

In the Spotlight

Grades
K-2, 3-5

by | Sharron L. McElmeel

Room for the Baby, by Michelle Edwards, with illustrations by Jana Christy (Random House, 2012)

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

This delightful story centers on a young family: Mom, Dad, and son, who learn that a new baby is to join their family. But where will the baby sleep? The sewing room is filled with scraps of cloth, thread, and other unwanted items that neighbors and friends have given Mom, knowing that she would make good use of the items. But now the sewing room is needed for the baby. As the family waits from Passover to Hanukkah, the room slowly empties. Jana Christy's pastel drawings amplify the book's themes of reduce, reuse, recycle; a timeline of Jewish holidays; and love and friendship within a family and within the neighborhood.

Primary readers will see this as a book about the anticipation of having a new baby in the house; older readers will recognize the theme of anticipating a new member of the household but will also readily see the overall theme of repurposing items into useful items for others—including the baby. In the 3-5 classroom, consider reading the book aloud and sharing the illustrations on a large screen so that the recycling aspect of the title can be shared and discussed.

Thirty years before this story was published, Michelle Edwards had sketched out a story, "Yetta, the Scrap Saver." Yetta lived on Mermaid Avenue in Brooklyn, because that is the avenue where Edwards's own Grandmother Yetta lived. The black and white sketches showed a busy streetscape and a grandmother who saved scraps given her by neighbors because they knew she would put them to good use.



When Edwards returned to the story years later, the location had moved to Eighteenth Avenue, the scrap saver had become much younger and more modern, and so *Room for the Baby* emerged.

In the story, the family moves through the year marked by Jewish holidays, while the mother takes bits of fabric, bolts of flannel, and other stashes of cloth to make diapers, sleepers, and little shirts for the baby and for her neighbors' children. She unravels mismatched mittens and sweaters and uses the yarn to create warm new mittens, caps, and sweaters, with stripes. And when the neighbors come by for "free stuff," they transform their found treasures into gifts for the baby. There's a soft animal made from socks, a mobile created from wooden spools, many knitted items, and a name collage created from magazines.

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While the family gets ready for the baby they manage to show readers how to reduce, reuse, and recycle. Along the way observant readers will be able to mark the passage of time by the references to the Jewish holidays as they occur:

- “As we buttered our Passover matzos ...”
- “By Friday, as our Shabbat hallah came out of the oven ...”
- “That autumn on Rosh Hashanah, we had apples dipped in honey for a sweet New Year.”
- “A few weeks later, just before Simhat Torah.”
- “That winter, on the first night of Hanukkah...” “On the third night of Hanukkah ...”

Curriculum Connections: Observing Details

From the start the illustrator gives the reader information not included in the text. On the title page we see the family of three, and the only child in the family is a young boy. Throughout the book the illustrations provide information showing us stacks of material, stacked travel trunks, chests of drawers that overflow with cloth and other materials, and even an idea of the garments the mother is sewing. Those readers who do not know the term “unravel” will get a picture clue from the illustration showing the mother pulling the yarn from a sweater, with piles of yarn on the floor beside her. On the first night of Hanukkah, the night that Mrs. Mack brings a plate of latkes to the family, the illustrator shows the menorah with the middle candle (the Shamash) lit, the first lighted candle signaling the first night of Hanukkah. The most informative picture is the final double-page spread, where the illustrator shows us the various gifts that the neighbors have brought baby Lily—gifts that they have created from previously unneeded or unwanted items.

1. As a class examine the illustrations for details not included in the text of the story.
2. Make a list of new story details shown in the illustrations.

Curriculum Connections: Reading and Thinking for Details

1. Create a collaborative class list of all the things that the new baby’s family used up to get ready for the baby.
2. Name an item and explain how the item was reused or recycled. For example, the diapers the mother makes from the soft, worn sheets can be considered recycled, because the sheets were not suitable to be used as sheets any longer. In addition, once the diapers are made and used, they will be reused over and over again, as opposed to disposable diapers, which are used once and then thrown away.

Curriculum Connections: Applying the Idea

1. Brainstorm a list of things each of us have in our room or home that are not being used.
2. Plan and make a list of ways to reuse or recycle those items.

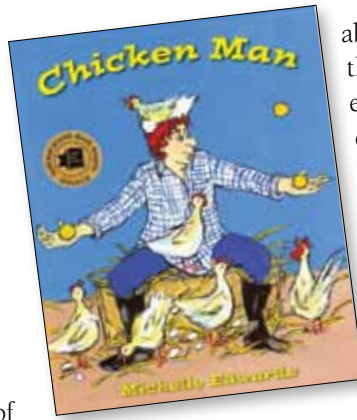
Example:

- a. Give outgrown clothing to someone younger or smaller who can still wear it (or donate to a charity that provides clothing to others).
 - b. Create something new from the item. Be specific—perhaps a toy box from a crate or a stacking toy from plastic bowls.
 - c. Making a milk jug skeleton is a great summer project for older students to get ready for autumn and Halloween. Find directions at [The Party Animal blog at www.thepartyanimal-blog.org/milk-jug-skeleton-fun-recycled-craft-decoration-halloween/](http://ThePartyAnimal.org/milk-jug-skeleton-fun-recycled-craft-decoration-halloween/). The basic list of items needed includes seven one-gallon milk/juice jugs.
3. Make a plan and showcase your projects at a recycling/reusing/repurposing fair. Invite other classes, parents/significant adults, and other members of school and neighborhood community.

Reading: More Books about Recycling and Reusing
The Earth Book, by Todd Parr
Recycle Every Day!, by Nancy Elizabeth
Wallace Recycle! A Handbook for Kids, by Gail Gibbons
Stuff!: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, by Steven Kroll

**Curriculum Connections:
Investigate a Culture**

Michelle Edwards creates the passage of time in her story with the references to traditional Jewish holidays. The first significant event is the announcement that a new baby will be coming into the family. That takes place during Passover. This year (2013) the holiday began the evening of March 25 and ended the evening of April 2. The date changes from year to year, but Passover is an eight-day festival celebrated in the early spring from the 15th through the 22nd of the Hebrew month of Nissan. Research the relative dates for the other holidays referenced in the story and create a timeline showing the length of time the story takes from start to finish (in 2013, Hanukkah coincides with the secular dates of November 27 to December 5).



about an event important to them or their family. Brainstorm some long-term events that might occur over a span of time. For example, an older sibling or cousin might be serving in the military and the family is awaiting the soldier's return. Just as the family in Edwards's book is waiting for a new baby, other families may be waiting for a new baby or adopted sibling. Other families may be waiting for Grandma to come visit, a puppy to

be born, a tree to grow as tall as the fence, for a child to be able to ride a bike, or other significant event. Write the story of waiting and indicate the passage of time by referencing holidays or celebrations symbolic to a particular culture.



Sharron L. McElmeel is director of McBookwords (www.mcbookwords.com), a literacy organization, and an instructor of children's literature and young adult literature in the University of Wisconsin–Stout's online education programs. She often writes and speaks about authors/illustrators and their books. www.mcelmeel.com

**Curriculum Connections: Writing—
Include YOUR Cultural Events**

Primary students might use this opportunity to write a story as a group, while older students might be able to plot their own story and write

About the Author: Michelle Edwards

Michelle Edwards has written picture books and early readers. Among her popular titles are *Stinky Stern Forever: A Jackson Friends Book*, *Chicken Man*, and *Papa's Latkes*. She is also a knitter and writes a column for a knitting magazine. Her book *A Knitter's Home Companion* is written for adults and older readers; however, that book also has some great stories that might be mentor texts for older students who want to write their own stories. Read a review of *A Knitter's Home Companion* at <http://mcbookwords.blogspot.com/2011/09/michelle-edwards-knitters-home.html> and learn more about Michelle Edwards on her website at www.michelledwards.com. Edwards is also an accomplished illustrator and sometimes illustrates her own books, and she knits—often warm mittens and scarves for family and friends that help ward off the cold Iowa winters where she lives.

About the Illustrator: Jana Christy

Jana Christy has illustrated many children's books, preferring to use pastels to create her expressive characters and colorful scenes. She began as a comic illustrator in the 1990s while working as an independent illustrator in the Boston area. She lives with her writer husband, John Seven, and their twin sons, Harry and Hugo, in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts. Learn more about Christy and her books and illustrations on her blog at <http://janachristyblog.wordpress.com/>.