

Making “The Little Fir Tree”

I made my first tactile book in 2004, after reading an article about them in a needlework magazine. This book was my fifth – I’m quite a slow worker. Hopefully, I have learned a little about what works and what doesn’t along the way, but every book brings with it a whole new series of challenges.

I chose the subject of Christmas as I thought it would give me lots of opportunities to use exciting shiny materials and bright colours and would bring with it many ways to appeal to the senses of hearing and smell. The inspiration for the little fir tree itself came from my thinking about the fir-tree shaped air-fresheners that you can dangle in car-windows. After searching long and hard for these, I realized that using one in the book was totally impractical – they needed to dangle free and were definitely unsafe for handling, but by that time the idea had taken hold.

My story is an adapted version of the folk tale “The Little Fir Tree” – obviously much simplified and with the sad ending taken out! The Little Fir Tree is all alone in a field. Then one day a kind lady takes him into her house and puts him in a pot. She then decorates him with bells (sound effects!) and gives him a (shiny!) star. Finally, on Christmas Day, he is surrounded by presents (which can be opened!) What I liked about this story was the cumulative effect: each picture on the right-hand page is the same as the one before, but with one simple addition (of a pot, some bells, a star, a present). The text is on the left-hand side and underneath is a copy of the object which is going to be added into the main picture. I hoped that this gradual building up of a picture made up of several elements would be

rather intriguing for the children and also quite a good learning experience.

I am proud of my fir trees, as I tried and rejected quite a few different materials (including green fur – that could have been confusing!) before finding a solution. I eventually went for a lolly stick, over which I sewed decreasing lengths of shiny green pipe-cleaner. Securing the wire edges properly was definitely one of the challenges. I also rather like the pots, which I made out of pink Fimo, which has a clay-like texture. I hope they will be robust enough to withstand investigation – but fortunately they are relatively quick and easy to replace.

I do think some parts of the book are a bit over-complicated. I wasn't very happy with my choice of star – I thought it would be so easy to find a nice chunky plastic star to sew in but how wrong I was. Also, I think there is definitely room for improvement with my presents. For the wrapping, I used a shiny piece of fabric, backed with felt to stop the fraying. This folded over the central present (a felt square with a funny face or squeaker, attached with elastic) and was secured with a ribbon. Definitely too fiddly – but the best I could do. I had some mini-gift boxes which looked ideal, but were just too bulky.

I was absolutely thrilled with my second place in the 3-6 age range, and the trophy has pride of place on the mantelpiece. Thank you very much to TBAG for running this competition. It certainly gave me the push I needed to get going on a project, and I really hope that looking at all the marvellous work on this web-site will inspire many other people to have a go too!

