reminded her of her own childhood, and the stories she had woven around each of her toys. This provided the inspiration for *The Velveteen Rabbit or How Toys Become Real*. She later said about her book, “*The Velveteen Rabbit* became the beginning of all the stories I have written since. By thinking about toys and remembering them, they suddenly became very much alive.”

In fact, most of her subsequent books continued her preoccupation with toys coming to life and the ability of inanimate objects and animals to express human emotion. In 1925, for example, her book, *Poor Cecco* came out, providing a wonderful adventure story about a wooden dog that sets off to see the world. That same year, she wrote *The Little Wooden Doll*, illustrated by her daughter, Pamela. *The Skin Horse*, published in 1927, was also illustrated by her daughter.

Margery Williams once said, “Nothing is easier to write than a story for children; few things are harder, as any writer knows, than to achieve a story that children will really like.” Her writings ranged widely, including translations, educational readers and even a travel book about Paris. Her book, *Winterbound*, was runner up for the Newbury Medal in 1937; it was awarded that Honor retroactively in 1971. It’s a novel for young adults, about two teenage girls, who have to assume grown-up responsibilities for two siblings when their parents leave home suddenly.

Her final book, *Forward Commandos*, was published during World War II in 1944. It includes inspirational stories of wartime heroism. During that same year, Margery Williams became ill and died at age 63.

*For a free illustrated copy of Margery William’s *The Velveteen Rabbit*, go to [http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/williams/rabbit/rabbit.html](http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/williams/rabbit/rabbit.html).*
An Introduction to Masks and Puppets

Masks

In this production of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, all of the actors wear masks and some of the characters in the play are puppets. Though masks are rare in American contemporary theater, masks have been used since the very beginning of theater. The early Romans used enormous masks that exaggerated human characteristics and enhanced the actor’s presence in the huge amphitheaters of their day. Greek Theater used masks that were human scale to designate tragic and comic characters. Masks have been used in the early Christian church after the ninth century and were revived during the Renaissance in Italy with the Commedia Dell’Arte. Theater throughout Asia has used masks to create archetypal characters, human and divine. In Balinese theatrical tradition, masks keep ancient and mythological figures recognizable to a contemporary audience, preserving a rare and beautiful culture. Though used differently in every culture, the mask universally facilitates a transformation of the actor and the audience.

Puppets

Puppets have a long and esteemed history. They have been used to represent gods, noblemen and everyday people. In the history of every culture, puppets can be found, from the tombs of the Pharaohs to the Italian marionette and the English Punch and Judy. The Bunraku Puppet Theatre of Japan has been in existence continuously since the seventeenth century. In the early days of Bunraku, the greatest playwrights preferred writing for puppets rather than for live actors. Puppets are similar to the masks in their fascination and power. We accept that this carved being is real and alive, and we invest it with an intensified life of our own imagining. Because of this puppets can take an audience further and deeper into what is true. Audiences bring more of themselves to mask and puppet theater because they are required to imagine more. Masks and puppets live in a world of heightened reality. Used with art and skill, they can free the actor and the audience from what is ordinary and mundane, and help theater do what it does at its best: expand boundaries, free the imagination, inspire dreams, transform possibilities and teach us about ourselves.
Before You See The Velveteen Rabbit . . .

Activity One: Prepare for the Play
Read the introductory sections about The Velveteen Rabbit and read the story (available at http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/williams/rabbit/rabbit.html) aloud with your class.

Ask the students the following questions for discussion:
1. If you were a doll, do you think you would want to become a real boy or girl?
2. Think about your own toys.
   a. Which ones have you had the longest?
   b. Do you forget about old toys when you get new ones?
   c. Do you have a favorite toy?
3. What do you think the “main idea” of the story is?
   a. What toy told the Velveteen Rabbit about becoming real?
   b. What did he mean?
   c. What did the Fairy say it means to be real?
4. How is the Velveteen Rabbit different from the other toys in the nursery?
   a. From the boy?
   b. From the rabbits outside?
   c. Who is more real?
   d. Describe a time when you felt different then everyone around you.
5. Describe the relationship between the boy and his parents.
   a. Between the boy and Nana.
   b. Between the boy and the Rabbit.
   c. Between the Skin-Horse and the Rabbit.
6. How did the Velveteen Rabbit become real at the end of this story? If the boy never got sick, do you think the Velveteen Rabbit would have become real?
7. The Rabbit comforted and cared for the boy when he was sick. You can probably think of a time when a parent or family member has cared for you when you needed help. Can you think of a time when you cared for an older person who was in a similar situation?

Activity Two: Explore Puppets
In this production, the Velveteen Rabbit and Nana are played by puppets. Puppets ask the audience to use their imagination to help bring them to life. They also allow a small cast of actors to play many different roles. Puppets, like masks, also help a character become bigger than life. They can represent different exaggerated qualities of a person or an animal. Based on the type of puppet used and the way it moves, a character can be understood at first sight as silly, scary, or ethereal.

The following are some ways you may introduce puppetry to your students before they see The Velveteen Rabbit:
1. Make a list on the blackboard of all of the different kinds of puppets that can be used: hand puppets, string puppets (marionettes), rod puppets, shadow puppets. To see examples of all different kinds of puppets, visit: www.puppet.org.
2. Have the students make a simple hand puppet from a sock. What kind of expressions and characters can they portray?

3. Have the students find or bring objects to the class that they wouldn’t ordinarily think of as a puppet -- a paper bag, a scarf, a folded piece of paper. Can the students make their object come to life? What are the actions the puppet performs that make it look real?

4. Choose one character from *The Velveteen Rabbit* and sketch a design of a puppet of that character. What type of puppet would it be? How would it move? What type of voice would you give it?

**Activity Three: Magic and Transformation**

*The Velveteen Rabbit* is not a fairy tale. Whereas most fairy tales that exist today have been passed down from story-teller to story-teller, from grandmother to child, and don’t have an author associated with them, *The Velveteen Rabbit* was written as a piece of literature and we know who the author is. However, *The Velveteen Rabbit* possesses an essential element that is common to most fairy tales: the existence of magic and specifically the use of magic as a vehicle for an inexplicable transformation to occur.

Use the following questions and exercises to prompt a discussion about magic:

1. What role does magic play in this story?

2. Do you believe this story? Why or why not?

3. Discuss the Rabbit’s transformation at the end of the story.
   a. Make a list of words describing the Rabbit as a stuffed toy.
   b. Make another list of words describing the Rabbit after his transformation.
   c. Create a human character based on the words in each list.

4. What if *The Velveteen Rabbit* was not a story in a book but a true story? How would you explain the Rabbit’s transformation?

**Activity Four: The Role of Music**

The music in this production was composed by Don Sebesky with additional music composed by Charles Gilbert. The music underscores the action and helps the performers tell the story. It is wonderfully evocative and theatrical, meaning that if you sit and listen to the music with your eyes closed, you can feel and see with your inner eye what is happening in the story.

To illustrate the role of music in storytelling, try the following activity:

- Ask your students to recall a personal experience (for example, a family vacation, first day of school). Ask one student to tell his/her story to the class. After he/she is finished, have your student retell the same story. This time, play a dynamic track of music (preferably instrumental) to underscore the story. Ask the class how this music affected the story.

When you attend the performance, encourage your students to pay attention to the music, and remember how the music created different moods within the piece.
Activity Five: The Importance of Imagination
The setting of this play is a stage with curtains that open to reveal different locations. *The Velveteen Rabbit* takes place with very little scenery, but with costumes, puppets, masks, props, and evocative lighting. The play invites the audience to use their imagination to see a garden, a child’s bedroom, and a nursery piled with toys.

Encourage your students to start imagining the play even before they see it:
1. From reading *The Velveteen Rabbit*, what do they imagine they will see on stage?
2. Draw a scene from the story that you see in your imagination.

After You See The Velveteen Rabbit

Activity One: Respond to the Play
Review the performance and ask students to describe with as much detail what they remember. What type of costumes did they see? How many characters were in the story? How did the actors transform themselves to play different characters? What happened in the story that was exciting? Scary? Funny? What kind of music was used? Ask the students to help make a list of different things that happened in the performance. Write these down on the board.

Questions to ask the students:
1. What character did you like the most? Why?
2. How did the boy change throughout the story?
   a. How did the Velveteen Rabbit change both physically and in other ways?
   b. Tell a story about a time in your life when you felt changed or transformed.
3. Did the music play an important role in the story? How? Can you describe the music?
4. How did the use of masks affect the telling of the story?
   a. How did the masks come to life?
   b. Did you forget the actors were wearing masks?
5. How did the use of puppets affect the story? Did you forget they were puppets and accept them as people?
6. Describe some of the puppets you saw? Why do you suppose they were designed that way?
7. The story was told by an unseen narrator and no actor spoke. How did you know what the characters were feeling?
8. What surprised you the most in the play?
9. How is being at the theater different than being at the movies?
10. What do you think theater brings to a community?
Activity Two: Discover Theater in the Classroom

In *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the actors were able to communicate ideas and feelings without using words. Discuss with the students how the actors let the audience know what was going on, even when they weren’t using their voices.

Use the following activities to explore the possibilities of communicating without speaking:

1. Ask students to think of actions or gestures they use to communicate. For example, can they think of ways to act surprised using only their face? Have the students make different faces while seated: fear, anger, happiness, etc. How can they use their hands also?

2. Make a space in the classroom for the students to move freely. Tell the students they are standing on a towel on a very hot beach and in order to get to the ocean they must walk through the scalding hot sand. Ouch! How do they move across the space? Other suggestions for environments to move through:
   a. A sidewalk covered with chewed bubble gum
   b. A frozen pond
   c. A very steep hill
   d. A pond scattered with stepping stones
   e. The surface of the moon
   f. A giant bowl of Jell-O

3. Extend the space exploration to include activities:
   a. Carefully paint a door. After finishing, open the door and step through it without getting any paint on your clothes.
   b. Build a snowman. The teacher should be able to tell how big the snowman is by how the student uses the space.

4. To conclude, ask the students to list the ways they saw one another communicate without using words (through facial expressions, movement, gesture).

Activity Three: Writing Our Own Stories

Get your students to start writing their own stories with the following activities:

1. Think about a favorite toy that you own. Imagine that this toy could think and feel like the Velveteen Rabbit. Write a story about this toy becoming real.

2. Pretend you are a toy. Write a letter applying for a position in a child’s toy box. Include experience, qualifications, and special talents. Have students exchange letters and respond.

Activity Four: Magic and Illusion

In fiction, magic is often used to explain things that are difficult to understand. Margery Williams uses magic in *The Velveteen Rabbit* to illustrate the Velveteen Rabbit’s transformation.

As a class, look at some optical illusions. (You may have in your school library *The Great Book of Optical Illusions* by Gyles Brandreth, Sterling Publishing Company, New York City). Ask:
1. What is an illusion? What is real?

2. How is magic used in this production? List the kinds of magic you saw.

3. Have you ever loved a toy so much, you treated it as though it were real? Is it possible to “believe” something is real, even when you “know” that it is not? Have them write down their experience or share it with the group.

Activity Five: The art in Theater
1. Have the students draw a picture of their favorite character from The Velveteen Rabbit.

2. Create shadow puppets of some Velveteen Rabbit characters and perform a mini-shadow show in the classroom.

3. Have the class make masks using paper plates or paper bags. (An excellent book on masks and mask construction is Mask making by Carole Sivin, Davis Publications Inc., Worcester, MA, 1986.)

Resources

Books
Other books by Margery Williams mentioned in this study guide:
- Poor Cecco
- The Little Wooden Doll
- The Skin Horse
- Winterbound
- Forward Commandos

Other helpful books:
- The Great Book of Optical Illusions by Gyles Brandreth
- Mask Making by Carole Sivin

Websites
- http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/williams/rabbit/rabbit/html
  The website for the free illustrated text of Margery William’s The Velveteen Rabbit
- http://www.puppet.org
  This website shows examples of different kinds of puppets
- http://www.123opticalillusions.com
  This website has some sample optical illusions
When you went to see *The Velveteen Rabbit*, you were a part of an audience of many different people: people from different schools, different neighborhoods, of different ages. You all saw the same play, but you may not all have the same ideas about it. The greatest thing about theater is that we all experience it in different ways. What is silly to you may be scary to someone else.

After seeing the performance, complete the scavenger hunt below to find out what your class-mates felt about *The Velveteen Rabbit*. You may be surprised!

1. Find 5 people who laughed at some point during the performance.
   ____________________________________________ ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________ ____________________________________________

2. Find 1 person whose favorite part was the same as yours. What part was it?
   ____________________________________________

3. Find 2 people who were sad when the rabbit got separated from the boy.
   ____________________________________________ ____________________________________________

4. Find 4 people whose favorite part was the magic. Favorite trick?
   ____________________________________________ ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________ ____________________________________________

5. Find 2 people who loved the costumes. Favorite costume?
   ____________________________________________ ____________________________________________

6. Find 1 person who thinks he/she has a magic trick figured out. Which trick?
   ____________________________________________

7. Find 2 people who were afraid that the boy was going to die.
   ____________________________________________ ____________________________________________

8. If your class was performing *The Velveteen Rabbit*, who would like to play...
   The boy? And why? ____________________________________________
   The Rabbit? ____________________________________________
   Nana? ____________________________________________
   The other toys in the nursery? ____________________________________________
   The Fairy? ____________________________________________
Theater Etiquette

Each year, thousands of teachers, students, bus drivers, and parents take part in CSB/SJU’s Fine Arts Education Series. Please review the LOOKING and LISTENING information below with your students to help make your theater experience the best it can be.

LOOKING and LISTENING
Attending a live performance of The Velveteen Rabbit will be interesting and enjoyable for everyone if you remember to...
- watch for facial expressions to help you understand what the performers are feeling
- listen in order to understand the meanings of the songs
- listen in order to understand the communication between the performers

The performers in The Velveteen Rabbit need help from you, the audience. You are an important part of the play. Being an audience member in a theater is different from watching a movie or television show. The performers are in the same room with you and are affected by what you do. To do their best, the performers need you to watch and listen closely. Audience members also depend on your quiet attention during the performance so that they can enjoy their theater experience as well.

Please review the PROCEDURES information below to help your theater visit go smoothly.

PROCEDURES
- Please bring a minimum of one adult chaperone for every fifteen students.
- Please remind chaperones that the theater etiquette they model speaks volumes to your students.
- Prepare your students to enter the theater in single file in order of seating.
- Position your chaperones to maximize adult supervision of your group.
- Please wait until your whole group is seated before making trips to the rest room. Then students may go in small groups with the teacher’s permission. Younger students making trips to the rest room will need to be chaperoned.
- The theater is a food, gum, drink, radio, camera, tape, and video recorder free zone!
- Please leave inappropriate behaviors behind when visiting the theater.
- Please remain seated following the performance. Your group will be dismissed from the theater by a Fine Arts Programming staff member.

Enjoy The Velveteen Rabbit!

This study guide was adapted from material provided by The Enchantment Theatre Company, and designed by Alison Guessou CSB ’08.