

The Puppet Pocket Story Apron

— Jennifer Aguirre

*Choose a pocket and we'll see
What is hidden there from thee. . .*

The puppet pocket story apron is an interactive visual storytelling presentation where children point to a pocket and the puppet inside comes to life through story, verse, or song, cultivating a sense of awe, wonder, and joy in the natural and fairy-tale worlds. This is a delightful way to share puppetry with children and audiences of all ages. I love the interactive quality of the apron and I am always learning from my young audience's spontaneous feedback.

My core audience is made up of four-to-nine-year-olds. These are the children you can count on to stay engaged to the very end. Audiences of two- and three-year-olds can also be engaged but need a simplified version of the apron to suit their age level. They often require gentle guidance on my part as many at this age practically want to climb into the pockets themselves or will stand and block the view of the rest of the audience. Mixed-age audiences are my favorite. I have seen many grown men's faces open in joy and remark afterwards that the performance made them feel young again.

The magic of the apron lies in the mystery of what is hidden in the pocket. Of course there is the ritual unveiling of the apron while singing a song, and then the ownership given to the audience with the pointing to each individual pocket. The voice can also be used as a tool to draw in the audience, or to quiet children by sharing that the puppets are shy and won't come out of hiding if it gets too loud. This can happen when the children get carried away with trying to guess what's inside the pockets. My favorite aspect of the story apron is that it is an opportunity to share all the charming old poems and finger stories that already exist, and that are otherwise underused. These old poems are such sweet little stories, often humorous and insightful as they hearken back to simpler times and are like little melodies to the ear. These poems are the models for the poems I write myself when I can't find the perfect poem for a particular puppet.



Performing a puppet pocket story apron. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Aguirre

An apron can have just one pocket in the bib or several pockets. My themed aprons have seventeen pockets on average, based on what fits best on the apron. I utilize several different styles of puppets, from felted finger puppets to little marionettes, hand puppets, and even pieces of fleece or ribbons that I trans-

form while I tell the story. Making something, even if very simple, is important to do in front of children because so few children today actually see something made in front of them, let alone make something themselves. Simple props can also be placed in the apron; for example, a crystal can be placed inside a small pocket and used to go and fetch a larger puppet that has been “sleeping” inside the story basket. The children can help wake him up by calling, “Wake up Mr. Gnome!” Or an appropriate object could be used to elicit an interactive finger game.

I created my first story apron nearly eighteen years ago, inspired by an article by Suzanne Down about her festival story apron. My first apron was stuffed with little gifts that I had made for my young children, brought to life through the little poems and songs I would sing to them. The themed apron idea came shortly after; the idea was planted by an Interpretive Specialist who hired me to perform at Big Trees State Park, CA and afterwards remarked, “Too bad your apron doesn’t have more animals in it.” My first themed apron was an oak tree with the puppets and poems inspired by the habitat of my home environment, the Sierra Nevada foothills of California. A flower garden, ocean, castle, barnyard farm, and festival aprons specific to Halloween (an old house) and Christmas (a winter tree) have followed throughout the years. I currently have three or four on the drawing board specific to natural ecosystems. I have found that the apron is a gentle way to impart appreciation for our natural world.

I perform these very portable puppetry aprons throughout the greater community at a variety of venues and public school classroom settings. I have fans (six- and seven-year-olds and their siblings!) at various annual music festivals that I perform at every year. These sit-down public performances are about forty minutes long. This length of show is too long for a Waldorf kindergarten, so I adapt the aprons for that

environment by leaving some pockets empty, or just having the bib full of pockets but not the skirt part. I don’t often perform my aprons in the Waldorf kindergarten as I like to save them for the venues outside the school, in order to keep them more special. Many of the Waldorf children attend these venues outside the school, and it keeps the aprons from being overly familiar. However, I do perform my Castle apron for the Waldorf nursery at their end of the year goodbye party, which includes parents, and share my barnyard farm apron at Easter time with the kindergarten.

I have worked with many kindergarten teachers over the years, helping them create story aprons that work for their classroom environments. Some have made an apron specific for performing the birthday story. Others have taken a multi-seasonal approach on the apron so they can change the puppets to reflect the cycle of the year, and still others have come up with a wide variety of creative ideas.

*The sunshine fades, the stars shine bright,
And now my stories say goodnight.
My pockets are all empty I’m sorry to say
But perhaps my puppets will come visit on
another day! ♦*

Jennifer Aguirre has been teaching a puppetry program based on the curriculum of the grades at the Sierra Waldorf School, near Sonora, CA since 1999. She is the school’s resident puppeteer, performing every three to four weeks for the kindergartens as well as developing large marionette performances for the festival life of the school, and also performs her themed puppet pocket story aprons in a variety of annual venues throughout California. She lives with her husband in a restored Gold Rush era home in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, where they raised their two children.