

COLUMNISTS

A Book/Video Review: The "Learn to Read American Sign Language in SignWriting" Package

by Alexandra Han

(SignWriting (or sw) is an 'alphabet', or a list of symbols, that can be used to read, write and/or type one's own sign language on paper or the computer screen. Like the Roman alphabet, used to write many different spoken languages, such as Danish, German, French, Spanish and English, SignWriting can also be used to write many different sign languages.)

The "Learning to Read American Sign Language in SignWriting" package comes in a glossy kit which opens up to reveal a video tape stored in an indented pocket. Six books, written in both SignWriting and English, accompany the video tape. Colorful pictures in these books naturally draw children's attention. Due to the glossy, shiny covers and the crisp pages, which are sturdier than most pages, these books promise to withstand years of usual abuse.

The sheer amount of work, thought and detail which has gone into this package to make SignWriting as readable and entertaining as possible is truly astonishing.

First, one watches the videotape, which has Darline Clark-Gunsauls, a native Deaf signer and experienced ASL teacher, sign the following well-known stories: Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, and Snow White. Clark-Gunsauls wears simple, plain yet flattering clothes, with an accompanying simple yet attractive background, so that the stories - in her hands and facial expressions - take prominence and come alive. (One mistake made by story-tellers at times is to wear multi-colored clothes, which makes reading ASL more difficult and thus discourage viewers).

A fluent, expressive signer, Clark-Gunsauls tells the stories so that both young and older children are both fascinated and challenged by the stories. Hearing teachers or parents frequently read literature to their hearing students, without pausing after every word to make sure the children understand; so, too, Clark Gunsauls signs without pausing after every sign. Just as it is not required that hearing students understand each and every word spoken in a story in order to understand and enjoy the story, so, too, young Deaf children do not need to understand each and every sign and its accomodating facial grammar in order to enjoy and gain from Clark-Gunsauls' expressive story-telling.

One might wonder at the somewhat sexist nature of these stories. There's Snow White, who cleans and cooks for the elves; Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, both of whom are rescued by princes. All these female characters are also Anglo-Saxon (white people), too; and super-beautiful to boot.

Valerie Sutton, executive director of the Center For Sutton Movement Writing, Inc., a non-profit organization, which funds the DAC organization, and who is the original inventor of SignWriting, acknowledges this:

"Of course those stories are not per-

fect! We have a ton of literature on videotape - in ASL. The idea was and still is, that in time I will transcribe those videos too, creating other literature for the Learn To Read ASL Series. (As) you know, SignWriting is used all over the world, and what we do in our little organization here is only a small portion of what is being done worldwide.

"So the question about choices of literature is not as simple as "we wanted those stories". Actually, I didn't! (The decision) was based on the illustrations I already drew from years ago, so that I wouldn't have to pay an illustrator to re-draw these illustrations again, (as well as) what literature had already been published, and which ones had to be re-done with the new SignWriting symbols....there is no question we need more literature and bigger variety.

"Actually I think Goldilocks was a brave woman! But she - also was a vandall!

"And everyone can see the underlying social atti-

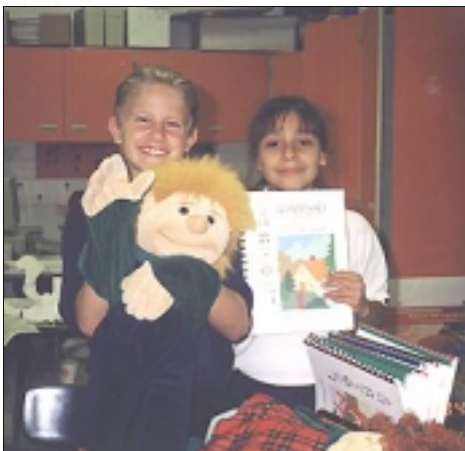
tudes in those old stories - that is for sure!

Darline (Clark-Gunsauls) and I are hoping that

some of the students will start writing and publishing their own stories written in SignWriting - why wait for us and our limitations! And I am sure they will choose other (non-sexist, non-racist) themes."

Already this is happening; stories are starting to be told around the world in written Signs. One example can already be found on the SignWriting web site. But back to the review itself....

From this particular package, the six books, which tell the story of Goldilocks & the Three Bears, range in reading levels from Level One (for young children, in which exercises are provided to practice components of SignWriting) to Level Four, Level Four being the most condensed, advanced



For: "send as is": "Two proud students are standing in front of some of their SignWriting books. New Mexico"

and complex. (Level 4 also has the smallest written Signs).

Kathy Akehurst is a private, experienced tutor in Ontario, Canada, who works with a group of Deaf people, ranging from children to adults. It is a mark of the professionalism of the books that her students had to be persuaded that these books belonged to them: "The students were very pleased with the book although it took some talking to get them to believe they were free to mark and color as much as they wished in such a nice book"

She also observed how "The children really enjoyed the coloring part, and even colored the signwriting symbols. Everyone did their best to write rows of symbols and signs although we all agreed it (quite naturally) made our hands

tired! Still, done in a group it was fun and interesting and some of the more diligent ones practiced on their own until our next meeting".

For Level One, the story is told in very simple English, with large type words and equally large typed Signs.

Level Two and Three books have color-coded Signs. In

other words, for each written Sign, different components of that sign is colored in particular colors, to make it both more attractive for young children (and adults too- like this columnist!), and easier to read. The colors, carefully chosen, are a pleasure to the eyes, and makes the written Signs, even for adults, enjoyable to read.

This is what these colors represent for each written Sign:

Dark Green: Face and Head

Dark Blue: Hands

Dark Red: Movement Symbols

Dark Pink: Contact Symbols

Dark Orange: Punctuation

Black: Arms & Shoulders

This is, as Darline Clark-Gunsauls, director of DAC (Deaf Action Committee), points out, similar to the Montessori method for very young children, in which words are color coded to facilitate greater independent reading. Verbs are colored one particular color, nouns another color, and so forth.

This color-coding continues until Level 4, when all written Signs are printed in black ink only. Clearly, in a world of newspapers and books which are printed in black ink, and it is cheapest to print written materials in black only, it is simply not feasible to have written Signs that are color-coded only.

There's also another book ("Instruction for SignWriting Level 3 & 4"), which includes explanations about



"Darline Clark-Gunsauls, the signer of the four stories in the video, here is teaching a Deaf child in Bluefield, Nicaragua. 1996."

the written (or rather computer-typed) Signs that tells the story of Goldilocks & the Three Bears. These books are ideal for any adult who wants to learn SignWriting themselves so that they can teach it to others - or for any older child who want to teach themselves SignWriting.

Teachers can contact DAC to obtain copies of the "Learn to Read American Sign Language in SignWriting" Package:

The SignWriting Literacy Project

The DAC, Deaf Action Committee

For SignWriting

P.O. Box 517, La Jolla, CA, 92038-

0517, USA

Voice(619)456-0098...TTY(619)456-

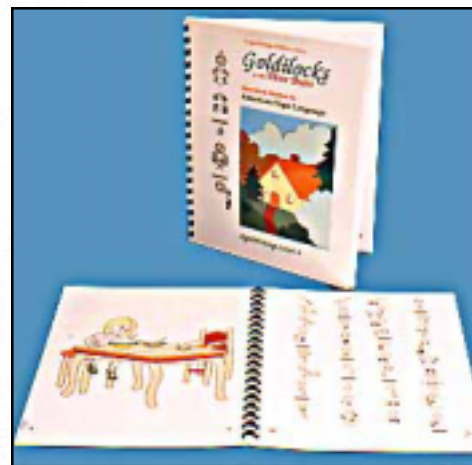
0010...Fax(619)456-0020

Email::DAC@SignWriting.org

Web: <http://www.SignWriting.org>



for: "level one": "Sample of the "A SignWriting Children's Story: Goldilocks and the Three Bears Workbook and Coloring Book in American Sign Language: SignWriting Level 1"



for: "level 4": "Sample of the "A SignWriting Children's Story: Goldilocks and the Three Bears: Storybook Written In American Sign Language"