

# Open Story

## Engaging older children in storytelling on TV

*Open Story* (YLE, Finland) asks kids to create stories about diversity without an ending, and asks other kids to write in the ending. Episode 1 was written by a 14-year-old girl about a boy named Jimi, who is new in school (cf. screenshot 1). He is angry and rebellious, and dresses differently from the other kids (cf. screenshot 2). No one understands Jimi and he doesn't seem to want any friends (cf. screenshot 3). After school he walks home alone and we find that his mother is a single parent who has drug and alcohol issues (cf. screenshot 4). Jimi is sent to procure drugs and alcohol for his mother, and wanders the streets alone in the dark, eating discarded food in fast food restaurants (cf. screenshot 5, 6). He daydreams about a better home life (cf. screenshot 7). He spends the night sleeping on a couch in the back of a pub while drunks stumble in and out, and is late to school the next day. He is given detention, and is eventually sent to the headmaster's office. The story stops here, and the audience is asked to send in their own ending to Jimi's story (cf. screenshot 8).

*Open Story* was one of the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2012 finalists in the 12-15 category.

### International experts' opinions

International experts shared their opinions about *Open Story* during the discussion sessions at the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2012. Most agreed that the format allowing children to write the story and suggest alternate endings was a great way to engage creativity and allow children's opinions to be heard.

"I liked the whole idea of the program: the openness of the story. I liked the power of the story. My impression was that this was the voice of the child who wrote it." (male expert, Canada)

Some experts suggested that the adults were presented in a flat way that might be understood as negative, while others pointed out that as a story written by a 14-year-old girl, it may be authentic that kids view adults this way. There was discussion as to whether the portrayals were stereotyped and if this affected the way kids engage with the program, or if it suggested that the story should end in a specific way.

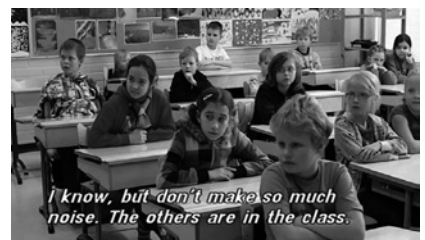
"What I found nice in this *Open Story* is that, when they have this opportunity to find their own ending or the developing of it, they have to think about the society and relationships. And they maybe become more tolerant or understanding." (female expert, Slovenia)

"I did notice that a lot of the adults were portrayed in certain ways that could be construed as not completely positive. Is that a cultural thing? Is that part of storytelling? Do kids really see themselves as kids versus adults, and the adults are frequently the cause of the problem?" (female expert, USA)

Experts wondered how the children's stories are treated. The director of the program, Tuula Rajavaara, explained: "I dramatize all the stories, and I try to honor the original text as far as I can. We broadcast the program 2 times; the first time just the original story. The second time the original story, and then there comes ending A, ending B, ending C."



Ill. 1: Jimi comes to his first day of class at a new school



Ill. 2: The class meets Jimi for the first time



Ill. 3: Jimi doesn't want to be friends with the other kids

### Opinions from teenagers in 7 countries

The PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2012 included the votes of an international youth jury, which was organized in co-operation with broadcasters worldwide. Teens between 12 and 15 in 7 countries discussed and judged 12 programs in the category 12 to 15. Here is a summary of their discussions on the program *Open Story*.



Ill. 4: Jimi comes home to find his mom drunk



Ill. 5: He is sent out alone to find drugs for his mom



Ill. 6: Jimi is so hungry he eats from someone else's discarded food tray



Ill. 7: He daydreams about what his relationship with his mom could be like



Ill. 8: The host invites the audience to write their own endings to the story

The **Australian** youth jury felt that the program was well done despite being sad. They liked the contrast between reality and Jimi's daydreams, and felt that his behavior was a consequence of the way he is treated by adults in his life. "Because he had been treated like that, so he treated others like that", "I was really intrigued by how they demonstrated the difference between reality and what he was thinking. It was really interesting, and depressing as well." Some found the story "weird", and wondered "Who would come up with that story?"

In **Cuba**, the youth jury felt that the program highlighted family, and many commented on the importance of family to children "because if you do not receive love, you cannot give love either". "The show made me reflect about the importance of parents in children's lives, because most of the time when we see people like this kid, we think 'what a pest!' and believe that he is such guy just because he wants to be." They appreciated the open end, saying, "This show is a chance for teenagers to come up with a happy ending to this situation that provokes such feelings of helplessness."

In the youth jury from **Egypt**, some felt that the open ending helped them "take the place of the characters and suggest the end", while others preferred the ending to be clear. Many felt that "there is a similarity between the story and our lives as young people", and that the acting and plot were very realistic.

In **Macedonia**, the youth jury disagreed about Jimi's character. Some said, "I have a friend similar to him", or "I used to be like him, ... my teachers did not care about me" while others were not moved by Jimi. The youths liked that children were able to participate in writing the story.

The youth jury from **Nigeria** commented that the program was inappropriate because of the depiction of drugs and alcohol, and that it taught young children to be disrespectful. Others liked it as they felt that "it shows how people behave because of their environment" and said they understood why Jimi behaved the way he did.

The youth jury in the **Philippines** was drawn to the importance of Jimi's daydreams: "It is about the dreaming of things that did not exist in life." They were concerned that Jimi was neglected and many felt his behavior was a "defense mechanism".

In the **United States**, the youth jury liked the "concept of children writing stories, acting it out and then having another ending", but felt that Jimi's story didn't have "a specific situation on which to build a conclusion". They felt that the story was sad and wondered why a 14-year-old girl would write such a story.

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