

Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet

Michael Rosen, Editor

Jane Ray, Illustrator

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This exceptional retelling is worth reading for one reason: it doesn't merely tell the story of the "star-cross'd lovers"; it raises the curtain on the story of their story, too.

The book opens as a play would. In lieu of a playbill, the audience meets the players via a cast list, with an illustration of each character. Kids are further entrenched as audience members-not mere readers-as they embark to London in the 1590s, the decade when Romeo and Juliet first hit the Elizabethan stage.

After an engaging overview of London's narrow, filthy streets, the plague's decimation of the population, Queen Elizabeth I's ruthless ways and spies, and the constant riots and upheavals in the streets, the play's storyteller unfurls the strength of the book: its ability to show readers that Shakespeare's writing process is as vitally important as the progress of the play's plot.

Indeed the book dedicates itself to exploring both. Readers are guided through selected play excerpts-generally the most memorable of the original text-each one small enough for easy digestion by middle-grade readers. The narrator offers frequent assistance to understanding, in the form of conversational interjections and explanations. Complicated themes are unraveled, and so are complicated words, thanks to the vocabulary and definitions that appear within the illustrated borders, each hanging level with its Shakespearean counterpart.

Credit the accessible and educational content to Rosen, whose book *Shakespeare: His Work and His World* earned the *School Library Journal's* Best Book of the Year in 2001. He is also the author of a children's poetry collection, as well as the popular *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*.

Rosen's bite-sized bunches of text are done fair justice by the illustrator's palette of ethereal but striking and vivid watercolors. Ray has illustrated several children's books, including *Under the Moon and Over the Sea* and a collection of fairy tales. Her *Story of Creation* won the 1992 Smarties Book Prize. Here, her focus illustrations take on the appearance of a snapshot scene of the play itself, and the pictures and text are bordered by a subtle, repeating frame that lends a colorful, clean, and curtain-raising flourish to each page.

The result is an elegant volume that will entice kids, excite parents, and treat any one who reads it as an audience member circa 1590.

LYNDA TWARDOWSKI (March / April 2004)

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