

Reviewed by Cora Lee Khambatta

Earthdance

By Joanne Ryder

Illustrated by Norman Gorbaty

New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1996

earth does: spin. The story entreats the reader to expand the imagination and reach physically beyond mountains into space, becoming Earth.

As Earth, the reader embraces the sounds of crackling ice and lapping waves, and the movement of

trembling mountains and quivering, murmuring reeds. In this role, the reader visits cities and farms, plants and animals, and people in all of their culturally diverse activities.

As the reader views an image of the bright sun, the facing page illustrates that others on the planet are in moonlit darkness. The science of daytime and nighttime is presented on this elemental level. Throughout, the reader has experienced all the Earth's happenings, and witnessed some of its inhabitants leaving footprints in the snow.

One of the unique features of *Earthdance* is the motion that it embodies. The images are like sculptures charged with movement and depth, almost jumping off the pages. The artist's use of printing ink with stencils on illustration board gives a feeling of bas-relief. The creative placement of text beside various images enhances the pictures' depth and movement.

In his online artistic statement, illustrator Norman Gorbaty writes, "I am fascinated by the motion around us and often try to capture this in my work...I make a mark. That mark tells me where the next mark should go until the image begins to have a life of its own." All of his images in *Earthdance* project a wonderful sense of movement. This is particularly evident on the cover, where one sees figures of diverse individuals dancing on the earth.

Earthdance is also an excellent springboard for creative dramatics. It is particularly well suited for Earth Day activities. Children enjoy dramatizing the story using scarves. They become Earth, and embody the sounds, movement, and rhythms of each aspect of the planet.



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Author Joanne Ryder's fascination with the natural world began during her childhood under her dad's guidance. She says, "My father helped me find the magic in the natural world and appreciate what it might be like to be another creature." That magic became her book *My Father's Hands*, a description of holding many different small creatures before carefully returning them to their habitats.

In *Earthdance*, however, Ryder's focus expands from small creatures to the entire world. In it, she invites the reader to identify with and imagine becoming Earth, exploring and honoring it, and dancing with all its inhabitants. The author commends the reader's new empathy for Earth, saying, "May they treasure you."

As in her previous book, Ryder asks her readers to leave the Earth whole. Her challenge is to help the reader feel intimate with the omnipotence of a planet. Ordinarily, that concept is beyond the grasp of a child's perception. But Ryder's poetry combined with the imaginative images of her artistic partner, Norman Gorbaty, work magic.

Before the story begins, the book's design invites a sense of wonderment by placing an illustration of the sun on the copyright page facing a picture of a star-studded sky with the moon on the credit page. The text asks the reader to imagine standing in a tall, empty space and reaching up toward the stars to do what the

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Consider composing an Earth Day song in ABA form to enhance the dramatization. The B part lends itself to improvisation with “found” instruments from nature that make sounds from rubbing, striking, shaking, or blowing them. Your students will experience the book and explore some or all of these activities with great enthusiasm.

In *Earthdance*, Ryder and Gorbaty have created a masterpiece. The rich verbal and artistic images inspire readers to explore their relationships to Earth and to expand their visual and verbal vocabularies. Together, the author and illustrator have expressed the magnificence of the world and made it intimate. This is a book that will enrich readers of all ages. ■

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