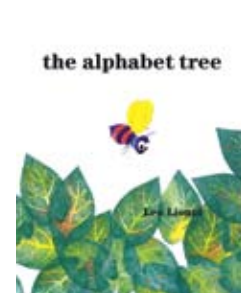


The Alphabet Tree

By Leo Lionni

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This charming parable by the late author and illustrator Leo Lionni is the tale of letters living in a special tree who learn to stand up to the wind by joining together to form words and sentences. Guided by a wise word-bug and strange caterpillar, they discover they are stronger collectively than individually and that they have something important to say that can make a difference. The story will delight children with its simplicity, humor and clever word play while engaging adults with the theme of the power of words and cooperation in a democratic society.

Told from the perspective of a tiny black ant to his friend, the story unfolds not so long ago when the letters lived happily in this very tree. But one day a strong wind comes and, though the letters try with all their might to hold on, many are blown away and others are terrified. After the storm passes, they huddle together frightened until the word-bug arrives to teach them how to gather in groups of “threes and fours and even more” to make words so they will be stronger when the wind blows again. The word-bug patiently works with the letters while they create short words like *dog* and *cat* and more difficult ones like *earth*. Climbing back into the leaves of the tree, they are able to hold on without fear against the wind when it returns.

One day a strange caterpillar happens upon the letters in the tree, remarking upon the confusion he observes, with random words scattered about the leaves. He suggests they cooperate to make sentences. Intrigued by this idea, the letters practice writing different kinds of sentences. The caterpillar approves but says it is not good enough, surprising the letters. “You must say something *important*,”

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remarks the caterpillar. After much thought, the letters come up with the most meaningful sentence they can think of and the caterpillar helps them to carry their message beyond their own tree.

Much of the story is told in Lionni’s beautiful watercolor stamps and colored pencil illustrations. Young children will be drawn to the bright-colored, often humorous artwork which fills and overlaps the pages of the book, making the text somewhat of a footnote. The bold, black typeset for the letters against the lush greens of the leaves creates quite a cozy effect.

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until the end.

Every summer, I look for a story to use for a creative musical drama camp with about thirty kids. My toddler found this story for me in a collection called Frederick’s Fables. Here are some of the ideas we explored based on *The Alphabet Tree*:

The Word: Adapt the story into a longer stage play. Begin by brainstorming all of the characters of the story: vowels, consonants, wind, ants, word-bug, caterpillar. What is each character’s personality and what kinds of things would they say? What consonants would be friends and hang out together? Practice spelling words and creating sentences using your bodies. Show verbs through movement. What important sentences could we write?

Creative Drama: Block, dramatize and dance the story using student ideas. How can we dance the wind-storm? Make sure everyone has an important part. Show three movement words that start with your letter. Now show three emotion words.

Play: Choose simple melodies, canons and instrumentals from *The Volumes* (Murray edition) to create songs and dances for the story. Create spoken chants, rhymes or letter games with body percussion or instrumental accompaniment.

Visual Art: Build an Alphabet Tree using recycled materials: brown paper bags, old boxes, cardboard, etc. Inspired by the artwork in the book, paint large leaves and connect these to the Alphabet Tree with clothespins. Allow the students to design their own sets and costumes. Keep it simple! ■

Kerri Lynn Nichols, a children’s composer, author, and recording artist, has taught Orff Schulwerk for more than twenty years.