

# Program 6

# Tom Feelings

## Description of the Program

Many things go into the telling of a story. The words, the plot, the characters all combine to weave a tale that takes you into the realms of your imagination. Tom Feelings combines pictures with words and sometimes he just uses pictures alone. He is both an author and an illustrator. Tom was born in New York and has retired as a professor of art at the University of South Carolina. He has won numerous award including two Caldecott Honor awards and three Coretta Scott King awards. His latest book, entitled **The Middle Passage** is entirely in pictures. Critics and readers have praised this book and called it extraordinary. This story is based on actual events and depicts the tragedy of Africans who were sold into slavery.

## An Illustrator Discusses His Work

Mr. Feeling considers himself a storyteller in picture form. He said, “What I do is use the skills of drawing and painting to tell a story. To me the story is the most important thing.” He started drawing when he was young by copying pictures in comics. Later, he drew from real life to help develop his skills because it helps you look at things that are close to you. Drawing from life is like penmanship, it is something you practice over and over as you develop your skills, then it is important what you say. What I try to do is take these skills and show what is important to me, I want you to feel and hear the music. When came back from living in Ghana in West Africa, I wanted to express what it was like living there. I wanted to do a picture book that was both for children and adults. I have worked on this project off and on for 20 years.

There are no words. The pictures express action, show movement and pacing just like you're tell a story. First he did historical research, wrote out the history into long hand, then wrote a description of the images he wanted to project. It is hard to be sure the pictures alone can project everything that the artist wanted to say...that's why it took such a long time to complete. I try to do like is done in Black music, the Blues, to mix pain with joy, see what is basically beautiful, but sometimes they have a bittersweet feel to them. I have tried to weave into the story all the elements that a storyteller uses, so I can keep the person looking at the book involved all the way to the end.

## Questions and Answers

1. *Do you picture yourself as a storyteller?*

I think it is more important to tell a story through pictures than to do a painting that will hang on the wall. What is told in the story is more important than the individual pictures. The story is most important.

2. *How do you decide what to illustrate?*

That's where it gets interesting. I read all the text and then try to choose pictures that will connect with the viewer in the best way. Sometimes I go over the picture many, many times until I feel it connects to the story and weaves in and out of it.

3. *What is the process of illustrating a book?*

You start out with the text and choose the images you want to do. Sometimes you do sketches, or thumbnail sketches, then you enlarge them and add color.

4. *Do you do rough drafts?*

Yes, many, many rough drafts....100's and 1000's.....doing thing over until you do them right. You are the person who knows when they are right. Lots of people say they use to draw which means they stopped. The people who kept at it are artists, the other go on to do something else. It's important to stay at what it is you want to do, express what is going on inside of you, drawing is one way of doing it.

5. *What is your favorite medium in which to work?*

I love to draw so pen, pencil, and pen and ink are my favorite mediums. Sometimes I add color to my drawings with colored ink, tempera, sometimes paint, but I really like to draw. I get excited about drawing. Usually I mixed mediums to fit the mood of that particular story or book.

6. *Do you think the personal experience of going to Africa helped you?*

I think all personal experiences are important to an artist. What I do is try to express what I feel deep inside and put it down on paper

7. *Does being an author and an illustrator make your job easier? and Who has the final say about illustrations?*

Sometimes being an author and an illustrator helps, but not always. I also illustrate other writer's text. If I'm writing the text, I have the final say about illustrations. Usually a manuscript that is sent into a publisher, the publisher selects the illustrator. When I illustrate my own materials, that's what I'm most excited about.

## **Suggested Activities**

1. Choose several different illustrators who have distinctive styles and select a variety of their books to review. What do the students know about the illustrator from their works? Do each of the illustrators only do one type of art work?
2. Ask the students to pretend they are authors who created something and gave it to another person to illustrate. How would they feel if they would have no say in what the illustrations in their book looked like?
3. Choose a passage to read from a book that is very descriptive and requires a careful selection of visual images. Do not show any pictures that accompanied the text until everyone has a chance to draw a picture to accompany the text.