



CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Mary Hance

Mom helps author see the 'Ocean'

If you know Estelle Condra, you would think that *See The Ocean*, her wonderful new children's book, was inspired by her own life, by her own experience with blindness.

But if you talk to Estelle about it, she will tell you that her story is really a tribute to her mother.

"The way Nellie sees the ocean is the way my mother told things to us," said Condra, who grew up in South Africa and has made a successful career for herself here as a storyteller, teaching artist, performer and now children's author.



Condra

"She could make things visible that were not there. She was a weaver of tales."

Like mother, like daughter. Estelle Condra is the consummate weaver of tales. And challenger of the imagination.

See the Ocean, illustrated by Linda Crockett-Blossinghame, is a picture book story of a family's annual trip to the beach — of the brothers in the back seat with their younger sister, who is blind — with all three trying to catch the first glimpse of their beloved ocean.

The brothers' sight wins out year after year, until one year when Nellie sees it first, and maybe the most vividly.

The book is just out from Ideals Children's Books, with an initial run of 10,000 copies. It has already been recognized as one of the American Booksellers Association's "Pick of the List" top 100 titles published in 1993 and 1994. ("That's very nice for a new author." Condra says modestly.)

Davis-Kidd Booksellers children's book expert Jeanne Pollock said Condra's reading and signing several weeks ago was a big hit with the crowd of 75 children and adults.

"Her whole concept is to inspire imagination and creativity in children. She's really wonderful."

Going from performer and storyteller to children's writer is harder than you might think, even for Condra, who is clearly accustomed to challenge.

"I wanted to write the way I talk, the way I tell stories — you rattle, there is no punctuation, no structure. But you can't do that. Writing involves the choosing of a few words. You have to be so sparing. Every word counts."

Condra came to the United States in 1973 after studying and teaching speech and drama in London and in South Africa. She moved to Nashville in 1979 and became a teaching artist for the Nashville Institute for the Arts.

Known for her folklore and African tales, she has performed with the Tennessee Repertory Theater, the Nashville Academy Theater, the Nashville Symphony, Summer Lights and on the WPLN Talking Library.

She also owns Imagination Crossroads, an educational toy store, and Imagination Station, a studio for creative drama for children.

Condra's blindness has progressed since she was 4 years old to where she is able to see very little. She does most of her writing on a special computer, which also reads books to her. The computer reader has a variety of voices to choose from, she says, pointing to "Husky Betty," "Handsome Harry," and "Perfect Paul."

"They read to me three or four hours a day," she says.

When asked which voice she chooses for *See the Ocean*, she stops short, "I don't let *them* read it. The voices do well on most things, but they cannot be sensitive."

Sensitive is indeed the right word for *See the Ocean*.