

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green color with a subtle vertical gradient. Scattered across the page are several stylized, light-colored leaf motifs, each consisting of a stem with two leaves pointing in opposite directions. These motifs are positioned at various heights and angles, creating a decorative pattern.

# SCARY READERS THEATRE

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**Suzanne I. Barchers**

The logo features a stylized green leafy branch on the left side, with three leaves pointing upwards and to the right. To the right of the branch, the word "Greenwood" is written in a large, elegant, dark green serif font. Below "Greenwood", the words "PUBLISHING GROUP" are written in a smaller, dark green, all-caps sans-serif font.

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# **SCARY READERS THEATRE**

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# **SCARY READERS THEATRE**

*Suzanne I. Barchers*

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*For Norma Olson,  
whose courage is inspirational*



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“The Thief and the Liar” was adapted from “The Partnership of the Thief and the Liar” in *The Grey Fairy Book*, edited by Andrew Lang, Dover Publications, 1967.

“The Tinderbox” and “The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids” were excerpted from *Readers Theatre for Beginning Readers*, by Suzanne I. Barchers, Teacher Ideas Press, 1993.

“The Voice of Death” was adapted from *The Red Fairy Book*, edited by Andrew Lang, Dover Publications, 1966.

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# Introduction

## NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART

The scripts in this collection were chosen because they are a bit mischievous, ghostly, monstrous, or downright frightening. Drawn from Greek myths, folk tales, ghost stories, and modern urban legends, they provide teachers with an enticing collection of deliciously scary stories from around the world. Peopled by witches, trolls, ghosts, monsters, robbers, and tricksters, these tales will be recognized by many students because they are adapted from familiar sources.

## THE ROLE OF READERS THEATRE

Readers theatre is a presentation by two or more participants who read from scripts and interpret a literary work in such a way that the audience imaginatively senses characterization, setting, and action. Voice and body tension rather than movement are involved, thus eliminating the need for the many practice sessions that timing and action techniques require in the presentation of a play (Laughlin and Latrobe 1990, 3).

Traditionally, the primary focus of readers theatre is on an effective reading of the script rather than on a dramatic, memorized presentation. Because many of the scripts are familiar, students will naturally paraphrase their reading, an acceptable practice. Generally, there are minimal props and movement on the stage, although adding such touches enlivens the production and invites more active participation, especially with primary students.

The ease of incorporating readers theatre into the language arts program offers teachers an exciting way to enhance the program, particularly in today's classrooms that emphasize a variety of reading and listening experiences. All scripts were evaluated with the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Scale and are grouped into sections of second-, third-, fourth-, or fifth-grade readability levels (parts 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively). Before using, each script should be further evaluated by the teacher for content or vocabulary that might be challenging to students.

The performance of readers theatre scripts also encourages strong oral skills for readers and promotes active listening for students in the audience (Sloyer 1982, 4). Students explore literature in a new form, and the class can begin to analyze various treatments of the same or similar stories by comparing these to versions they have heard or read. Additional benefits are the pleasure of performing for parents or other classes and the ease of preparing for special days when a program is expected.

## PREPARING THE SCRIPTS

Once a script is chosen for reading, make a copy for each character, plus an extra set or two for your own use and a replacement copy. To help beginning or remedial readers keep their place on the page, use highlighter markers to designate a character's name within the copy. For example, in any given story, the role of the narrator could be highlighted in blue each time it appears, with other parts highlighted in different colors. This helps readers track their parts and eases management of scripts in the event pages become mixed. Line numbers are included in the right margin for easy prompting by the teacher to a specific line.

Photocopied scripts will last longer if you use a three-hole punch (or copy them on prepunched paper) and place them in inexpensive folders. The folders can be color coordinated to the internal highlighting for each character's part. The title of the play can be printed on the outside of the folder, and scripts can be stored easily for the next reading. Preparing the scripts and folders is a good task for a volunteer parent or an older student helper. The preparation takes a minimum of initial attention and needs to be repeated only when a folder is lost.

## GETTING STARTED

For the first experience with a readers theatre script, choose one with many characters to involve as many students as possible. Gather the students informally, perhaps in a circle on the floor. If a story or picture book version of the chosen script is available, read it aloud to the students. Then introduce the script version and explain that readers theatre does not mean memorizing a play and acting it out, but rather reading a script aloud with perhaps a few props and actions. Select volunteers to do the initial reading, allowing them an opportunity to review their parts before reading aloud. Other students could examine other versions, brainstorm prop ideas, or preview other scripts.

Before reading the first script, decide whether to choose parts after the reading or to introduce additional scripts to involve more students. A readers theatre workshop could be held periodically, with every student belonging to a group that prepares a script for presentation. A readers theatre festival could be planned for a special day when several short scripts are presented consecutively, with brief intermissions between each reading. Groups of tales could include the well-known Grimm tales, those drawn from mythology, tales of trickery, or tales from specific countries. Consider these groupings drawn from this collection:

**Ghosts and Fairies:** "The Fiddler's Contest," "The Headless Haunt," "Janet and Tam Lin," and "Aaron Kelly's Bones."

**Grave stories:** "The Grave," "The Girl with the Lavender Dress," "The Fiddler's Contest," "The Headless Haunt," and "Aaron Kelly's Bones."

**Witch stories:** "Brave Heart" and "The Witches with the Horns."

**Heads:** "The Headless Haunt," "The Red Ribbon," "The Tale of the Talking Eggs," and "The Hydra."

**Retribution:** "Rachel's Curse" and "The Punishment."

Once the students have read the scripts and become familiar with new vocabulary, determine which students will read the various parts. In assigning roles, strive for a balance between males and females. Some roles are animals or characters that could be read by either sex. Some parts are considerably more demanding than others, and students should be encouraged to volunteer for roles that they will be comfortable reading. Once they are familiar with readers theatre, students should be encouraged to stretch and try reading a role that is challenging for them. Though one goal for incorporating readers theatre into the curriculum is to develop and inspire competent readers, it is equally important that the students succeed and enjoy the literature.

## PRESENTATION SUGGESTIONS

For readers theatre, readers traditionally stand—or sit on stools, chairs, or the floor—in an informal presentation style. The narrator may stand slightly off to one side with the script placed on a music stand or lectern. The readers may hold their scripts in folders.

The position of the reader indicates the importance of the role. For example, Rachel in “Rachel’s Curse” would have a position in the front center of the stage, with the minor characters to the sides and slightly behind her. In “The Fiddler’s Contest,” the narrator, county clerk, Coot, and Ples could be on one side of the stage with the other characters entering and remaining on the other side of the stage for their lines.

Because these scripts are appropriate for developing and remedial readers, it is important that the students are comfortable with the physical arrangement. It is assumed that the students will present informally, perhaps adapting or enlivening the traditional readers theatre style. Therefore, a traditional arrangement for presenters is not provided with the scripts. Instead, a few general suggestions are supplied for each play. For example, readers of brief parts may enter or leave the stage prior to and following their parts. Alternatively, readers may stand up for a reading and sit down for the remainder of the script.

Determining the presentation arrangement is a good cooperative activity for the readers. The arrangement should foster success; students who cannot stand quietly for a long period of time should be allowed to sit on a chair, a pillow, or the floor. Restless students with a short reading could remain on stage only for the duration of the reading. However, students may have fresh ideas for a different presentation, and their involvement should be fostered.

## PROPS

Readers theatre traditionally has no, or few, props. However, simple costuming effects, such as a hat, apron, or scarf, plus a few props on stage will lend interest to the presentation. Shirlee Sloyer (1982, 58) suggests that a script can become a property: “a book, a fan, a gun, or any other object mentioned in the story.” Suggestions for simple props or costuming are included; however, students should be encouraged to decide how much or little to add to their production. The use of props or actions may be overwhelming for some readers, and the emphasis should remain on the reading, rather than on an overly complicated presentation.

## DELIVERY

In an effort to keep the scripts easy for readers, few delivery suggestions are written within the scripts. Therefore, it is important to discuss with the students what will make the scripts come alive as they read. Primary students naturally incorporate voices into their creative play and should be encouraged to explore how this same practice will enhance their reading. Small groups working on individual plays should be invited to brainstorm various delivery styles. A variety of warm-ups can help students with expression. For example, have the entire class respond to the following situations that have similar themes as those in this collection:

- discovering a snake has gotten loose
- suspecting a monster is under your bed
- learning you have been tricked

- having someone jump out of the closet at you
- discovering your best friend is a ghost
- having witches take over your house
- discovering your cat can talk
- having a genie or fairy appear with three wishes

At first, it is tempting for students to keep their heads buried in the script, making sure they don't miss a line. Students should learn the material well enough to be able to look up during a presentation. Students can learn to use onstage focus, where they focus on each other during the presentation. This is most logical for characters who are interacting with each other. The use of offstage focus, where the presenters look directly into the eyes of the audience, is more logical for the narrator or characters who are uninvolved with onstage characters. An alternative is to have students who do not interact with each other focus on a prearranged offstage location, such as the classroom clock, during delivery.

Simple actions can also be incorporated into readers theatre. Though primary students are generally less inhibited than older students, encourage readers to use action by practicing pantomime in groups. If possible, have a mime come for a presentation and some introductory instruction. Alternatively, introduce mime by having students act out the following familiar actions: combing hair, brushing teeth, turning the pages of a book, eating an ice cream cone, making a phone call, and falling asleep. Then select and try general activities drawn from the scripts: rocking, waving, jumping, fiddling, and so forth. These actions need not be elaborate; characters can indicate falling asleep simply by closing their eyes. Although readers theatre uses minimal gestures and actions, using them can brighten a presentation for both participants and audience.

Generally, the audience should be able to see the readers' facial expressions during the reading. Upon occasion a script lends itself to a character moving across the stage, facing another character while reading. In this event, the presenters should be turned enough that the audience can see their faces.

The use of music can enhance the delivery of the play. For "The Fiddlers Contest" or "Aaron Kelly's Bones," use violin music during parts of the play. Royal music may accompany the kings' roles in "The Thief and the Liar." Signals could foreshadow disaster, such as a drum beat just before the narrator tells that the wife's head has fallen off in "The Red Ribbon." As with props and action, music should be used sparingly, as the emphasis should remain on the reading.

## **THE AUDIENCE**

When students are part of the audience, they should understand their role. Caroline Feller Bauer (1990, 30) recommends that students rehearse applauding and reacting appropriately to the script. Challenge the students to determine if the audience might provide sound effects, such as joining in with the hobyahs' chant in "The Hobyahs." Cue cards that prompt the audience to make noises can be incorporated into the production. Encourage students to find additional ways to involve the audience in the program.

## BEYOND SCARY READERS THEATRE

Once students have enjoyed the reading process involved in preparing and presenting readers theatre, the next logical step is to involve them in the writing process of creating their own scripts. Consult your librarian for sources of more scary stories. The options for readers theatre scripts are endless, and students will naturally want to translate a favorite story into a script. For an in-depth discussion of this process, consult part 1 of Shirlee Sloyer's *Readers Theatre: Story Dramatization in the Classroom*.

## REFERENCES

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- Laughlin, Mildred Knight, and Kathy Howard Latrobe. *Readers Theatre for Children: Scripts and Script Development*. Englewood, CO: Teacher Ideas Press, 1990.
- Sloyer, Shirlee. *Readers Theatre: Story Dramatization in the Classroom*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982.

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# Part I



## The Black Cats Are Talking

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# The Black Cats Are Talking

## SUMMARY

In this American tale, a woodcutter is coming home when he meets nine black cats carrying a dead cat on a stretcher. The cats ask him to tell Aunt Kan that Polly Grundy is dead. He shares the story with his wife, with unexpected results.

*Reading level: 2.*



## PRESENTATION SUGGESTIONS

The main characters, the narrator and the woodcutter, should have the central focus. The black cats could be to one side of them, with the wife and yellow cat on the other side.

## PROPS

Students could bring in a variety of stuffed toy cats or make cutouts of black cats to be propped around the stage. Consider adding props or drawings to depict the fire or dinnertime.

## CHARACTERS

Narrator  
Woodcutter  
First Cat  
Second Cat  
Wife  
Yellow Cat