Second Reaction: Giant Squid as an Invitation to Imagine and Explore


Judi Anderson

Giant Squid, written by Candace Fleming and illustrated by Eric Rohmann, provides a fascinating introduction to a sea creature with extraordinary features. As a teacher, I wondered what other animal children could explore that has eyes “as big as soccer balls,” travels like a jet underwater, and hides by instantly changing skin color (Fleming unpaged). Giant Squid is not just a book with interesting facts; it is also an invitation to young reader to learn more about the mysteries of a sea creature that scientists are still trying to understand. As I shared the story with a group of young children, the illustrations took us on a journey to what’s hidden in the inky black, deep ocean while showing us unexpected glimpses of the mysterious, giant squid’s long tentacles, large eyes, and sharp-toothed suckers. Giant Squid energized our read-aloud discussion, and the children responded with “wow” and “look at that” as I turned each page.

The story begins by taking the reader to the squid’s habitat—“down, down to the depths of the sunless sea, deep, deep in the cold, cold dark” (Fleming Intro). I could easily take my time with the class to explore each page’s illustrations and wonder aloud as to what would happen next. I enjoyed reading the vivid descriptors of the giant squid’s world. It gave me the chance to slow down and emphasize each word to create pictures and images that were new and interesting. We were fascinated by the giant squid as we talked about how it remains a mystery by being difficult to find at the bottom of the sea. Some of the children described
what it must be like to live deep under the water, comparing it to swimming with their eyes closed. That idea led to questions about how sea creatures find food in the dark waters, and by reading facts in the back of the book, we discovered that the giant squid's eyes are the biggest in the animal kingdom.

The children tried to compare the giant squid to other sea animals but found that its uniqueness was what made it so appealing. We tried moving our legs like the squid's two, long, "curling and twisting" tentacles, which led to a discussion about its suckers (Fleming unpaged). Using the book's facts, I showed the children how its tentacles can lock together like a zipper by slowly zipping up my coat, which they observed carefully before trying it themselves.

If I had more time in the classroom, I would facilitate a study of the giant squid with the students since they became especially interested in how it uses its tentacles to catch prey and move with jet propulsion. Not only are these features interesting to learn about, but they also have real-world connections that can involve children in a wide range of learning opportunities. Activities that support the children's questions could include creative writing that explores the mysteries of the giant squid, science experiments that mimic its body's suckers and ability to pump water, and math activities that measure the giant squid's shape and size. I would also arrange a visit to the local aquarium to find out more about current deep-sea research and learn how the squid compares to other marine life.

The challenge for most teachers is finding creative ways to guide children's learning. Giant Squid brought new ideas and fresh thinking to our read-aloud. Its presentation sparked the children's imagination as we learned alongside each other. We talked about and pictured a world that is not visible to us, but that didn't stop us from asking questions and wanting to learn more.

About the Author

Judi Anderson, M.Ed., is currently Professional Development Coordinator of Early Childhood/Early Childhood Special Education in the Departments of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education and Human Development Quantitative Methodology at the University of Maryland, College Park. She has spent her entire career in early childhood education in a variety of roles as teacher, curriculum author, children's museum content advisor, teacher trainer, and leader of school readiness and public school initiatives. She enjoys reading to her five-year-old granddaughter, who equally shares her love of exploring and learning about the natural world and its endless mysteries.