

TALES and TIPS

by Gwendolyn Jones
GSSL Founder

TALES (An excerpt of "Tales and Tips" was published in *STORY ART* • July, August, September, 1995)

The Story Behind the Story: A Personalized Review of *See the Ocean*

See the Ocean

Author: Estelle Condra

Linda Crockett-Blassingame, Illus.

A diamond is multi-faceted and so is Estelle Condra. She sparkles; she shines! The warmth of her personality and the vibrancy of her voice embrace her audiences. She is also multi-talented. Long have I admired her skills as a storyteller and an actress, and now she has given us an extraordinarily sensitive and perceptive picture story book. *See the Ocean*, written by Estelle Condra and illustrated by Linda Crockett-Blassingame, takes the reader on a journey over the Black Mountains to the much loved ocean. We travel there with a family of five: mother, father, two brothers and Nellie, the youngest child. Nellie loves the ocean and delights in it.

As they travel by car, we learn that as Nellie grows older she keeps a mental score for her brothers as they play games. Gerald and Jamin, Nellie's brothers, would always try to be the first to see the ocean. Nellie never competed. She sat quietly in spite of her excitement. One year, a heavy mist prevented anyone from seeing the water, but when a freshening breeze brought the salty aroma of the ocean into the car, Nellie exclaimed, "I can see it!" Her brothers complained, insisting that she was cheating. They said it was too misty to see the ocean. It was then that father said, "Let her tell us what it looks like." The author then gives us a marvelous metaphorical description of the ocean which is, indeed, poetry in prose. Through the voice of the small child, Nellie, we see the ocean as "an old man born at the beginning of time." We see him in all of his moods,

and, finally, we see him at rest.

"At night he's more beautiful than ever. At night he wears a dark, silvery gray cloak with moons and stars sprinkled upon it. Every night before he goes to sleep, he pulls a soft, misty blanket over himself."

After Nellie has shared how she sees the ocean, her brother Jamin says, "It's still not fair." And Gerald adds, "How could she see through the mist when we can't? She can't even see." The children's mother replies, "Though your sister's eyes are blind, she can see with her mind." The story ends with a smiling Nellie thinking how very much she loves the ocean.

The impressionistic illustrations of award winning artist Linda Crockett-Blassingame fully complement Estelle's gentle and sensitive narrative. Nellie is depicted from babyhood to young girlhood. Always a large straw hat conceals the eyes. This recurring visual motif is a subtle clue to Nellie's blindness which is not revealed until the end of the story. For reading teachers and classroom teachers who are interested in "visual" literacy as well as "verbal" literacy, the predictive quality of this story on both levels is excellent.

To me, this story is intensely interesting. As I read the story, I was transported back in time to 1981 when Estelle Condra was the featured storyteller at the *Children's Literature and Storytelling Conference* at Trenton State College. I had seen her perform in 1980 at the NAPPS (now NSA) Storytelling Conference in Jonesborough, TN, dur-

ing the audience participation sessions. I knew that she would enchant our New Jersey audience. During her outstanding performance in Trenton, I recalled her sharing with us some of her early experiences in South Africa where she was born and where she spent the first 29 years of her life. She spoke of the family's summer visits to the beach house and how the drive over the Black Mountains was full of anticipation as they waited to catch the first glimpse of the ocean. I also knew that Estelle carries the recessive gene of retinitus pigmentosa, an inherited disease that leads to eventual blindness. As I recalled these thoughts over a span of fourteen years, I realized that Estelle was in essence telling her own story. I quickly turned to the biographical sketch on the book jacket. There was no indication that Estelle is now blind nor was there any indication that she had been legally blind for many years. I knew that I wanted to write this review, and I felt strongly that readers of the book would benefit from meeting Estelle and knowing that here is a woman whose spirit remains indomitable. Naturally, I asked her permission to share in this review that she is, indeed, blind. Permission was given.

I recently spoke with Estelle by telephone. What a joy it was to hear her vibrant voice, so full of energy and enthusiasm. She explained, in response to my query, that she purposely omitted including her blindness on the book jacket biographical sketch because she wished the book to be judged on its own merit. I have since learned that it does

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exactly that. I also note that it is included on the American Bookseller's "Pick of the Lists." As I had thought, *See the Ocean* does, in fact, to a great degree, reflect Estelle's own experiences. She chose the name Nellie for her main story character as her brother used to call her Nellie as a nickname. Her brothers, Gerhard and Benjamin, became Gerald and Jamin in the story. The only clue that the setting is South Africa is the mention of the Black Mountains; yet a car journey to the shore is in the experiential realm of many children and adults. We can identify with this shared experience.

Estelle told me that she continues to tell stories and conduct workshops. She has added a new dimension to her already extensive performing repertoire. In the past, she has played leading roles in many theatre productions, including Portia in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Hedda in Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. This will not come as a surprise to those who have seen her dramatic storytelling in *Video Stories for Christmas Eve* in which she assumes the identities of the characters in the stories. An already experienced playwright, Estelle has recently written and stars in a one-woman play entitled *Caged*. This play is an autobiographical metaphor of "flight and sight" which explores the subject of a gradual loss of vision. To quote Estelle in our telephone conversation, "This is not a story of gloom and doom. It is a celebration of the human spirit." The play has received front page reviews in Nashville, Tennessee, where Estelle lives with her husband David. It is interesting to note that Estelle and David are working on a project using radio frequency to guide the stage movement of blind performers.

I have written this review on a personal level because we, as tellers, do not always know the life story of the teller. Neither do we fully know the "life story" within a *written* story. In 1980, when I first heard Estelle tell one of her vivid Zulu tribal tales, I was completely captivated by her consummate skill as a dramatic storyteller. The intervening years have affirmed and reaffirmed my first impression. Estelle is a woman of "vision" who looks to the future and embraces it with joy. We are the beneficiaries!

Estelle Condra's works include:

- *See the Ocean* by Estelle Condra, illustrated by Linda Crockett-Blassingame
Ideals Children's Books, Nashville, TN, 1994
- *Video Stories for Christmas Eve* by Estelle Condra 1991
Distributed by Imagination Crossroads
3900 Hillsboro Road
Nashville, TN 37215
(615) 297-0637

"The Peace Angel" and "Hey You"

Contact Estelle Condra
3027 New Natchez Trace
Nashville, TN 37215
(615) 383-1065

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- We welcome comments and suggestions from our readers and members.
- Keep on "telling." Volunteer for all GSSL programs. We need to increase our cadre of volunteer tellers.