

# Martha Speaks

**Martha Speaks** was produced by WGBH Educational Foundation/Studio B Productions, Inc. based in the USA. *Martha Speaks* is an animated series that is designed to enrich the vocabulary of 4 – to 7-year-olds. The series is based on the classic books by Susan Meddaugh that have charmed and captivated millions of children. Each episode uses Martha’s unique linguistic abilities and the hilarious consequences to engage kids and help build their vocabulary skills. Each episode contains explicitly defined words that are defined by one of the characters and implicit vocabulary words that are used in context. In this episode, “There Goes the Neighborhood”, Martha can not believe that Helen and Alice are making such a fuss about a kitten. Everyone knows kittens are not to be tolerated. But could this kitten be different?

**Martha Speaks** was one of the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2010 finalists in the “up to 6 fiction” category.

## International experts’ opinions

There were conflicting opinions among the international experts about the program. Most of the international experts were not impressed by the program. They were not convinced about the lessons that the program intended to deliver to the children. “Learning from fiction – I don’t know how to say this. They are Ok, but there is absolutely nothing memorable there. I don’t know if it is the scripts, the stories, the mix of elements (...), I really wasn’t convinced by that” (male expert, Germany).

Many were critical of PBS and the way it functions in the USA. “For me, actually, this show had everything in it that is wrong with PBS. It ends with a Chucky Cheese Promo – this is a fast food restaurant in a country suffering from a childhood obesity epidemic. To me, it is exactly the problem of PBS; on the one hand: look we are super educational; we are helping kids. On the other hand: look who is paying our bills – those which we are promoting at the end of our shows” (male expert, USA).

The dialogue delivery lacked any originality. “The dialogue felt like they were mouthing stuff right out of a curriculum: ‘Prejudice is when you discriminate against somebody’. It was just so on the nose. There was no character, no personality to the way these characters were saying their lines” (male expert, USA).

Experts raised doubts about the preschool age range as the target audience of the program. “I thought that the vocabulary was way out preschool range. Those words were too big. I thought for four – to six – I think this is ridiculous” (male expert, USA).

However, some international experts admired the program and found it interesting. “I find it very interesting and very funny. I



Figure 1: Martha is a speaking dog who teaches words.



Figure 2: Martha immediately dislikes the new cat.



Figure 3: Martha and her friend discriminate the cat.



Figure 4: Alice being displeased with Martha's unsocial behavior.



Figure 5: Martha warns the cat that she can not tolerate her presence.

love it. I don't think you see the didactic very obviously. I see the humour more" (female expert, Colombia). They also liked the humour in the program "I enjoyed it very much, because it was well done, and really it had a lot of humour. Personally, I thought that the dialogues were great" (female expert, Germany).

They were also impressed by the characters in the program. "I quite like some of the characters, though. I hated Martha at first, because of her way of speaking. I think the characters – they convey the message that is behind the story. I think the story would have been enough to just convey the message of this piece" (female expert, Germany).

They also appreciated the educational theme of the program. "I think kids love learning new words. We very, very rarely use rich vocabulary in children's television. Even if Martha speaks a little bit in your face, at least it demonstrates that you can use rich vocabulary. One of the big problems,

educationally, especially for lower income kids, is that they come to school with very small vocabularies – to the extent that in general we can do that in shows, I think, I it is very useful. It doesn't necessarily get in the way of anything else that is happening in the story" (male expert, USA).

The whole discussion among the international experts could be summed up in the words of a female expert from Canada. "I actually love Martha Speaks, and we run it, and we do quite well with it. But I must say, after watching it and watching it in this context, I felt that we educational broadcasters have to be reminded to pull back a little bit. I thought that the education could have been a little less obvious or tossed at me – or wrapped more into the story. I think it is a brilliant show, and it has certain objectives, and it does meet those. I think maybe it may suffer by turning the audience off just a tad by being a little too didactic."



Figure 6: Martha saves the cat from being hit by a car and they become friends



Figure 7: Martha's friend makes fun of her when he learns Martha has a cat friend.



Figure 8: Martha persuades her friend not to discriminate against cats and they decide to visit the kitten after it was adopted

*Prof. Dr. Dafna Lemish, Namrata Bansaland Hao Cao  
(Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, USA)*