

# Whiskers!

School Show Guide



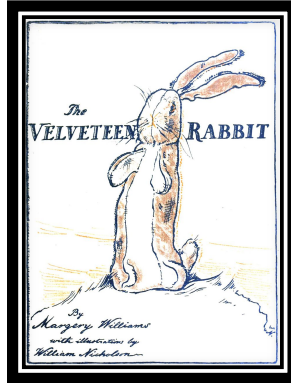
Welcome to Whiskers! and the wonderful world of *The Velveteen Rabbit!* This guide has been designed to enhance and build upon your class trip to the musical, Whiskers! In the following pages you will find information about the beloved book and its author, the road to become a musical, along with fun activities, and prompts for projects and classroom discussion.

Lyricabella Productions is committed to the power that arts education has to motivate, inspire, and buoy young minds and creativity. We believe that creative engagement and artistic interpretation, along with strong educational skills, truly shapes the whole child, enabling him or her to grow into confident, compassionate, open-minded adults.

Thank you for joining us at the show!

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*The Velveteen Rabbit (or How Toys Become Real)* was written by Margery Williams with illustrations by William Nicholson, and was first published in 1922. Its universal message of the search for love and acceptance made it a beloved favorite in the canon of children's literature.

## THE STORY

The story takes place just after Christmas when a stuffed rabbit, sewn from velveteen, is given to a small boy. Rabbit is simple, and the boy soon neglects him, favoring the other shiny, more modern toys. Rabbit finds himself left in the nursery with the other forgotten toys, and soon befriends the Skin Horse, the oldest toy in the nursery, who tells Rabbit about what it is to become REAL. REAL is achieved by love alone, and Rabbit despairs that it will never happen to him as long as the boy only plays with the other toys.

One night the boy is taken ill with Scarlet Fever (an illness that was very, very serious back in those days.) He cries for his favorite toy, and is hastily handed Rabbit instead. Over the next few weeks, Rabbit comforts the boy, and slowly rises to the status of favorite toy. He begins to lose some of his fluffiness, and starts to look slightly shabby, but remembers Horse's words:

*"Generally, by the time you are REAL, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are REAL you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."*

As the boy begins to recover Rabbit is sure he is slowly becoming REAL. In those days, germs were taken quite seriously as they did not have the medicine that we have now, so when the boy is healthy, Rabbit and all the bedclothes from the boy's sickroom are taken to the back garden to be burned. Rabbit is heartbroken that he is to be destroyed just when he has finally become REAL to the boy. At the last minute, the Nursery Magic Fairy appears, and actually transforms Rabbit to a REAL Rabbit, giving him the power to run and play in nature with REAL rabbit friends. He learns that his love and sacrifice have given him the power to achieve his real dream.

## MARGERY WILLIAMS BIANCO (1881-1944)

Margery Williams was an English-American novelist, most famous for the numerous books she wrote for children and young adults. While she started writing at age 19, she achieved lasting fame at the age of 41 with the publication of *The Velveteen Rabbit* in 1922. Born in London, England, Williams lost her father when she was seven, and moved to the United States with her family in 1890. In her late teens she returned to London to pursue writing, where she met and married Italian writer Francisco Bianco. The couple had two children, Cecco and Pamela, and moved to Turin, Italy, where Francisco served as a soldier during the first World War.

After the war, the family moved back to the United States, where Margery found success as a prolific writer of children's books and novels. During the next 20 years, her daughter, Pamela, illustrated many of her books.

Her works were somewhat controversial amongst critics, as each story seemed to have an underlying theme of sadness, loss, and transformation, and many argued that these were not appropriate themes for children. She also commonly wrote about toys becoming real. It was apparent that the death of Williams' father had been major turning point in her life, and perhaps the solace that she found in her toys at the time took on monumental power for her. In her defense, Williams always argued that "hearts acquire greater humanity through pain and adversity and that life is a process of constant change—there are departures for some and arrivals for others—and the process allows us to grow and persevere."

—courtesy, Wikipedia

## BOOKS BY MARGERY WILLIAMS

- 1902 *The Late Returning*
- 1904 *The Price of Youth*
- 1906 *The Bar*
- 1914 *The Thing in the Woods* (republished in 1924 as by "Harper Williams")
- 1922 *The Velveteen Rabbit*
- 1925 *Poor Cecco*
- 1925 *The Little Wooden Doll*
- 1926 *The Apple Tree*
- 1927 *The Skin Horse*
- 1927 *The Adventures of Andy*
- 1929 *All About Pets*
- 1929 *The Candlestick*
- 1931 *The House That Grew Smaller*
- 1932 *The Street of Little Shops*
- 1933 *The Hurdy-Gurdy Man*
- 1934 *The Good Friends*
- 1934 *More About Animals*
- 1936 *Green Grows the Garden*
- 1936 *Winterbound*
- 1939 *Other People's Houses*
- 1941 *Franzi and Gizi*
- 1942 *Bright Morning*
- 1942 *Penny and the White Horse*
- 1944 *Forward, Commandos!*

## WHISKERS!

The musical, with script, music, and lyrics by Caroline Altman, was first performed at San Francisco's Young Performers Theatre in 1995. In 1996 it was picked up by Galatean Players Ensemble Theatre, where it played at the Onstage Theatre in Pleasant Hill, California. The show went on to become a holiday favorite in the area, running for 15 holiday seasons at the Regional Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek.

Altman, always one to make up stories and plays with her stuffed animals as a child, and a big fan of the story (she played the Skin Horse in a school play in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade) had always been interested in the inner life of toys, and decided to tell this story from the perspective of the toys. This is why we never meet the boy; we only hear and see the action of the toys in response to the plot of the story. Nana is the only human we encounter as she brings in news from the outside world that affects the community of the Nursery.



## MEET THE CHARACTERS!

The cast of Whiskers! is multi-generational which means that there are actors of all ages playing the roles. The nursery is also multi-generational, but often the youngest actors play the parts of the oldest toys. This is to show that wisdom of the heart does not always go along with age, and that personality and experience can often influence the maturity rate of character.

Two of the youngest actors in the show play the characters of the ragdolls, Raggedy Ann and Holly Hobby. They appear very young, but are wise beyond their years, and have been in the nursery a very long time. We see this as they advise the other toys in song:

*“There’s a new understanding that we reach as we grow.  
People love, people leave us, and just why we’ll never know.  
It is when the heart, divided, makes us choose how to feel-  
Either loss or growing wonder at these changes that are real.”*

In contrast Soldier and Darbie are two of the newest toys to the Nursery, but they are played by the older actors. They are not very mature, always concerned with superficial things. This shows us that age does not necessarily bring wisdom.

As you can see the toys have been updated to be more familiar to modern day audiences, but we have also added a character who affects the plot. Tina the Ballerina is a sympathetic character who does not speak in the first half of the show, as she has rusted due to an early “bathtub accident.” While most of the toys have grown accustomed to the notion that toys are neglected, forgotten, and left behind, Tina has not. In fact it is quite possible that her inability to accept change is what has ultimately makes her speechless, and it takes the threat of losing Rabbit to make her break her silence and spring to action. When the other toys cannot help her, she ventures out on her own, leaving the nursery, and experiencing her own transformation into the Nursery Magic Fairy who ultimately saves Rabbit.

## Characters of WHISKERS!

- Rabbit
- Skin Horse
- Tina the Ballerina
- Soldier
- Darbie
- Jack
- Timmy Train
- Holly Hobby
- Raggedy Ann
- Tin Soldier
- Nana

## QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the differences between the musical and the book? What are the similarities?
- How does adding music to a story change the experience?
- What was your favorite song in the show, and why?
- Some songs are fast and lively, while some are slower. How does the style of a song help support its meaning?
- How would you describe the relationship between Soldier and Darbie?
- Why does Rabbit want to become REAL?
- What does it mean to become REAL?
- If one of your toys were to suddenly become REAL, how would it change what you do together?
- Which character was your favorite? Why?
- Which character was most like you? Unlike you?
- If you could choose any toy in the nursery to take home, which would it be?
- Why does Tina leave the Nursery?
- What is the difference between Soldier and Tin Soldier?
- Think of your toys. Which one is the oldest?
- Most plays, musicals, and even ballets are adaptations of other stories. If you were to write a musical of your own, which story would you use? Or would you make up your own?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Margery Williams was born in London in 1881. *The Velveteen Rabbit* was the first, and best known, of her thirty children's books. Research what life was like in 1881 in London and in the United States. Explore what life was like for a child born in 1881:

- What type of toys did children play with?
- What type of schools did they attend?
- What did children wear?

2. Classroom Toy Story: Have every student bring his or her favorite toy to school, and create a story in which each toy has a role. Try to focus on the personalities of each toy and how they interact with one another, and create a story with a strong beginning, middle, and ending, clear conflict and resolution.

Design a simple set for your story with cardboard and found objects.

3. Research how REAL rabbits behave in nature. Ask a local pet shop owner or rabbit owner to bring a real rabbit for a classroom visit.

- How are rabbits cared for?
- What do they eat?
- How do they socialize and play?

4. Write a story about your favorite toy coming to life.

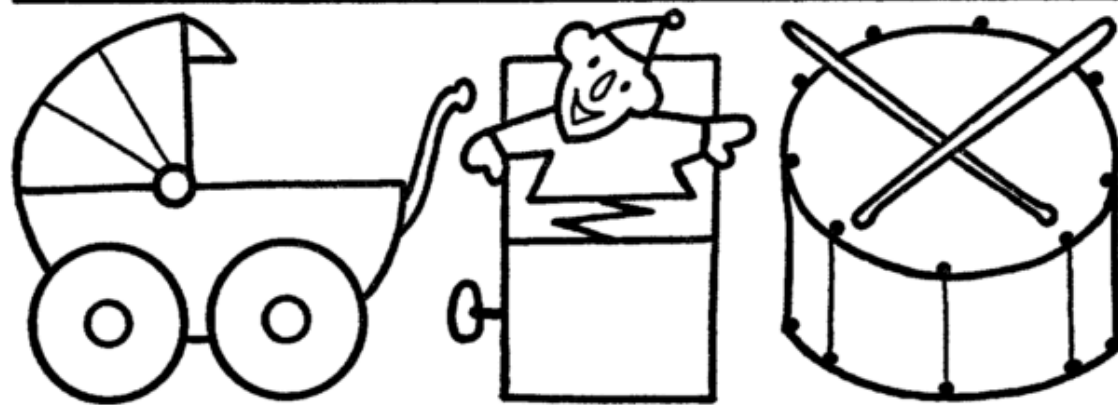
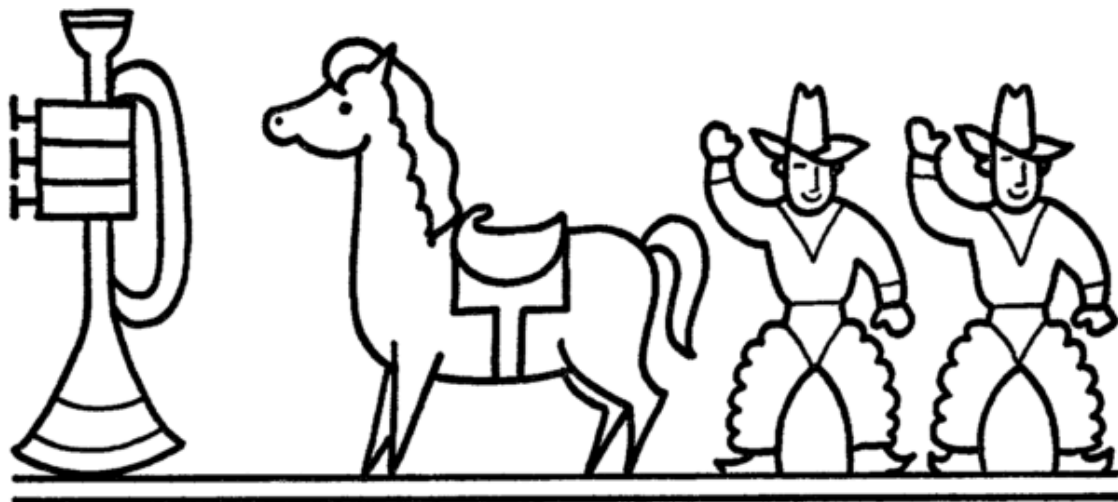
- What does it say?
- What is its voice like?
- What does it want most
- What is it afraid of?
- What experiences do you share?

5. Draw a picture of what you think Rabbit's life was like after he came to life.



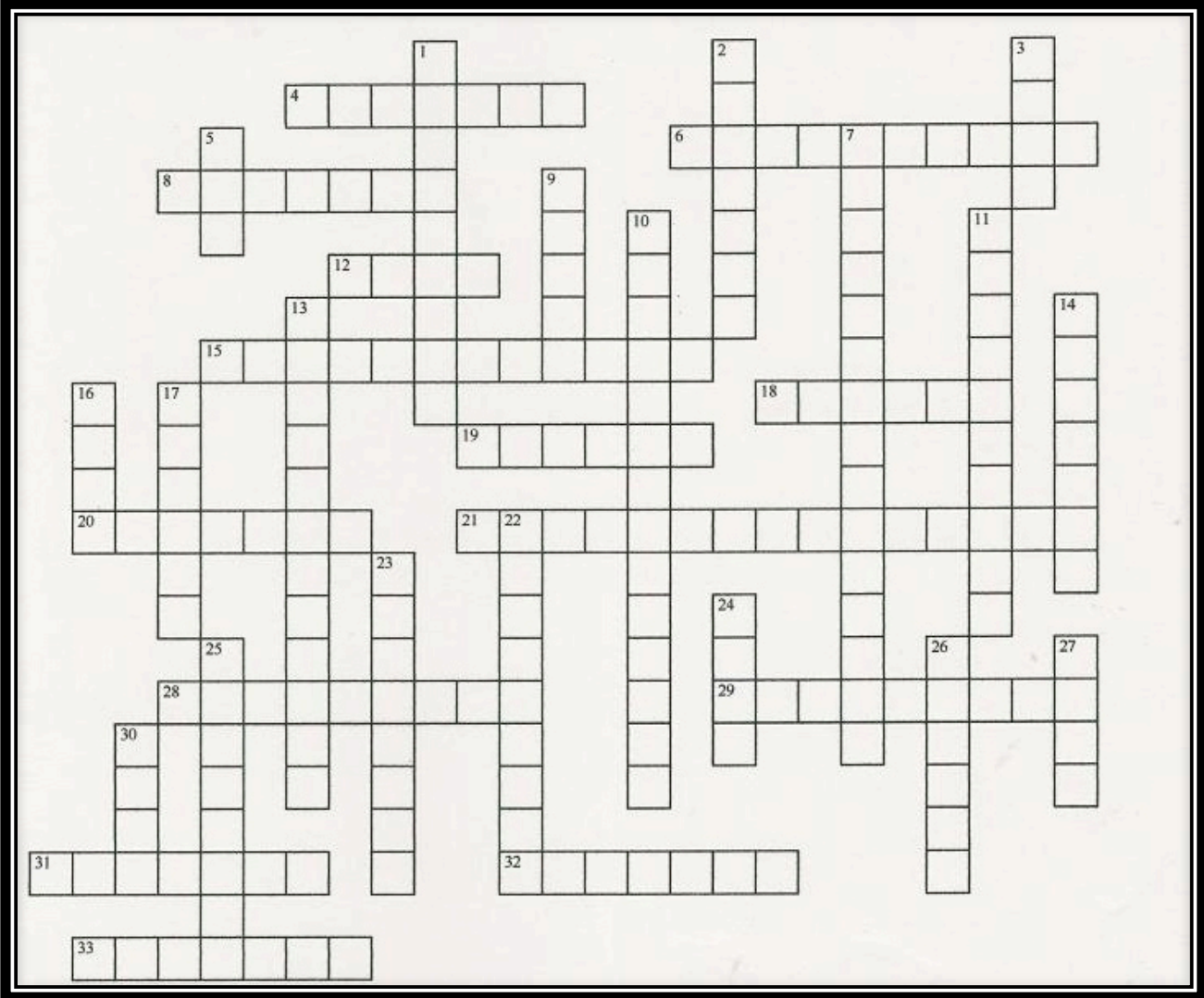


TOYS COLORING PAGES!





# WHISKERS! CROSSWORD PUZZLE



## ACROSS

4. What do the soldiers fight to preserve?
6. Who turns the Rabbit into Real? (2W)
8. Tina says, "That's what REAL does, it means saying\_\_\_\_\_"
12. In order to save the Rabbit, what do the other toys want him to do?
15. Who joined the Nursery last year? (4W)
18. In which country is Darbie famous?
19. Who is the most glamorous doll?
20. What game do the toys play that tangles them up?
21. Who wrote THE VELVETEEN RABBIT? (2W)
28. What cloth is the Rabbit made of?
29. Who is the oldest toy in the Nursery?
31. What do the cookies that Darbie makes taste like, according to Soldier?
32. What room do all the toys live in?
33. Where do Rabbits live in nature?

## DOWN

1. Horse says, "The job of a toy is\_\_\_\_" (2W)
2. Soldier says Darbie is made of this oil based product
3. What must happen to clothes and toys that might carry the boys' germs?
5. The nursery tells Rabbit to "Be a \_\_\_\_!"
7. What are the two most important things to be according to Horse? (3W including "and")
9. Which relative of the Boy made the Skin Horse REAL?
10. Who wrote Whiskers!? (2W)
11. Who is the small rag doll who is friends with Holly Hobby? (2W)
13. What illness does the boy have? (2W)
14. What is Rabbit stuffed with?
16. Tina can't talk because her bathtub accident caused her to \_\_\_\_.
17. What time of year does Nana say sickness ends in?
22. What does the Soldier call out when Nana approaches?
24. What does Train say? (2W)
25. Horse tells Rabbit, "Real is in the eye of the \_\_\_\_\_"
26. The dolls are glad to have cars and this kind of place to live.
27. What does the Rabbit want to be?
30. Who takes care of the Housekeeping and the Boy?

