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THERESA SMYTHE***The Runaway Valentine* (Albert Whitman & Company)**

In elementary school, Theresa Smythe sold her sketches of Peanuts characters for five cents each. In between reading about the planets, learning multiplication tables and marketing her drawings, this busy girl also assembled collages. Big and bright, the paper creations became her grandmother's treasures and the foundation of Smythe's career many years later.

Considering all the cards and collage gifts her grandmother harbored in closets, drawers and keepsake boxes, Smythe knew she would be overjoyed about *The Runaway Valentine*, her first collage-illustrated book. Published by Albert Whitman & Company, the book is written by Tina Casey. Because of a recent promotional mailing she sent to the company, Whitman asked her to examine Casey's manuscript. "That promotional image of two snowmen continues to acquire assignments for me," says Smythe. "I was rather excited that the publisher was confident I could successfully complete this book assignment based on my mailings."

The Runaway Valentine amplifies the life of Victor, a dazzling Valentine card. Once he falls off a crowded shelf and skids into a corner, his independent journey begins. Draped in glitter and sparkles, he attracts many people who have a use for him. In the end, all the characters appear at the same Valentine's Day Party, and Victor finds a home.

Smythe says personifying a Valentine's Day card was not easy. As she read the manuscript during a flight to Las Vegas, she scrambled for ideas. "I was terrified when I read *The Runaway Valentine*. The writing was so clever, but it was a story about a card—what kind of face would I give it, after all?" As a result, she says visiting a city like "glittery, lacy, colorful" Las Vegas at that time really offered perspective about the characters she would create. Thus, she got started on the illustrations immediately after the trip.

During the book's creation, Smythe's ongoing interaction with the publisher was lively and beneficial. Since Whitman had never published a book with cut-paper collage as illustration, the editor often asked her for input on the process and was very receptive to her ideas. Because *The Runaway Valentine* was also her first book, she submitted extra sketches, consulted her critique group, and read guides to negotiating book contracts.

Upon the book's completion and receiving an appreciative letter from Tina Casey, Smythe says she felt more comfortable defining herself as a professional paper collagist. Influenced by hand-made toys and decorative crafts, she has always expressed herself through creative means, but she certainly didn't plan on cutting out paper figures for a living.

While working as an animator, Smythe woke up one morning from a dream that conveyed she should pursue collage. "As ridiculous as it sounds, it's absolutely true," says Smythe. "This voice shouted 'Do Collage!' I was stunned and half asleep, but acutely aware . . . or *awakened* you might say." As a result, she left her position at a top-notch company, and purchased the necessary materials to get started.

In the beginning, she promoted herself by sending out 400 mailings to adult- and children-oriented companies including magazines and record companies. She received her first assignment from *Folio* magazine, and has been busy ever since. After *The Runaway Valentine* was published, she condensed her mailing list to 125 children-specific companies. Because of the book's success, Smythe's phone didn't stop ringing for some time, and she was booked with more than a year's assignments. Additionally, Cartoon Network in California exhibited *The Runaway Valentine* illustrations.

Considering how bustling her agenda is every day, Smythe frowns at the thought of working with an agent. She admits that answering the phone and weeding out assignments takes a lot of time away from other aspects of her life, but she enjoys being in charge of her own career.

"I trust my own judgement, even through rejections," says Smythe. "The most important part is that I'm having fun doing what I do, and the results continue to amaze me—what an ideal job!"

