

Language More Than Just the Written Word

“Children who are read to, learn how to handle books, look at pictures, and make up stories for themselves -- that’s what makes a reader,” says children’s book author and poet Mary Ann Hoberman. Hoberman shared her insights on children’s literature with early childhood educators at OFC’s Provider Appreciation Day celebration in May.

Language isn’t just the written word and isn’t silent – facts that are sometimes overlooked in the push to teach children to read at earlier and earlier ages, observed Keynote Speaker Mary Ann Hoberman at OFC’s Provider Appreciation Day Early Literacy Event at the Fairfax County Government Center.

The noted children’s book author and poet talked to the crowd of almost 300 early childhood educators about the importance of reading aloud to children. She also discussed the inspiration behind the many children’s books and poems she has produced during her long writing career and what kinds of books appeal to young children.

“Reading silently to oneself is a very small and relatively new part of language,” explained Hoberman. “Long before reading, humans communicated by speaking.”

Moreover, language is not primarily visual, according to Hoberman. “It’s a social and sociable act and an oral and aural medium.”

“So, of course it’s important to read to young children,” stressed Hoberman. “Just as we spoke and listened long before we developed reading and writing, so human beings learn to speak, hear, and talk long before they learn to read.”

When children hear stories, they are repeating and reinforcing what they’re learning to do naturally already, according to Hoberman. “The stories that they hear expand their language and expand all kinds of ideas that they have in their head.”

Good ideas for her books -- ones that sustain an entire story from the first line to the last in an organic way -- are “very mysterious in origin,” confided Hoberman. “Sometimes they feel almost as though they’re gifts, as if they’re not really yours at all but have been given to you.”

Often an idea starts with the book's title. That was the case with Hoberman's first book All My Shoes Come in Twos published 50 years ago. She was watching her feet as she pushed her two young children in a carriage through autumn leaves when the title "popped" into her head.

And it was the case with her more recent A House is a House for Me. "The title came into my head in that same kind of rhythmical way and I almost wrote the whole thing in one sitting," she recalled.

The book begins with these words "A hill is a house for an ant, an ant. A hive is a house for a bee, a hole is a house for mole or a mouse" and ends by declaring "The earth is a house for us all."

It's a strong environmental message for children and one that Hoberman endorsed. But, as with many of her books, she didn't know how it would end until she wrote the last line.

"Sometimes, even when I have a good idea, it's only in writing the book, and working out the logic of that first line, of that first concept that I understand what the initial good idea was and what its all about," admitted Hoberman.

When children are read aloud to from books that contain what Hoberman called the "4Rs" -- rhyme, rhythm, repetition and refrain -- they learn how to read without even knowing they're learning how to read."

Children might not learn to read when you want them to. Nor should they be pushed to read before they're ready, said Hoberman.

"But if they're read to and love books. And if they learn how to handle books, look at pictures, and make up stories for themselves, that's what makes a reader."