

AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTHUR LEVINE

# Riverbank Review

of books for young readers

**An Ode to Frog  
and Toad**

By Karla Kuskin

**The Power of  
Langston Hughes's  
"Dreams"**

**Ten Great Books  
about Bugs**

**A Profile of *Holes*  
Author Louis Sachar**

**Holling Clancy Holling's  
*Paddle-to-the-Sea***

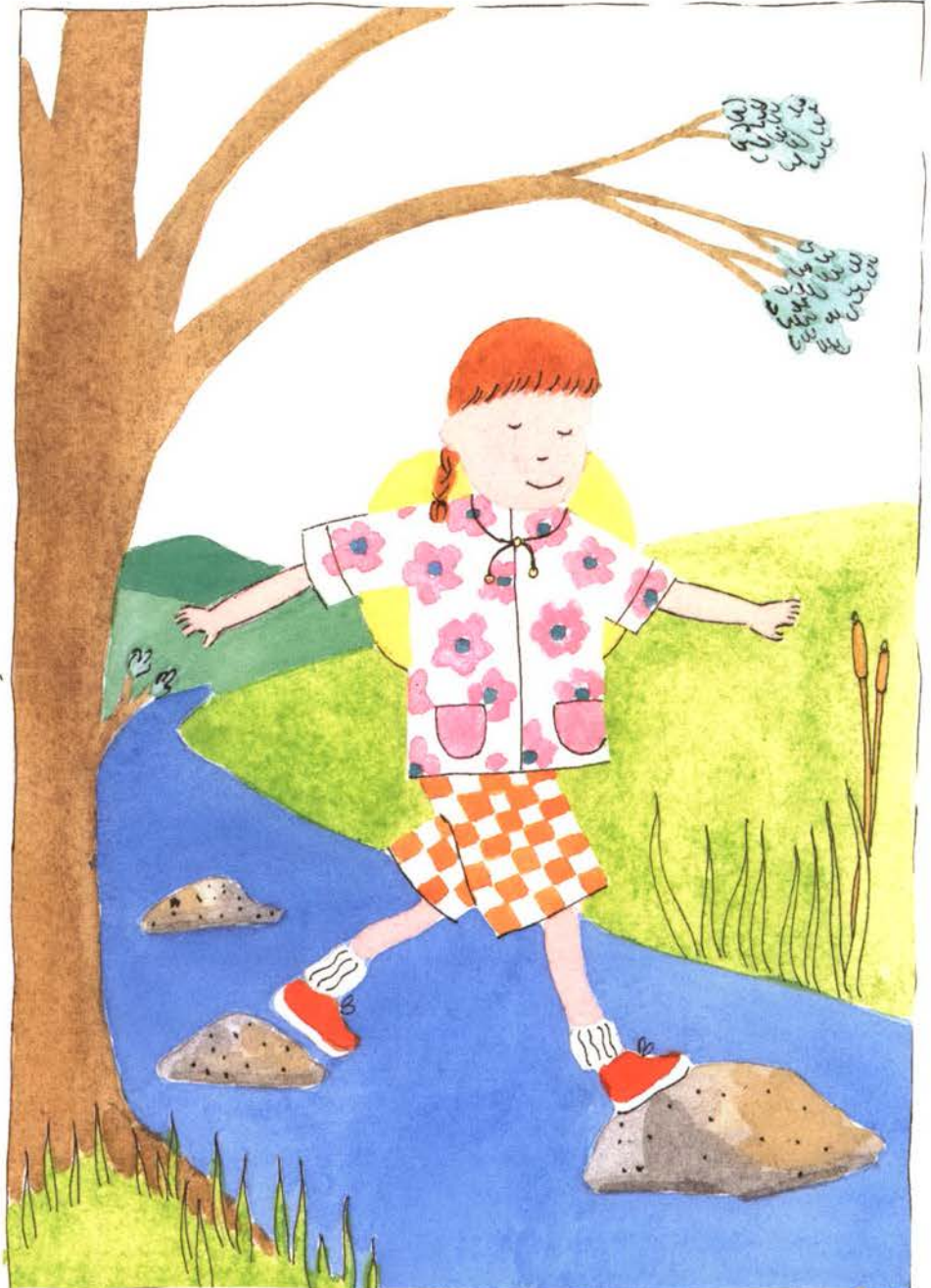
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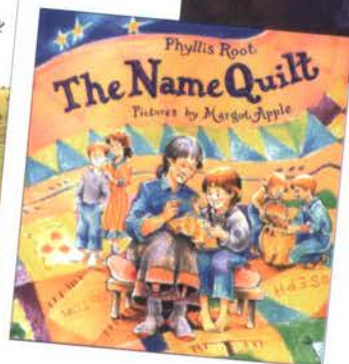
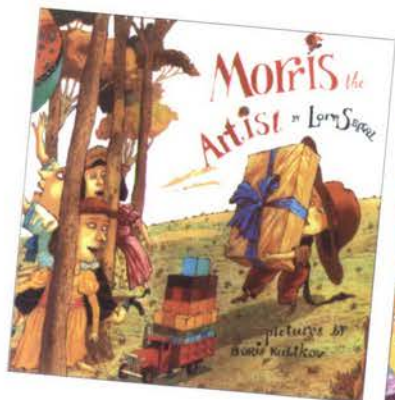
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Illustration by Boris Kulikov from *Morris the Artist*



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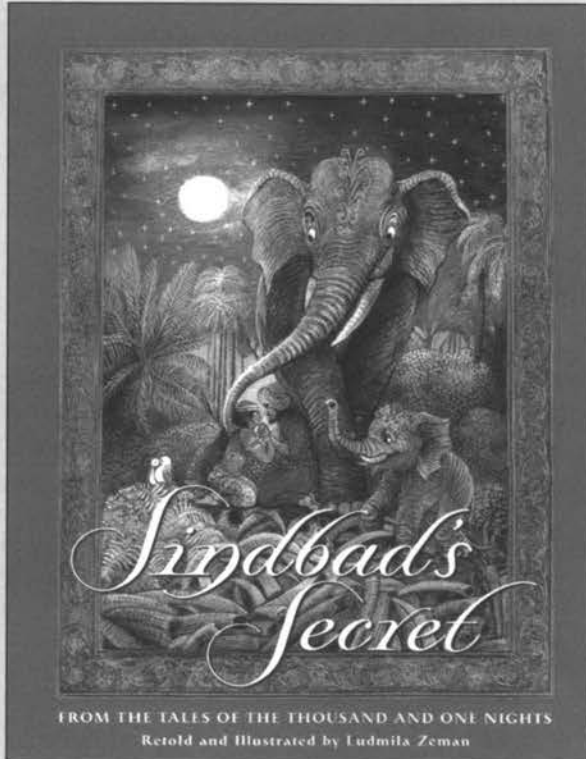


## About the Cover Artist

Both a writer and an illustrator, Amy Schwartz has been making picture books for nearly twenty years and has over thirty titles to her name. In notable collaborations (as the illustrator of Amy Hest's *The Purple Coat* and *Nana's Birthday Party*) and as the sole creator of such distinctive titles as *Annabelle Swift*, *Kindergartner* and *The Boys Team*, she creates artwork that is defined by an unfettered line, simple planes of color, and lively patterns. Her pictures and her text show her to be a sensitive observer of the real life activities and emotions of children, attentive to what gives them pleasure.

The cover image for this issue was inspired by a family outing in the country, when she watched her son playing on the rocks below a waterfall. Amy Schwartz's next picture book, *A Glorious Day*, will be published by Simon & Schuster in the spring of 2004.

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editor's note

Robert McCloskey, the author and illustrator of classic picture books (*Make Way for Ducklings*) and fiction (*Homer Price*) died this summer at the age of 88. *McCloskey*. His name always made me think of clouds and fishing boats, which fits nicely with some of his best-known works—*Blueberries for Sal*, *One Morning in Maine*, *Time of Wonder*—set on the islands off the coast of Maine.

McCloskey was the first author I recognized as an *author*—the man behind words and pictures I loved. I discovered his books separately, but the name on the spine linked them up and caused me to consider the writing as well as the reading of those stories. How could the same person who thought up Lentil, the Midwestern boy who played the harmonica in the bathtub, also create the beautiful paintings in *Time of Wonder*, paintings that made you feel you were watching rain drift across the water, or the fog begin to lift? He made the work of writing and illustrating seem free and many-sided, which made sense to me, as a young reader with wide-ranging tastes.

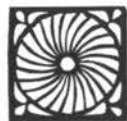
McCloskey's pictures eloquently captured life's com-mo-tion and calamities (the slip of a girl's sneaker on wet seaweed; the near collision of a duck with a hell-bent boy

on a bike; an unstoppable doughnut machine), but har-mo-ny was always gently reestablished in his tales. He made us see how silly people can be, but the parade of life he pictured was solid and graceful. The line of his drawing was so strong and sure, you could water-ski behind it. Few illustrators I can think of can match his comedic ease, his balance of lightness and gravity.

This issue marks the beginning of a partnership between *Riverbank Review* and the University of Minnesota. We're excited about this affiliation, as it offers us the chance to reach a wider audience and links us to resources that will help the magazine grow. The university's long history of attention to children's literature, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, make the connection a logical one. We are grateful to Dean Steve Yussen in the College of Education and Human Development, Lynn Slifer in the U of M development office, and Lee Galda, professor of children's literature in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, for helping to make this partnership a reality. We are also happy to welcome Lee as a contributing editor to the magazine. Here's to new beginnings!

—Martha Davis Beck

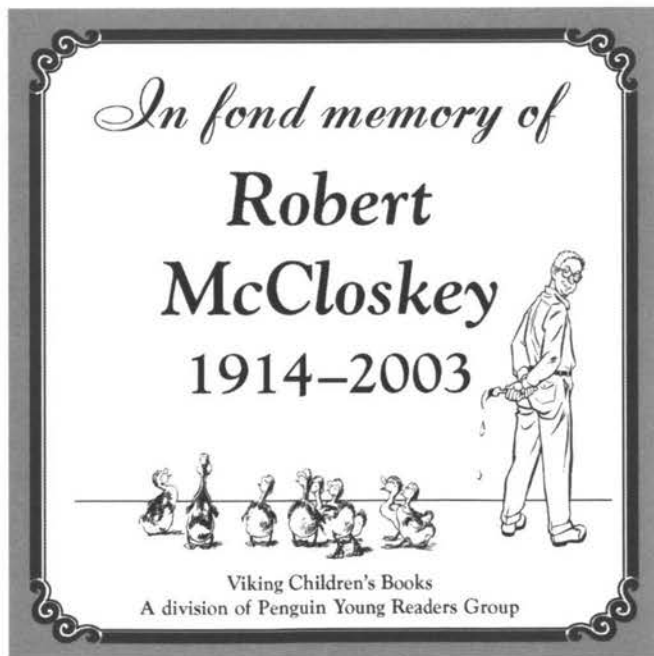
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# An Ode to Frog and Toad

*Over thirty years old and having recently made the leap from page to stage, Arnold Lobel's childlike amphibians are as delightful as ever.*

By Karla Kuskin

*Between 1970 and 1979, Arnold Lobel proved himself to be as gifted a writer for children as he was an illustrator. Using his first-class hand and head, he came up with a series of four wonderful I Can Read volumes. Frog and Toad Are Friends won a Caldecott Honor in 1971, and Frog and Toad Together won a Newbery Honor in 1973. The idea for these books had been conceived by editor Ursula Nordstrom at Harper & Row. Written in simple language, with few contractions and a limited number of*



*Arnold Lobel*

*characters to each line, they followed Elsa Minarik's and Maurice Sendak's Little Bear books (in form but not content) into a pantheon of well-loved and lasting literature for young children. Arnold died, too young, in 1987 but Frog and Toad are still very much with us, as easy to read and to look at as ever.*



WHAT A DAY. The whipped-cream clouds floated across the July sky. Frog said to Toad, "You are looking good."

"Blah," said Toad.

"I mean it," Frog said. "We are thirty-three years old now. I am still tall and green, and my outlook is as positive as it was when we were first published in 1970."

"Sure, sure," said Toad. "And I am as short and brown as ever. But even if it is hard to see, we are each of us getting a little gray around the edges."

"There was always a hint of Eeyore in your tone," Frog said to Toad. "I, on the other hand, took the lines of a sunnier spirit."

One who loved today and looked ever forward  
to an equally splendid tomorrow.”

“Well,” said Toad, “except for the short, tall  
factor and the green, brown stuff,

I would say that our dear, late author was quite  
evenhanded when he created us.”

“Do not forget the weight,” Frog heard himself say.

“I was tall and shapely from our very first page  
together. You were...well...”

“Dumpy,” Toad said. “Double blah.”

He went on. “You would not feel so dapper, either,  
if all the jokes were on you.”

“Remember when you lost a jacket button?” said Frog.

“And every button you found was the wrong size  
or shape and you said,

‘The whole world is covered with buttons  
and not one of them is mine.’

And that is just when you found your white, four-holed, big,  
round, thick jacket button.”

“Yes,” Toad said. “I remember. And I took my jacket  
and I sewed all the buttons I had found on it and gave it  
to you.”

Frog said, “It was beautiful, a work of art. I still  
wear it.

“Oh, and do you remember your swimsuit?”

Frog asked Toad.

“Of course I remember it,” said Toad. “How can I  
forget that weird striped garment and the  
furry field mouse who came to watch me, saying,  
‘I have not seen anything funny in a long time,’  
as she choked back a smile.”

“At least,” Toad sighed, “I made everyone laugh.”

“Even when you were sad,” said Frog.

“And remember when you sat in front of your empty  
mailbox and felt bad because there was never any mail?”

“Of course,” said Toad. “We sat together.”

“Then I ran home and wrote you a letter,”  
said Frog, “and I asked a snail to put it in your mailbox.

“‘Sure,’ said the snail, ‘right away.’”

“That was a great line,” said Toad. “Did I write  
that line?”

“Of course not,” Frog said. “Arnold did.”

“And do you remember the letter I wrote  
to you?” Frog asked Toad.

“I will never forget it,” said Toad. “It said ‘Dear  
Toad, I am glad you are my best friend.  
Your best friend, Frog.’”

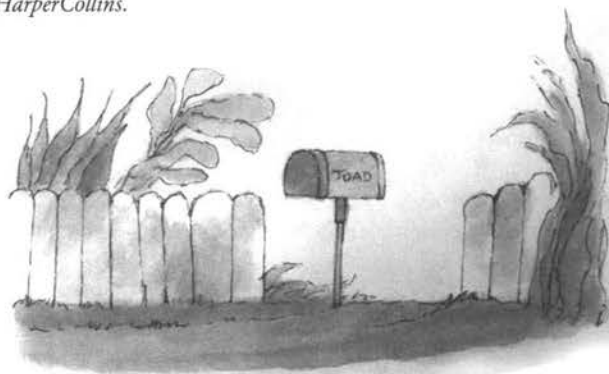
“We waited and waited,” said Toad. “The snail  
took four days to put your letter in my  
mailbox. Oh, I was sad.”

“Even I was sad,” said Frog. And then Frog said,  
“That Arnold. Thirty-three years ago  
he invented me, and you, and snail mail too.”  
Toad did not say blah at all. He smiled.

**I**n April of this year, the musical *A Year with Frog and Toad*  
opened at the Cort Theatre on Broadway and Forty-  
eighth Street in New York City. Originally produced by  
the Children’s Theatre Company in Minneapolis, it moved  
to New York last fall and played successfully off Broadway  
for several months. Among the many talented people who  
worked on the show from the beginning was set designer  
Adrienne Lobel. When her father’s book *Frog and Toad Are  
Friends* was published in 1970 she was fifteen years old.

The *Wall Street Journal* calls *A Year with Frog and Toad*  
“the best new musical on Broadway.” In the *New York Times*,  
Ben Brantley wrote that the show is a “pure-hearted chil-  
dren’s musical...clear as a rural stream in a pre-industrial  
age.” In May it was nominated for three Tony Awards. Con-  
gratulations again, Arnold, wherever you are. ~

*Karla Kuskin’s first book, Roar and More, was published in 1956. This  
spring, Moon, Have You Met My Mother?, a collection of her poetry  
illustrated by Sergio Ruzzier, was published by Laura Geringer Books at  
HarperCollins.*





interview

# Arthur A. Levine

*The editor behind Harry Potter has more than the boy wizard under his hat.*

By Nathalie op de Beeck

**E**ditor and publisher Arthur A. Levine has had a unique influence on children's publishing over the past two decades. Fresh from college in 1984, Levine joined G. P. Putnam's Sons as an editorial assistant. Within ten years, he moved on to become a senior editor at Dial Books for Young Readers and then

editor-in-chief at Putnam. In 1994, he held the editor-in-chief position at Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers, and he now heads his own imprint, Arthur A. Levine Books, at Scholastic.

Though he is best known as the man who signed J. K. Rowling and co-edits her Harry Potter books, Levine has formed partnerships with many notable authors and developed a long list of memorable titles. He worked with Peggy Rathmann to produce her artful, Caldecott Medal-winning *Officer Buckle and Gloria*, and with Philip Pullman on *The Golden Compass*. His interests range from lighthearted fare like Saxton Freymann and Joost Elffers's *How Are You Peeling?* to a brilliant repackaging of Russell Hoban's novel *The Mouse and His Child*, with designer David Saylor and illustrator David Small.

In May 2003, Levine spoke to *Riverbank Review* about his work cultivating great authors and his efforts to serve as an "ideal reader" for promising manuscripts.

**NodB:** *I'd like to begin by asking you about the distinction between a book that gets critical acclaim and a book that has*

*commercial success. Could you comment on the blurry distinction between literary works and best-sellers?*

**AL:** Well, there isn't always a distinction at all. Sometimes *literary* has a connotation of being elitist or difficult. But I don't think I'm such a genius that I'm the only one who can understand my books. Everything I publish is literary in my own mind.

The truth is that I think even my best-sellers are literary books. The quality of the writing is of paramount importance. They're not designed to capture a trend or serve a particular need for information or to cover a person who is famous at the moment. If I were to publish a biography, for instance, I'd do it because an individual writer was truly passionate about the subject. I wouldn't do it because I knew that the fourth-grade curriculum required biographies on X, Y, or Z. I'm not saying it isn't a good thing to do that kind of book as well. Lined up side

by side, books published for different reasons can serve the same purpose.

*Do you notice yourself taking a different approach to a book you suspect will be wildly popular, as opposed to a worthy book for a more specialized market?*

The process is always the same for me, as an editor and a publisher. I approach everything as a *reader*. I publish things that I would have loved to read and that I love to read now. Whether a book has a very wide audience or a more narrow audience,

I'm always part of that audience.

But the size of the audience may affect the financial offer I'm able to make. I'll say, "I anticipate an audience of about this size, and that means the company will make about this much money, which means this is about how much I can pay the author." The decision has practical ramifications, but it doesn't affect whether or not I publish the book.

*As a children's editor, you publish a range of genres. You've edited science fiction, fantasy...*

...historical fiction, fiction, picture books, poetry, nonfiction. In adult publishing, I'd probably have to work at seven different companies if I wanted to publish all the different kinds of



books that I do.

*Are you attracted to children's publishing because it lets you wear so many editorial hats?*

I guess I'm many-hatted as an editor because I'm many-hatted as a reader. I might have one or two poets I'm reading, and a novel, and a collection of short stories. Sometimes I'm reading them all at once, sometimes I'm reading them sequentially. But I'm one reader and I enjoy a variety of things, so I assume that there are others like me out there who have the same notions.

*When you edit, do you see yourself more as a close line editor or as someone who guides people's vision for their work?*

Those are different stages of editing. The earlier stages are more about overall structural work, and once that structural work is done the final stage is line editing. I am present for the whole process.

Part of my job is recognizing when I'm needed and when I'm not. My overall goal is to serve as an "ideal reader" for an author, to use a phrase that I learned in a course I took with Stephen Roxburgh, a wonderful editor and the founder and publisher of Front Street Books. In other words, I read the manuscript and react as any reader will read. The key advantage, however, is that the author has a chance to consider *this* reader's response before the book is finalized. I tell them how I react, and if I've done my job in a way that's articulate and precise enough, then the author can make use of my feedback to determine whether or not the writing has evoked the desired reaction.

*Do you feel you've always had that instinct to be the ideal reader? Have certain mentors helped you develop your skill?*

I've always been an enthusiastic reader, which is probably why I became an editor. And of course I've

learned from everybody that I've worked for. I remember when Patty Gauch came to Philomel, having never been in the industry before, she was so fearless and so open. I remember



thinking, "I want to be this way. I will try to remember to keep this sense of possibility and to feel less beholden to publishing tradition." But the course I took with Stephen Roxburgh was the most helpful educational experience I've had, in that it outlined basic principles that I still follow.

*When you seek manuscripts now, do you work through agents and established authors, or do you still go through the slush pile to find a diamond in the rough?*

You know, books come from everywhere. I'm publishing a book this fall called *Millicent Min, Girl Genius*. That was something that the author, Lisa Yee, sent me unsolicited, meaning she sent me a query and I asked to see it. We worked on it together for about five years. She's a wonderful writer, but it took her a while to find her voice. So this is a person who doesn't have an agent and isn't a superstar, but we're incredibly excited



about this book and I'm pushing it as hard as anything.

*You describe a real commitment to a writer. Would you say that this is the exception now? We hear so much about editors being unable to nurture writers through their careers the way editors of the past did.*

Speaking personally, I have a fervent desire to work with my authors over the course of their careers. Not everybody's career takes off with the first or second book, and it's satisfying to have authors trust you enough to let you help them along the way. Conversely, it's gratifying when they remain loyal even after they've achieved some recognition.

I'm lucky to have had several authors I've worked with for years. My first book with Emily Arnold McCully was *Mirette on the High Wire*, which was a lovely beginning. We've worked together ever since, and we've done a variety of books on my imprint, including *Beautiful Warrior: The Legend of the Nun's Kung Fu* and most recently *The Orphan Singer*. Now she's working on a full-length nonfiction book, which is another great, brave leap for her. I'm proud to have been at her side for all of that. I've worked with Rafe Martin for many years, too, on picture books like *The Rough-Faced Girl* and his first novel, *The World Before This One*.

Having said that, I can't pretend that there aren't pressures that work against the editor and the author having long-term relationships. One of those pressures is money. Sometimes an agent will see his or her job of furthering an author's career primarily in terms of money, and that winds up meaning that a book is sold to somebody else. There is the illusion of money, and I say illusion because it's still the case that few people—very, very few people—get rich writing

children's books. But when there's the idea that it's possible, that can sometimes become something of a holy grail for a writer and his or her agent. That being said, I think that most authors still also hold the ideal of finding an editor with whom they're in sympathy and developing a long-term relationship.

*Since we're on the subject of the stellar rise of certain authors, I have to ask you about J. K. Rowling and the Harry Potter books. Were you surprised at their amazing success?*

It's hard for me to answer that question, because it has been asked, in those very words, a billion times. But it relates to the first question you asked about literary and commercial publishing. Was I surprised? Of course I was surprised. This is an unprecedented phenomenon. That is not to say that I didn't think it was a great book. That's why I published it. I thought, "I love this book, and other people are also going to love it."

I had a general level of success in mind, and I built a reasonable offer that is public knowledge, a fairly high number that I had to pay in an auction. That made me a little nervous because it was a high number for a first-time author and a British writer. Imported British fantasy was not exactly a hot category.

*Well, it is now.*

It is now, but that wasn't what I was aiming toward. I was thinking, "This reminds me of books I loved as a kid." What surprises me is only the velocity of it, and the fact that people sometimes feel they have to take a position on the books. They have to hate Harry Potter, turn up their noses at it, or on the other hand read nothing but Harry Potter. I don't think either of those responses is appropriate. It's a wonderful group of books. Rowling is a talented author. I think few authors can match her skill at

plotting and her use of imaginative detail and the completeness of the world that she's created. It's incredible. The stories stand up to the multiple readings they get.

*People sometimes feel they have to take a position—they have to hate Harry Potter, or on the other hand read nothing but Harry Potter.*

*From your vantage point, how has the J. K. Rowling phenomenon affected public interest in children's publishing?*

It's a great thing that ten-year-olds can say, "I've read a 750-page book." That certainly knocks a whole bunch of obstacles out of their way. It may make shorter books less intimidating. I'm positive that Harry Potter has encouraged kids to realize that they can enjoy reading, whether or not they report that immediately to an adult. It's the kind of experience that forever changes you.

Harry Potter raised awareness of children's books in the adult publishing world, and in the culture at large. I was keenly aware of this a couple of years ago, with the publication of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. That was the only time in my life when I can remember people being aware of the publication date of any book, let alone a children's book. A book can be a big event. That's a post-Harry Potter thing.

*In addition to Rowling, you've worked with English author Philip Pullman (The Golden Compass and its sequels), and Australian novelists Markus Zusak (Fighting Ruben Wolfe, Getting the Girl) and Martine Murray, a newcomer whose first book is The Slightly True Story of Cedar B. Hartley. You've*

*brought many books from other English-speaking countries to an American audience. What challenges does this entail?*

The challenge is maintaining a balance on my list between exciting books that come from somewhere else and exciting books that come from here. I look at the whole world, and there is so much great literature out there. How do I narrow it down? I could publish a huge list that was just the greatest novelists from other English-speaking countries. That would leave no room for American novelists and French and German and Italian novelists, or picture-book writers or artists. I want to have all of those too.

*You seem interested in broadening the scope of American publishing to include international work. This fall, I notice, you're publishing a translation of a successful Spanish novel, The Story of a Seagull and the Cat Who Taught Her to Fly.*

Ah. Luis Sepúlveda. He's *fantástico*. It's a great story.

*In this tale, a gull crash-lands in Hamburg after an oil spill and leaves her last egg in the care of a cat. Sepúlveda brings up issues of environmentalism and diversity—a cat gets along with a gull.*

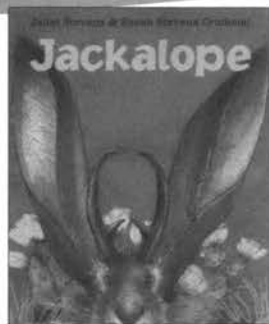
Not just "gets along with a gull" but is a *parent* to a gull. It's a story that explores the nature of love and whether love is something that you can feel only for somebody who is exactly like you. I think the book is extremely profound in that regard, and that's one of the reasons it has struck such a strong chord with readers around the world.

*Speaking of the global context, I want to mention Daniella Carmi's Samir and Yonatan, a story of a Palestinian boy in an Israeli hospital, which won the Mildred L. Batchelder Award in 2001. If parents and teachers are looking for texts on Middle Eastern topics, this could be a good place to start. How did you acquire it, and did you see it through the translation process?*

Samir and Yonatan should probably

# Extraordinary Adventures in Literature

New for Young Readers from Harcourt



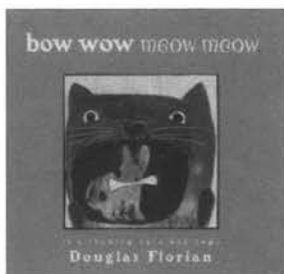
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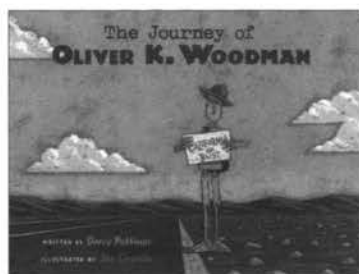
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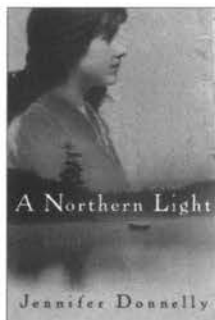
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be read in every middle school across the country because it offers such important insights into the Middle East, which we as a nation are seeing more and more as a cauldron of the world's problems. This book came to me as part of my ongoing relationship with the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, a group I met when I went to the Jerusalem Book Fair on an editorial fellowship in 1991. *Samir* was one of the books they sent me to consider. I'm lucky to have an editor on my staff who speaks Hebrew, so we were able to oversee the translation together. That's the best possible scenario, when you want to publish work in translation, to have people on staff who read both languages.

*How do you recognize great books written in other languages? And how do you ensure an accurate translation?*

I've developed a network of reliable readers who not only are fluent in other languages but also are knowledgeable about literature, are knowledgeable about children's literature, and know my taste. It involves a lot of networking.

European publishers have been doing this for years. And many of America's adult literary publishers have built their lists with wonderful authors from around the world. Alfred A. Knopf himself found some of his most important early acquisitions, like Thomas Mann, in Europe. We owe children the same breadth and diversity of voices.

*You've been attentive to multiple perspectives in the United States, too. You edited Gary Soto and Susan Guevara's Chato's Kitchen, Jonah Winter and Ana Juan's Frida, and Elizabeth Swados and Joe Cepeda's Hey You! C'Mere: A Poetry Slam. How do you find manuscripts that express U.S. diversity?*

I've always found it most interesting to get to the universal through the specific. That is something I seek as a reader. It can be a rich part of a person's reading experience, to encounter a culture that

isn't your own and to experience truth through somebody else's perspective.

I think it is important for children to understand humanity in the broadest possible construction. Characters who represent human beings can be Asian or



*Illustration by Joe Cepeda, from Hey You! C'Mere: A Poetry Slam*

black or Latino as well as white. It's important to have stories that are, in a sense, everyday stories that are illustrated with a diverse cast of people. You shouldn't only see people of color in stories about the problems that come with being a person of color.

*Over the past decade or so, the state of publishing has been a bit dismal, notwithstanding the occasional upward spikes that come with fabulous blockbusters. Is children's publishing flourishing or is it in a lull? What trends encourage you in your business?*

Well, I can't understate the threat to literary publishing that comes from cuts to library budgets and a decreasing diversity in our retail outlets. Even so, there are some encouraging signs. Certainly children's fiction has never been so widely read or taken so seriously. When I was first editing books in the 1980s, it was extremely difficult to persuade booksellers to stock hardcover literary fiction for kids, and that's gotten much better. I'm encouraged by the breadth and quality of fiction

being published these days—who knows, maybe it's even a "golden age."

But it's sad to me that picture books seem to be struggling now—I hear booksellers say they're having a hard time selling them.

*Are picture books a tough sell because they are expensive in hardcover? Or are there other factors, such as the difficulty of choosing from among all the new picture books and established classics?*

The abundance of choice does, paradoxically, seem to be a problem for everybody right now. What that will ultimately mean is that there will be *less* choice in the future. If people stop buying picture books, publishers will stop publishing them.

*Do you see picture books moving off your own list?*

No. I have a continuing love of picture books as a reading experience and as an art form, and I'm maintaining about a fifty-fifty balance of picture books and novels. But it's much harder to be successful with picture books now than it has been.

Publishing is a hard business. With all the passion that you may bring to it, you still have to get people to buy your book and read it. And it ain't easy because each book is an individual creation. Anytime something is individualized it resists mass distribution, and that's an especially big problem when the most common outlets are mass outlets.

There's a lot of talk about "branding" these days. But books cannot be branded in the same way as ketchup. Authors aren't brands. They're people, and they're creating art. With a book, the beauty is finding the right reader for the right book, like mini-marriages. The really good ones last. ~

*Nathalie op de Beeck is an assistant professor in the Department of English at Illinois State University, where she teaches courses in children's literature.*

**Children of Summer:  
Henri Fabre's Insects**

By Margaret J. Anderson

Illustrated by

Marie Le Glatin Keis

FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX, 1997

AGES 8 - 12

*In nineteenth-century France, a boy participates in research conducted by his father, an inspired entomologist and teacher.*

**Grasshopper on the Road**

By Arnold Lobel

HARPER, 1978

AGES 5 - 8

*A leggy traveler has a series of encounters that transparently and comically suggest to young readers the ideals of moderation, flexibility, and grace.*

**Insectlopedia**

Poems and paintings

by Douglas Florian

SCHOLASTIC, 1998

AGES 6 - 9

*From the "focus" of the locust to the "evil" of the weevil, identifying features of twenty-one insects are creatively presented.*

**Insects Are My Life**

By Megan McDonald

Illustrated by Paul Brett Johnson

ORCHARD, 1995

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*After irritating everyone around her with her passionate regard for things that crawl, a zoologically minded girl meets a kindred spirit.*

**In the Tall, Tall Grass**

By Denise Fleming

HENRY HOLT, 1991

AGES 2 - 5

*From the caterpillar's viewpoint, everything that moves in the daylight is enormous, bright, and bold.*

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**Riverbank Review**

of books for young readers

**Joyful Noise:  
Poems for Two Voices**

By Paul Fleischman

Illustrated by Eric Beddows

HARPER, 1988

AGES 8-12

*Meant to be read aloud, these verbal duets about bugs reflect on time and teamwork, fate and beauty, death and love.*

**The Lady and the Spider**

By Faith McNulty

Illustrated by Bob Marstall

HARPERCOLLINS, 1986

AGES 5-8

*A spider makes her home in a head of lettuce, which is harvested by an observant gardener, who wisely decides to let the spider go.*

**Old Black Fly**

By Jim Aylesworth

Illustrated by Stephen Gammell

HOLT, 1992

AGES 3-6

*The exploratory landings of a fly evoke disgust and fascination, thanks to gleeful art and gallivanting verse.*

**Two Bad Ants**

By Chris Van Allsburg

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN, 1988

AGES 7-10

*It's only a spoon, but to renegade ants it poses a terrible threat—one of many in a kitchen they are lucky to escape.*

**Where Butterflies Grow**

By Joanne Ryder

Illustrated by Lynne Cherry

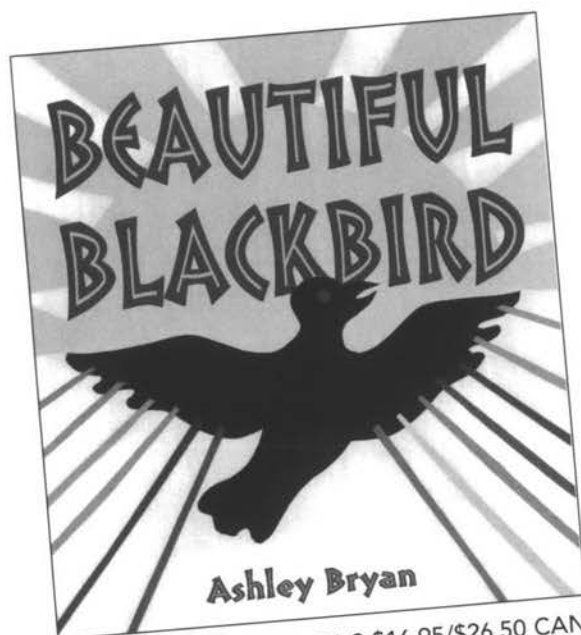
PENGUIN, 1989

AGES 5-8

*Author and artist together provide the reader with a ground-level view of a caterpillar's teeming world and private transformation.*

Riverbank Review

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## THE CANNING SEASON

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—Starred, *Kirkus Reviews*

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“Kennemore’s writing style is vivid and visual, showing great flair and intelligence . . . The dynamics within this amusing family will surely make children wish they could become part of the rollicking good fun.”

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**Children of Summer:  
Henri Fabre's Insects**

By Margaret J. Anderson  
Illustrated by Marie Le Glatin Keis  
FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX, 1997  
AGES 8-12

*In nineteenth-century France, a boy participates in research conducted by his father, an inspired entomologist and teacher.*

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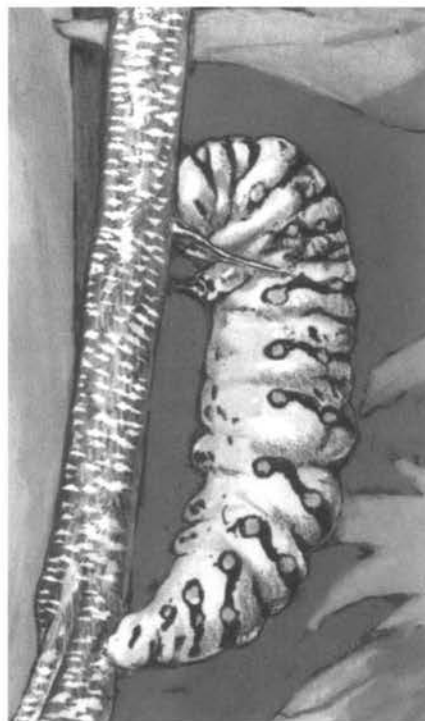
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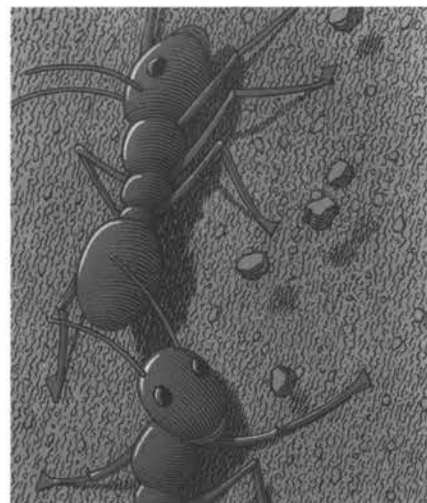
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PENGUIN, 1989  
AGES 5-8

*Author and artist together provide the reader with a ground-level view of a caterpillar's teeming world and private transformation.*



# The Power of “Dreams”

*How is it that Langston Hughes’s brief, cautionary poem seems to speak to us all?*

By Susan Marie Swanson

Langston Hughes’s call to “hold fast to dreams” has lodged itself deep in America’s memory. The eight-line poem titled simply “Dreams” couples an inspiring imperative with a sober truth. “Hold fast to dreams,” the poem begins. It continues, “For if dreams die” and “For when dreams go...” Dreams can die.

Sometimes they abandon us. The metaphors the poet uses to describe life without dreams are stark: “a broken-winged bird / That cannot fly”; “a barren field / Frozen with snow.” The desolation and honesty in those words pierce the heart. If Hughes had written instead that our dreams would win us the freedom of soaring eagles or the beauty of fields of lilies, would so many of us remember his words? Would we hear the poet’s charge to “hold fast to dreams”?

The poem has been quoted by commencement speakers, recited by children, and set to music for chorus and orchestra. It can be read in year-books, in newsletters, and on an array of Internet sites, including one where the Academy of American poets includes it in a selection of poems by Hughes. “Hold Fast to Dreams” has been the title of an elementary school play, a young adult novel, and a video produced by an urban housing agency. For former U.S. poet laureate Robert Pinsky’s Favorite Poem Project, in which ordinary Americans were invited to record treasured poems, a probation officer from Baltimore

poem meant when he was wavering.”

“Dreams” was first published in a journal called *The World Tomorrow* in May 1923, when Langston Hughes was twenty-one years old. The poem was addressed to a child, in phrases deleted from subsequent printings: “Hold fast to dreams, my son...Hold fast to dreams, O boy.” Though the poem did not appear in Hughes’s first book, *The Weary Blues* (1926), it was in *The Dream Keeper* (1932), a collection for young readers that included a number of poems originally published for adults, such as the well-loved “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “Mother to Son,” “My People,” and “The Dream Keeper.”

Each of these poems, like “Dreams,” is written in a voice that resonates with wisdom. But the young man who wrote “Hold fast to dreams, my son” had grown up apart from his parents and lacked elders who could nurture his dreams. His father sought a life in Mexico, free from racism, disdaining other black Americans, like Hughes’s mother, who worked a long series of jobs he judged to be demeaning. The boy’s childhood home was in Kansas with his grandmother, who died when he was twelve. During his high school years, he lived in Cleveland with his mother. When she left the city for a time, the teenager lived alone in a rented room, eating hot dogs and rice every night for supper. He graduated from a high school attended mostly

## Dreams

Hold fast to dreams,  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams,  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.

—Langston Hughes

chose “Dreams.” He explained that he often recited the poem to parolees, once to a man “who was hanging by a thread.” When the officer recited the first stanza, he related, the client “gave me a surprised look, and then he continued the part he remembered: ‘Hold fast to dreams, / For when dreams go / Life is a barren field / Frozen with snow.’ It was my turn to be surprised...it was a connection made. I had the feeling that the poem had power—the power to give courage. He did make it through parole. At our last meeting he told me how much that

by children of European immigrants, where he participated in track and field, was elected to the student council, edited the yearbook—and discovered poetry, writing his own poems and reading his favorite writers: Carl Sandburg, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Walt Whitman.

When Hughes visited his father in Mexico, the two found themselves at odds by temperament—the father active and acquisitive, the son obser-

funded, communication between the two broke off.

Drawn to the rich cultural activity that would become known as the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes made Harlem the center of a peripatetic life. Hughes's first major publication had come in June 1921, when "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" appeared in W. E. B. Du Bois's journal *The Crisis*, the most widely read African American magazine of its time. Jessie Fauset, the literary editor of *The Crisis*, had published some of Hughes's writing in *The Brownies' Book*, a magazine for African American children. When Hughes sent "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Fauset accepted it immediately, but for *The Crisis*, not *The Brownies' Book*. She later wrote, "I took the beautiful dignified creation to Dr. Du Bois and said: 'What colored person is there, do you suppose, in the United States who writes like that and yet is unknown to us?'"

Hughes might have written "Dreams" during the winter he lived on a docked ship up the Hudson River from New York City,

where he found work on the ship's mess. He'd left Columbia, worked during the summer on a truck farm on Long Island, delivered flowers for a few weeks to elite addresses in the city, and then, wanting to go to sea on a freighter, ended up on an anchored boat. In his memoir *The Big Sea*, he remembered "long winter nights with snow swirling down the Hudson, and the old ships rocking and creaking in the wind." When

spring 1923 came, he found himself on a ship bound for Africa.

Throughout his life, Hughes wrote about dreams, a theme biographer Arnold Rampersand calls "perhaps the central motif of his poetry." He wrote about daydreams, dreams in sleep, hopes, goals, wishes, and ideals. His writing about dreams encompasses his understanding of the black struggle for identity and justice in a racist society. In *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), a book-length poem about Harlem patterned after its popular music, he wrestles with and meditates on the consequences of racism, asking his famous question: "What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?...Or does it explode?" Hughes created this work about frustrated dreams during the summer of 1948, soon after he fulfilled a dream of his own. With money from a successful theater project, he purchased a brownstone at 20 East 127th Street in Harlem. Though he continued to travel, this was his home until his death in 1967.

The house figures prominently in *Visiting Langston* (Henry Holt, 2002), by Willie Perdomo, a picture book about a "Harlem girl" who proclaims, "I'm going with my daddy / To visit Langston's house." She visits rooms brought to life in collages by Bryan Collier, filled with the spirit of a man who loved jazz, literature, and black America. The girl writes poetry. She has some dreams of her own. And like many young Americans, she hears Langston Hughes's voice calling out to her to hold fast to dreams. ~

*Susan Marie Swanson is a contributing editor to Riverbank Review.*

*An edition of Langston Hughes's The Dream Keeper and Other Poems was published by Knopf in 1994, with illustrations by Brian Pinkney.*



*Portrait by Henri Cartier-Bresson, 1956*

vant and reflective—and in conflict over Langston's future. James Hughes wanted his son to study engineering in Europe and make a career mining in Mexico, while Langston was beginning to understand that the course of his life would be shaped by his love of black America, his desire to go to Harlem, and his passion for poetry. When Langston decided to leave Columbia University after a year of study that his father grudgingly

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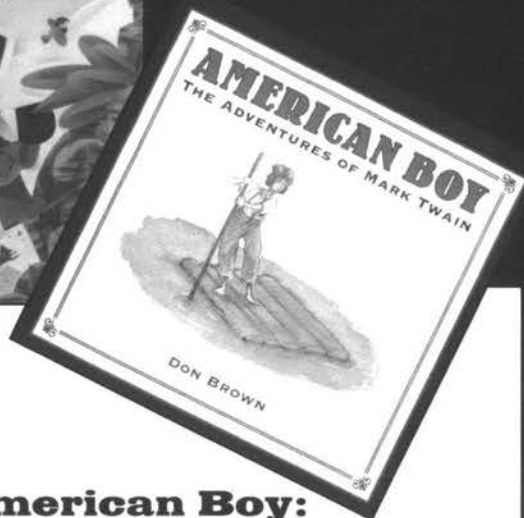
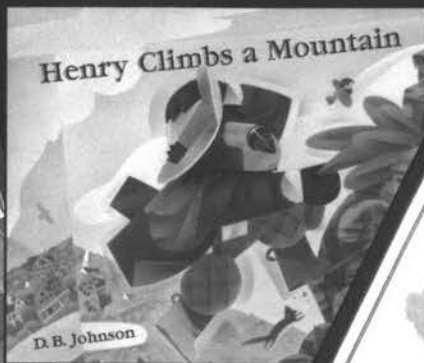
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profile

# Louis Sachar

*This author's smart, funny stories about kids on the social fringe deftly straddle the realms of mass market and literary fiction.*

By Christine Alfano

**H**ere's how Louis Sachar starts each writing day: he gets up, showers, drinks tea and freshly squeezed grapefruit juice, reads the paper, eats breakfast, walks upstairs to his office, and shuts the door. Then he writes for about two hours, a routine that may seem oddly akin to digging one hole each and every day.

What has Sachar harvested from this bland and unvarying approach? More than twenty remarkable books peppered with wordplay, wit, and captivating plot puzzles that not only entertain young readers but also provoke them into rethinking what makes someone a "bully" or a "loser." Sachar has garnered both a National Book Award and a Newbery Medal, and this spring saw the successful movie treatment of his critically acclaimed novel *Holes* (1998).

And to think that he could have been a lawyer. Sachar's first book, *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* (1978), was accepted for publication during his first week of law school. He was inspired to write the delightfully strange tales when, as an undergraduate at Berkeley, he worked as a teacher's aide at a local elementary school. Out of the experience he conjured a bizarre yet recognizable cast of students and teachers, housed within a school that was meant to have been thirty classrooms long but, due to an architectural

glitch, was built thirty stories high—one classroom on top of the other (except for floor nineteen, which is missing, and whose teacher, Miss Zarves, doesn't exist, or might be the devil incarnate in teacher form—no one is quite sure).

Initially the book didn't sell too well, but kids who read it loved the offbeat humor and wrote the author lots of fan letters. Encouraged, Sachar still wasn't sure that he could earn a living as a writer, so for the next six years he worked part time as a lawyer and in his spare time continued to craft stories. By 1984 he'd published two more novels, *Johnny's in the Basement* (1981), the story of a boy with an absurdly large bottle cap collection as well as an assortment of relationship dilemmas, and *Someday, Angeline* (1983), the bittersweet por-

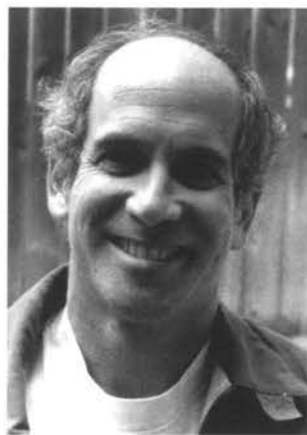
trait of an extremely gifted misfit. Sachar finally felt able to quit practicing law so that he could devote all his energies to writing.

Sequestered in his office (no one but his dogs are allowed in, and he never talks about his work until a book is finished), Sachar has stuck with what he knows and loves: his novels don't stray far from the elementary school grounds that spawned his first book. In a sense, he lives there still. In the *Wayside School* series, Sachar unabashed-

ly modeled the most sensible and benevolent character—the person who passes out balls at recess, known by kids as the "yard teacher"—after himself. (During Sachar's stint as a teacher's aide, this playground responsibility was his—and of course the character's name is Louis.)

Sachar seems to have total recall of the subterranean complexity of

life in the upper elementary grades: the shifting alliances, the unspoken power structure within the student body, kids' intermittent off-the-wall behavior, and adult dim-wittedness (and sometimes cruelty). His writing



Louis Sachar

brilliantly homes in on the rich social brew of the classroom and playground. Robert Cormier wrestled with these themes in a dark and tragic way; Sachar tackles them while embracing the humor and absurdity in kids' lives. Can books this funny and entertaining be literary? Notorious for their kid-friendly qualities and word-of-mouth popularity among young readers, Sachar's novels straddle the line between mass market and serious fiction.

Sachar's first three titles didn't get much critical attention, but his fourth, *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom!* (1987), won several state prizes, including the Texas Bluebonnet Award. It's become a cult classic among teachers and kids for its brutally honest, often hilarious depiction of the main character, Bradley Chalkers. He is the kind of kid we have all known—a failing student at best; a surly “loser,” friendless and alone in the lunchroom and on the playground; a boy who defends himself from classmates' jeers and teachers' exasperation by acting as if he doesn't care.

Another writer might have worked hard to explain the causes of Bradley's plight and attempted to extract tenderhearted sympathy for him. But Sachar doesn't hesitate to show readers how dense Bradley is about his own situation and how obnoxious and self-destructive he can be. He isn't misunderstood—Bradley Chalkers *isn't* likable, and he consistently meets everyone's dismal expectations. Yet Sachar goes beyond making this messed-up kid the butt of his jokes. Readers come to understand that Bradley doesn't have the know-how to turn himself around. It takes a kind and evenhanded counselor named Carla to see the minuscule glimmer of light in Bradley's stubborn personality. (The inspiration for this character? Sachar's wife-to-be, also named Carla, was the counselor at a Texas elementary school

where Sachar worked for a time as a visiting author.) No magical transformation takes place; one kiss does not turn this toad into a prince. But by the novel's end, Bradley has a friend and has been invited to his first birthday party, small feats that seem magnificent in the seemingly hopeless context of his life.

Another memorable, much more well-adjusted character emerges in Sachar's Marvin Redpost series, published by Random House. There are eight titles so far, written for first-through third-graders, and in each, readers are made privy to the trials and tribulations of a boy who seems to attract more than a little drama into his life. In *Kidnapped at Birth* (1992) Marvin is convinced that he was mistakenly taken home by his current pitiful family instead of his rightful parents, the King and Queen of Shampoo. A boy's greatest dream and worst nightmare are realized in *Alone in His Teacher's House* (1994). Marvin has gained access to the inner sanctum of his teacher's abode, but her dog dies while he's caring for it. In *Why Pick on Me?* (1993), Marvin boldly exposes the gross—but also rather ordinary—phenomenon of nose-picking, along with the pack mentality of his classmates. And, of course, Marvin's unconscious attraction to a girl periodically rears its head throughout the series, introducing hormonal stirrings to the prepubescent set.

If you suspect that Louis Sachar saves his best characterization for boys, meet Laura Sibbie, the coolest girl in Mr. Doyle's class and the star of *Sixth Grade Secrets* (1987). Like Bradley Chalkers, Laura is a recognizable type, but she represents his opposite: popular, self-confident, smart, a natural leader who abuses her immense power and nearly drives her teacher mad by forming a secret and elite club called Pig City. Drawing on the dark themes of *Lord of the Flies*, Sachar's novel delves

into the private world of children, where adults have no say: groups splinter off and gang up on one another, a brutal pecking order emerges, and grabs for power spiral out of control. Sachar, however, maintains a lighter tone, exploring in a deliciously humorous way the hidden social maneuverings that make up so much of kids' lives.

Girls are also the most interesting characters in *The Boy Who Lost His Face* (1989). In broad strokes, Sachar lays out the peer-pressure dilemmas faced by David, a sixth-grader who is dropped by his former best friend for a cliquish, tougher crowd. The plot could be the stuff of mediocre genre fiction if it weren't for the novel's unique, three-dimensional females: Mo, fast-talking and whip smart, who protects David from thugs in shop class; Tori, David's intelligent and intriguing love interest; and Tori's aunt, Mrs. Bayfield, the artistic “old witch” on whom David and the tough boys play a startling, mean-spirited prank. Throughout the novel Sachar cleverly toys with the notion of a curse, describing the psychological disintegration that takes place when David believes he is the victim of an evil spell.

In *Holes*, Sachar revisits the curse theme, taking it to a fantastic level. With this novel, the setting shifts from the universal elementary school classroom to the scorching heat and desert vistas of Texas. In a lizard-infested juvenile detention center, questionable teachers are replaced by nasty wardens straight out of Roald Dahl.

Like Sachar's other fiction, *Holes* is essentially a comedy about a kid. Stanley Yelnats, wrongly accused of stealing expensive basketball shoes, is sentenced to eighteen months at Camp Greenlake, where he is forced to dig a five-by-five-by-nine-foot hole each day. In the end, he heroically carries a curse's bad luck to its immensely satisfying undoing.

“There is no lake at Camp Greenlake” is the novel’s opening sentence. The declaration is simple, but right away readers get a taste of the irony and absurdity that twist beneath the surface of this remarkable story. Sachar layers folklore, historical fiction, and modern realistic drama in an enthralling tale that sometimes borders on magic realism. Yielding to his penchant for creating and solving mysteries within stories, Sachar expertly places clue-like puzzle pieces throughout the novel’s short, cleanly written chapters. A gypsy’s strange request at the book’s beginning is magnificently mirrored at the story’s close; an old forgotten lipstick tube becomes a key to the past. Like a wizened casino card dealer, Sachar shuffles his cards out into thin air, but with virtuosic control and precision timing, he brings them back into a neat deck. All of his odd plot pieces fall firmly into place, and readers relish the novel’s surprising revelations. Sachar’s most ambitious and complicated novel deserves the prizes it has received, and the fact that Sachar wrote the screenplay helps to explain its daring and successful leap from page to screen.

In addition to offering readers labyrinths to navigate and clues to solve, Sachar’s stories seek and find what is good in such disparate and unlikely characters as the bully Bradley Chalkers, the insecure David, and the quintessential bad-luck kid, Stanley Yelnats, transmitting a sense of fairness and an appreciation for the complexity of kids’ lives. Moreover, they express contempt for the way that adults (especially adults with power over children) ignore or refuse to see what many children have to offer. Louis Sachar believes that there is good in every child. And, lucky for us, he believes that reading should be fun. ~

Christine Alfano is a contributing editor to Riverbank Review.



## Some Words Inside of Words

Sometimes we see a pie we long to eat,  
 Sometimes we see a girl we long to meet,  
 Sometimes we see a horse and long to ride it,  
 And that’s why *eyesight* has a *sigh* inside it.

A cat will often take the softest chair  
 In the living room, and lie for hours there  
 With a smug, sleepy look upon his face,  
 Behaving just as if he owned the place.  
 Therefore it’s no surprise to notice how  
 Inside *homeowner* is the word *meow*.



If you are rowing up a marshy stream  
 Where the air’s full of flies and rising steam,  
 And alligators lie in mud and eye you,  
 I know where you are! You are in a *bayou*.



In every *icecube* there’s a *cub*, and so  
 It sometimes happens that a cub will grow  
 Within the freezer of a Frigidaire,  
 Until it is a full-sized polar bear.  
 What happens then? Well, opening the door,  
 It steps into the kitchen with a roar,  
 And lumbers through the house, huge, white, and fat,  
 Turning down every single thermostat.

A cashew nut, as I’ve heard people tell,  
 Is like a piggy-bank. Just crack its shell  
 And you’ll have lots of money in a flash,  
 Because a *cashew* nut is full of *cash*.  
 (That isn’t really true, I gather—but  
 At least the cashew is a tasty nut.)



When *steam* is coming from a china pot,  
 It means that *tea* is in it, like as not.  
 Sit down, my friends! We’ll have a cup this minute,  
 With sugar lumps and milk (or lemon) in it.

—Richard Wilbur

Richard Wilbur is a poet and general writer whose books for children include *Opposites*, *The Disappearing Alphabet*, and a book about words within words called *The Pig in the Spigot* (all published by Harcourt). Retired now from college teaching, he divides his time between rural Massachusetts and Key West.

# An Economy of Words

*Poetry finds new life in novels-in-verse.*

By Deb Kruse-Field

Crossing literary divides can lead to all kinds of discoveries. Many children's book writers have recently undertaken such crossings, and readers are reaping the rewards. These days a novel for young readers might be written in any number of forms—as a screenplay, a radio script, or a collection of letters—and

authors of picture books and nonfiction are finding that rubbing narrative with poetry sparks an altogether different tale. Notable examples include Marilyn Nelson's Newbery Honor-winning *Carver* (Front Street, 2001), a biography of George Washington Carver shaped into a suite of poems. Some books defy easy categorization, like Vera B. Williams's delightful *Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart* (Greenwillow, 2001), the story of two young sisters told in a series of tender poems and colorful illustrations with the trajectory of a narrative. Is it a novel? A collection of poetry? A picture book?

Perhaps the most popular hybrid to emerge in recent years, novels-in-verse, written for middle-grade or teen readers, have achieved both critical acclaim and popular readership. In a way, this is surprising. Making room for poetry seems like hard work these days. Our lives move at an urgent clip: we connect with one another through instant messages or disordered cell phone chatter. But, as Karla Kuskin suggested in an interview in this magazine a few years ago, the condensed images of contemporary media, swirling around us in "sound bite" form, may actually make young peo-

ple more receptive to poetry than they were a generation ago.

What is it about splicing poetry and narrative that energizes us? Stripped down, the narrative can snap with tension. There isn't room for plodding plots or excess detail. Poetry allows a writer's language to radiate its meaning. Poetry's nourishing details slow us down, inviting us to think, to create images rather than being bombarded by them. When teenagers connect with a character whose story is told in verse, they can begin to see poetry in a new light, not as something to be endured or feared, but as a way to get straight to the marrow of what it means to be twelve or sixteen. They may even embrace poetry as a natural form for telling their own stories, a means for more clearly expressing who they are—a better way to understand their lives.

For an author, poetry can emerge as that "better way" of telling a character's story, often for the freedom it offers that character's voice. In Virginia Euwer Wolff's National Book Award-winning *True Believer* (Simon & Schuster, 2001), sequel to *Make Lemonade* (Scholastic, 1993), fifteen-year-old LaVaughn grapples with the

extremes of her first serious crush, and with paving a path out of her inner-city neighborhood, toward college. Wolff's dynamic free verse swings with the cadences of a young woman's capricious feelings—tentativeness, elation, heartache—allowing LaVaughn's warm, colloquial voice to resonate:

A big strong brave girl  
would not go crying to her mirror,  
"What's wrong with me?"  
over and over and over  
like a dodo.

A mature person  
would not pretend her pillow  
was Jody and kiss it  
all crying wet tears all over it  
even with stuff coming out her nose.

Somebody logical would not  
wake in the middle of the night  
and get up and go over to the chair  
where the beautiful dress was  
draped over  
and put her face down in it  
to try to smell the delicious chlorine  
and cry so confused  
about everything being so spoiled.

The concentration and pacing of Wolff's poetry are a powerful draw for introspective teenage readers. LaVaughn ruminates intensely, often on several things at once: drifting childhood friends who have joined a religious fundamentalist group; her own spiritual uncertainty; the loss of her father:

I want to join with them  
to have it be like the old times we  
had,  
but there's something  
holds me back.  
If there is a God and Jesus,  
is my Dad in their heaven up there?  
And if there isn't,  
where is he?  
Can he see me?

LaVaughn's inquisitive voice affirms an important point for reluctant and sophisticated readers alike: our questions have a lot in common with poetry. Both are realms of ambiguity, and while poetry's indirection may at first be off-putting to some readers, LaVaughn's questions, which echo those of many teenagers, have a compelling clarity.

While Wolff sculpts a narrative of continuous verse, other recent novels are structured as a collection of poems that cumulatively tell a story, such as Sonya Sones's *Stop Pretending: When My Big Sister Went Crazy* (HarperCollins, 1999) and *What My Mother Doesn't Know* (Simon & Schuster, 2001). Sones's poems offer snapshots of universal teenage moments, alive with the tension created by the push and pull of contradictory elements. For spirited Sophie in *What My Mother Doesn't Know*, laughter and tears converge as she searches for her first true love. In "Shopping for a Dress to Wear to the Dance," Sophie models a black dress that she thinks is perfect. Her mother responds:

Perfect. For a funeral.  
Besides. It's too tight.  
Now, take that one off  
and try on the beautiful one.

We laugh at this familiar mother-daughter dressing-room dilemma, and at the resulting "crinkly sound / of the flowered dress / being slipped into a paper bag." But at the same time, we

cringe for Sophie, whose mother, normally glued to television soap operas, chooses this moment to try to be more involved in her daughter's life, breaking down in tears to pressure Sophie into purchasing the "rose disaster dress." And though Sophie comically battles internally to keep herself from falling for outcast Murphy ("I didn't / ask Murphy / to have lunch with me just now, / did I?"), her anxiety over her peers' judgment, which repeatedly causes her to shun a meaningful relationship, gives the reader a sad pang.

Each spare, sobering poem in Sones's autobiographical *Stop Pretending* juxtaposes the tension of Cookie feigning normalcy with the fears whipping around inside of her—fear of becoming mentally ill, like her sister; fear that her torn-apart family will sink permanently into disrepair; fear that the secret of her sister's illness will be revealed to her peers:

Sometimes  
I worry that  
the truth will break out all  
over my face, like a fresh crop  
of zits.

In the end, Cookie accepts her altered family, reality and hope mingling, as they do in Sones's poems, into one.

Then there are novels-in-verse in which the poetry makes the past strikingly present. In Karen Hesse's *Witness* (Scholastic, 2001), multiple voices chronicle the Ku Klux Klan's slow invasion of a small Vermont town in 1924. Hesse's Newbery Medal-winning *Out of the Dust* (Scholastic, 1997) takes on an even greater task: breathing life and interest into a crumbling Depression-era farm in Oklahoma. In her Newbery speech, Hesse explains that Billy Jo's lyrical free-verse narration arose organically from the setting: "The frugality of the life, the hypnotically hard work of farming, the grimness of conditions

during the Dust Bowl demanded an economy of words."

As a subject, it sounds depressing. What is the potency of these distant, dusty poems? The book's power lies in Hesse's vivid images. Free of excess, her word pictures swell with timeless emotions: Billy Jo's scarred hands, "looking like the earth itself, / all parched and rough and cracking," which prevent her from playing the piano, her only solace; her pregnant mother dancing in a rare rain; and always the blowing dust—between their bed sheets, crusted in their hair, not even pausing for dinnertime:

We shake out our napkins,  
spread them on our laps,  
and flip over our glasses and plates,  
exposing neat circles,  
round comments on what life  
would be without dust.

These images invite us into Billy Jo's hard life and into her longing for something other than what she has. When so much young adult fiction dwells exclusively in the present, in the world of peer issues, it may be invigorating for teen readers to stretch back in time and absorb the particulars—both foreign and familiar—of another time and place. Readers may consider differently both the pleasant and the hard details that infuse their own lives, and the ways in which their surroundings shape who they are.

Although boys may enjoy these narratives, the novels mentioned here largely navigate the emotional territory of girl characters. Where are the guys' voices? As it turns out, content and form perfectly coalesce in several novels in which tough yet sensitive guys discover that they need poetry more than they know, even though some of them start out feeling like fifth-grader Jack in Sharon Creech's energetic and affecting *Love That Dog* (HarperCollins, 2001).

Jack candidly explains his resistance to poetry in his opening journal entry:

September 13

I don't want to  
because boys  
don't write poetry.  
Girls do.

Yet as his teacher reads work by a range of poets—from Robert Frost to Walter Dean Myers—Jack's appreciation for poetry grows, and he is inspired to write his own verse. Some of Jack's poems express his grief over the recent death of his dog Sky, while also celebrating his memory:

And when us kids  
were playing outside  
kicking the ball  
he'd chase after it  
and push it with his nose  
push push push  
and getting slobber  
all over the ball

but no one cared  
because he was such  
a funny dog  
that dog Sky  
that straggly furry  
smiling  
dog  
dog  
Sky.

If the two were in the same classroom, Jack might befriend Lonnie, also encouraged by his teacher to write poetry, in Jacqueline Woodson's soulful *Locomotion* (Penguin Putnam, 2003). Lonnie writes heartbreaking poems about his parents, who died in a fire a few years earlier. Equally powerful are his adept yet believable haikus, epistles, and free verse poems about the people and events in his new life: his little sister, playing basketball with his friends, and his frustrations and delights with writing—"This day is already putting all kinds of words / in your head / and breaking them up into lines." Each rhyth-

mic poem shines a bit of light on Lonnie's life, moments of sun that he hadn't noticed before.

For teenage baseball jock Kevin Boland, in Ron Koertge's *Shakespeare Bats Cleanup* (Candlewick, 2003), experimenting with writing different poetry forms begins merely as a way to relieve the boredom of being stuck in bed with mono. Honestly, often wryly, he worries about regaining his spot as the starting first baseman and muses over eighth-grade romance; sometimes his sharp-witted observations find their way into poignant poems about his mother's recent death. In "A Poem for Poetry," he writes:

Sure, I guess I could have spilled  
my guts  
all over the page, but you made  
me want  
to pour things out a little more  
carefully.  
And into prettier containers, if  
you know  
what I mean.

For these guys, not only writing words, but writing the *exactly right* words is cathartic, a way to sort out the jumbledness of life in clear, gutsy lines.

These novels-in-verse are telling us that we need to pay attention to the poetry that loops through our lives. Pulsing beneath our skin, as it does for these boys, poetry sometimes tumbles out in eloquent verse set down in a journal. But most often it explodes in a gritty play at first base, lopes after a scruffy dog chasing a ball, or floats in the banter between players on a basketball court. It can also be found in LaVaughn's questions, in the arguments in Sophie's dressing room, and rising out of Billy Jo's dust. ~

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**a poem for summer**

**Fireflies**

An August night—  
The wind not quite  
A wind, the sky  
Not just a sky—  
And everywhere  
The speckled air  
Of summer stars  
Alive in jars.

—J. Patrick Lewis

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# Crossing Boundaries

*A white writer steps outside herself to tell a story of the Underground Railroad.*

By Shelley Pearsall

**A**fter I had visited her school to talk about *Trouble Don't Last*, my novel about runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad, a young student sent me a letter that included the following comment: "I thought you would be older, African American, and have gray hair with glasses." Clearly, I was not what this

child expected. Although I had written a story from an African American point of view, I was not a black author. Furthermore, I did not have gray hair or glasses—a prerequisite for those of us who write historical fiction, it seems.

In fact, I was a thirty-six-year-old white woman with rather ordinary brown hair and 20/20 vision (a rarity within my nearsighted family). How is it that I had come to write a book about two Kentucky slaves, an elderly man and a young boy, escaping via the Underground Railroad in 1859? Beneath her surprise, I believe that this is what the child was truly wondering.

Generations ago, this child would not have expressed surprise at my appearance. Regardless of the topic, nearly all children's stories were written by white authors. Unfortunately, the stories told by white writers sometimes, intentionally or unintentionally, perpetuated harmful racial or cultural stereotypes in their words and illustrations. Over the past several decades, there has been a dramatic shift in children's literature. As the field has expanded to embrace authors

of diverse races and backgrounds, the literature has become more authentic and meaningful for children of all races and cultures.

Positive as this shift has been, it has also led to a subtle change in readers'

become well acquainted with the lines that children and adults, of all backgrounds, draw in their minds when it comes to authors and their work. Behind people's surprise at my appearance often lie deeper questions. Why would a white author decide to write an African American story? Should authors write books from outside their particular point of view?

Let me begin with the question of *why*. Years ago, books about African Americans were written by white authors



perceptions about authorship—mainly, that authenticity comes from authors writing about their own backgrounds. In other words, white authors should write "white stories," black authors should write African American stories, and Latino authors must write Latino stories.

After many school visits, I have

with sometimes questionable motives: perhaps to assuage a feeling of guilt, to convey sympathy or pity—or, in the worst cases, to mock and denigrate. As I started to work on *Trouble Don't Last*, I was keenly aware of the motives of some white writers in the past. However, I also felt that it was possible to move away from them, toward a differ-

ent aim. I believed that authenticity could come from places other than one's background. My novel about the Underground Railroad grew from my own love of history and journeys.

I have always been fascinated by journeys. Growing up, I was the quintessential armchair traveler—a fan of travelogues, explorers' journals, and anything else that would take me beyond my fenced-in backyard in Cleveland, Ohio, with its single maple tree. Truthfully, I was also the sort of child who was afraid of virtually everything and I think, deep down, I admired the astonishing courage of those who weren't. For me, writing was a way of imagining what existed beyond myself and my world. I didn't want to follow the old adage "Write what you know." Instead, through writing, I wanted to discover what I did not know.

One of my early works of fiction was a handwritten, forty-page story of a Vietnamese family. Written when I was thirteen, the manuscript was based on accounts of Vietnamese boat people and told the story of a family trying to cross the ocean to freedom. The piece was inspired by a local Vietnamese refugee family, brought to the United States and sponsored by our church.

At age sixteen, I spent several months studying the journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition. I had heard some uncorroborated family stories suggesting that we were distantly related to William Clark, which may in part explain my interest. I wanted to know all of the details of the expedition, from grizzly bear sightings to the ailments afflicting the explorers.

Later, after I became a historian and writer, my curiosity about the Underground Railroad grew from similar roots: fascination with difficult journeys, and with individuals whose life experience was different from my own. I was surprised to discover that few history books outlined the specific details

of the Underground Railroad: preparations made, food eaten, routes taken, methods of transportation—the kind of minutiae that someone interested in journeys always wants to know, and that were a central part of the story in other journeys I studied.

Even more surprising to me was the fact that, although there were many children's books on the topic, most did not feature runaway slaves as main characters or as the "heroes" of the journey. Instead, books generally seemed to highlight the accomplishments of the white leaders, guides, secret signs, and safe houses of the Underground Railroad. The people who were actually making the journey, the runaways themselves, were often relegated to secondary or background roles.

At first, I thought that this must be due to the fact that the Underground Railroad was a secret operation, and so its travelers were, in reality, nameless shadows. But then, in my research, I began stumbling across the names and accounts of real runaways: William Triplett, Ordee Lee, Thomas Harper, Laura and Lizzy, Old Jane Davis...the names went on and on. My fictional runaways, eleven-year-old Samuel and seventy-year-old Harrison, were born from the stories of these real travelers who did, in fact, leave behind records of themselves and their lives. Their stories fascinated me, and I felt they needed to be told.

When you cross cultural boundaries with your work, I believe it is important to begin with a strong foundation of respect for your characters and their history. That is the key. For me, respect means researching and creating characters who exhibit richness, depth, and complexity—regardless of whether I am writing about my own culture or another.

In *Trouble Don't Last*, seventy-year-old Harrison is, unquestionably, the leader on the long journey to freedom. With his self-determination, complex

values, and gruff manner, he is a far cry from the passive and simply rendered stereotype of the runaway slave often depicted in books. During the course of the journey, eleven-year-old Samuel also grows and changes as a character. He begins as a fearful slave who has little sense of who he is and no understanding of what it means to be free, and ends the journey as a determined and courageous young boy who dreams of his future in freedom.

In addition to Harrison and Samuel, there are seven other African American characters in *Trouble Don't Last*, each with a unique point of view, personal history, and language pattern. In order to make these characters three-dimensional, I immersed myself in their history and culture. On the walls of my office, I posted nineteenth-century photographs of slaves and freedmen in order to give myself a visual picture of the real people of that period. I listened to the powerfully emotional slave testimonials recorded by the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s and combed through letters of former slaves, searching for my characters' distinctive words, phrases, and opinions.

I also followed the same path that my characters took. I stood on the former site of slave auctions in Washington, Kentucky, and crossed the Ohio River in a boat. On these occasions, I often felt as if I was merely the official note taker for my characters, trying to describe the unfamiliar towns and landscape as they saw them.

Anne Lamott writes about this experience of being a "scribe" for one's characters in her book *Bird by Bird*. She says, "Over and over I feel as if my characters know who they are, and what happens to them, and where they have been and where they will go, and what they are capable of doing, but they need me to write it down for them because their handwriting is so bad."

Writing *Trouble Don't Last* required not only searching historical records and

documents, but also searching my soul. John Gardner wrote, "Art that tries hard to tell the truth unretouched is difficult. It tears down our heroes and heart-warming convictions." To be truthful to the historical facts, I found that I had to tear down some of the heart-warming myths of the Underground Railroad: to travel on the Underground Railroad was not free—guides often required payment for food and transportation. Not everyone was altruistic. There was prejudice and mistrust, among both blacks and whites.

At times, seeing the world through Samuel and Harrison's eyes meant depicting the racism and prejudice of white characters. I had to be willing, as a writer, to step out of my own skin to depict a scene in an authentic way. For instance, in one section of the story, a white widow seems, on the surface, to be benevolent. She provides shelter and food for Samuel and Harrison, but she will not handle the coins given to her by Harrison as payment, because she doesn't want to touch the same coins their "black hands had touched."

Should I, as a white writer, have written a story of the Underground Railroad from an African American point of view? This is a follow-up question I am often asked by readers.

Taped above my computer screen is a quote. Although I have forgotten the exact source, the words beautifully express my thoughts on this issue, as both a writer and a reader. The quote simply reads: "To imagine is to begin to understand." It is my belief that the most powerful imagining we can do, as people, is to try to see the world through one another's eyes. ~

*Shelley Pearsall is the author of Trouble Don't Last, winner of the 2003 Scott O'Dell Award for historical fiction. She is a former public school teacher and a former historian for Hale Farm and Village, a living-history museum in Ohio.*

## Excerpt from *Trouble Don't Last*

### Onions

Harrison smacked my shoulder.

"Stop staring at me like you seen a ghost. Gimme the knife. You gotta put them on like this."

I watched Harrison's clumsy fingers slice off thick pieces of onion and reach for his feet, but his back was too stiff to bend far enough down. He cursed loudly and said, "You help me out here, child, and be quick about it."

I did what he told me. Scrubbed the strong-smelling onions all over his dark, knotted feet as if I was polishing the legs of Miz Catherine's parlor chairs, not fixing to run away. My fingers stung and my eyes burned so I couldn't even see what I was doing for all the tears.

"Ain't right to run off," I said under my breath. Lilly had always told me that running off was the surest way to bring the worst kind of trouble on my head.

Harrison straightened up and waved his hand toward the direction of the house. "Go on back to Mas'er and Miz Catherine then," he said sharply. "I ain't stoppin you." An owl hooted in the distance. I looked up at Harrison's face. His eyes were closed and he didn't have on any expression at all.

"Why you runnin' away?" I asked.

"Die one way, die 'nother, soon enough."

"But they gonna send dogs after you. Young Mas Seth told me about dogs that can hunt down runaways anywhere. Even two days after they gone. Even if they have run through water, he told me. What if they chase you down? You gonna get all tore up by them dogs."

"Why you think I brung the onions, Samuel? To keep them kind of dogs away," Harrison snapped.

He stared at me and pressed his lips together. "I know what I'm doin. I lived long enough on this here earth to know what I'm doin when I decide to do something, you hear?" He was getting angry now. "You just make up yo' mind. Either you run away or you stay, but I'm goin, and the Devil's dogs can drag my old gray body back, arm by arm, leg by leg, if they want to." He glared at me. "You runnin off with me or not, Samuel?"

# Wind in the Grass, Lace under Glass

*Laura Ingalls Wilder's family homestead in South Dakota and her final home in the Missouri Ozarks offer the visitor very different experiences.*

By Martha Davis Beck

Visiting a site that has been brought to life in historical fiction can be challenging for a devoted reader. There is an inevitable gap not only between the literal and fictional landscapes, but also between the past and the present. Early this spring when I set out to visit Laura Ingalls Wilder's family homestead in

DeSmet, South Dakota, I carried within me a world I knew I would not, in a strict sense, find at my destination.

On the other hand, South Dakota has changed less in the past hundred years than many places, which encourages imaginative time travel. With the exception of video stores, the small towns look much the way they did in the 1950s. Vast rolling prairie and a surprisingly big sky are the main things to look at. Some visitors don't seem to notice either, complaining that there's "nothing to see." For others, the land and sky exert an almost hypnotic pull on the senses.

Standing on the gentle rise east of town where the Ingalls family built their claim shanty in 1880, it is not hard to imagine what that view looked and felt like to Laura, standing barefoot in the tall grass. Though roads now crisscross the farmland, few cars pass. The landscape is quiet except for the ever present sound of the wind. On this April day the temperature was mild, but the wind was a reminder of the power of the elements out on the prairie. Wilder's account of winter in DeSmet—especially in the year of

1880–81, described in *The Long Winter*—is so vivid that, after one reads it, mild weather doesn't seem like the *absence* of weather, but a gift the land bestows.

Fortitude against the harshness of nature—without the protection of modern housing and heating and year-round supplies of essential goods—was a central requirement for western settlers like Charles and Caroline Ingalls. If you distill their daughter's story to its essence, you get to this: the power that cheerfulness, hard work, love of family—and music—can have against daunting obstacles.

In visiting the site of the home where they finally settled (after shorter stays in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and the territory that is now Kansas), where five of Laura's books are set, I wanted to slip into that story even more deeply than I had done so many times as a reader. My attention focused on the things that had not changed in the intervening years. I tried to screen out the roads and farms in the distance; the tourist center on the hilltop behind me (not yet open for the season), with its pony ride and replica buggy; and the painted wooden platforms that lay

across from where I sat. (These wooden blocks, I had been told while touring the Surveyors' House that Laura's family lived in when they first arrived in DeSmet, were part of the set for the annual Laura Ingalls Wilder pageant held at the homestead site in July.)

The pageant draws crowds to the homestead each year, but I was glad to be visiting on a quiet day, off-season. While this event helps the town of DeSmet keep a piece of its history alive, reenactment of the Ingalls family's life is not something I'd seek out. Somehow I avoided seeing even a single episode of *Little House on the Prairie*, one of the most popular television shows of the 1970s, not because I object to the idea of TV shows or movies being made from books, but because I felt too strongly about this particular story to accept a mediocre adaptation. As a young teenager, protective of my childhood experience, I knew that Michael Langdon's blow-dried hair and Hollywood work clothes had nothing to do with the Pa I knew in the stories—or with the historical person on whom the character was based, whose wedge-shaped, nineteenth-century beard and intense gaze transfixed me in the photographs I'd seen. I've had a similar resistance to the spinoff titles and products that the books' publisher has created in an effort to endlessly expand this classic series. Maintaining one's love for a book in

the face of popular media adaptations and mass-market promotion is similar to preserving a satisfying experience of Christmas despite the glut of holiday merchandise: it's possible, but it requires an ingredient of Ingalls fortitude.

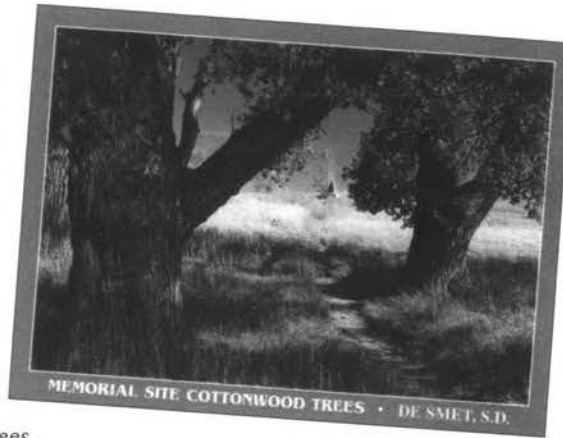
Alone on the hill, I listened to the wind creak in the branches of the five cottonwoods that Laura's Pa planted so long ago, now grown into large, gnarled, shade-giving trees. The same wind rustled in the delicate papery grasses that surrounded me. The fields that stretched to all sides of me were set in motion by wind, a rippling surface of subtle golds and browns, gentle green just beginning to show.

Later in the season I took a trip to southern Missouri, where Laura and Almanzo Wilder eventually made their home as a married couple and lived together for fifty-five years. (Laura lived there for eight years longer following the death of her husband.) Because this was not a site described in Laura's books—rather, it is the site where the books were written—I came to it free of any preexisting vision, curious to see the artifacts that were there and hoping to gain insight into the adult writer.

The countryside I crossed on my way to Mansfield gave me my first impressions. How much kinder this fertile land, with rolling green hills and plentiful trees, must have seemed to the young couple, arriving in 1894 to start a new life after years of hardship on the northern prairie.

At the Wilder home I encountered a much more fully developed tourist site than in DeSmet. The Ingalls' Dakota claim shanty is long gone, but Laura and Almanzo's Missouri home still stands, its interior almost eerily intact, as if they still lived there. While I had plenty of company on my tour, the experience was unexpectedly intimate.

Almanzo built Rocky Ridge, with Laura's help, adding on to its first small room bit by bit over a period of twenty



years. It is, literally, made to the measure of their personalities and tastes—as well as their physical size. (I had forgotten that Laura was only four feet, eleven inches tall as an adult, and Almanzo just a few inches taller. The kitchen counters and living room bookshelves were all designed to be comfortably within their reach.) Rugs and pillows that Almanzo hooked are scattered around the warm living room, and pictures that Laura cut from magazines and calendars still hang on the walls of their bedroom. Though Laura lived through most of the 1950s, there was no television in the house, and she preferred to cook on a wood-burning stove until she died.

Most striking are the many touches that express Almanzo's love for and understanding of his wife. Laura disliked being cooped up indoors, but, as a farm wife, had to spend many hours each day engaged in domestic tasks. The house has large windows all around, offering generous views of the outdoors in every room, in all directions. She wanted a stone fireplace, and Almanzo built a massive one in their living room, despite having had his fill of hauling rocks when he cleared the land for their orchard and farm. Laura's writing desk sits in the corner of a small study that links the bedroom and living room, and a library nook and a music room (which holds the organ Laura helped to buy for her sister Mary) offer space for activities both Laura and Almanzo loved.

A museum next door holds many

objects that were familiar to me from the stories, the most celebrated being Pa's fiddle. Built in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century, this violin has been carefully maintained and is played for the public once each year, in accordance with Laura's request. Other items of interest include a nine-patch quilt and samples of delicate beadwork made by Mary after she had gone blind.

A small item I almost didn't notice, among other objects in a glass display cabinet, was the patch of lace that Laura's friend Ida Brown gave her when Laura and Almanzo were married. I remembered this from *These Happy Golden Years*, a book poignant with the sense of loss that accompanies the passage from youth to adulthood, signified and sealed by marriage. Though Laura and Almanzo's courtship captivated me as a girl (what could be a more satisfying answer to romantic anticipation than the sound of sleigh bells?) I also recognized, in this volume, the sadness Laura felt in saying good-bye to life with her family and her girlhood friends. This feeling comes through strongly in the scene following Laura and Almanzo's wedding, when Ida, overcome by emotion, slips a small package into Laura's hand. Later Laura realizes she is holding something and, at her mother's urging, unwraps it: "She opened the small tissue-paper package and unfolded the most beautiful piece of lace she had ever seen... Laura knew that she would always keep and treasure this lovely thing that Ida had given her." Looking through the glass at the small, triangular piece of lace with its design of leaves and flowers, I felt a sharp thrill to know that Laura was right: she did keep and treasure it—as she kept and treasured so much of her childhood, sharing it with millions of readers. ~

*Martha Davis Beck is the editor of Riverbank Review.*



## Picture Books

### Big Momma Makes the World

By Phyllis Root

Illustrated by Helen Oxenbury

CANDLEWICK

44 pages, Ages 4–8, \$16.99

ISBN 0-7636-1132-8

I am persuaded that when Phyllis Root so much as clears her throat, crowds of listeners appear and settle down, eager to hear the story her merest utterance promises. The very first sentence of *Big Momma Makes the World* (“When Big Momma made the world, she didn’t mess around”) is evidence that Ms. Root doesn’t mess around either. She’s got a story, and you’re going to want to hear it.

Not only that, you’re going to want to look at it over and over, again and again, because the endearing and sometimes sly acrylic illustrations are by none other than Helen Oxenbury (*Tom and Pippo*, *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig*) and they are, quite simply, gorgeous and a happy pairing with the text.

Big Momma has seven days to make the world, and even with a baby on her hip she does it and does it thoroughly, bossing the sun and moon and stars around with a down-home twang that gives this creation story both the feeling of a folk tale and strong feminist appeal. You can be sure that each confident order Big Momma issues meets with instant compliance:

“Earth,” said Big Momma, “Get over here.”

And it did.

Oxenbury’s illustrations playfully keep pace with the story’s unusual combination of drama and comfort, as when she shows us Big Momma and her little baby, just barely visible as they nestle together in a full-page panel of soft blackness. It is the first day of creation, and Momma is galvanizing the quiet dark into action with a crook of her finger. A double-page spread depicts this tale’s version of the “Big Bang,” wherein all creatures who *want* to be created appear in one large explosion. Suddenly, smiling

pink animals are everywhere, flying from the great unknown’s fiery center.

But after she makes the light and the dark, the fish and the fruit, the hedgehogs and the whales, Big Momma realizes something important is missing from her creation. She needs people—someone to swap yarns with, someone to make her laugh. The workweek is almost finished, but Big Momma musters her forces and conjures up a noisy crowd. Then we realize that it is just as many of us suspected all along—the best part about being here is the time we spend sharing our stories with one another. Thank goodness Big Momma didn’t quit early!

—Roz Ramstad Hawley



Illustration by Helen Oxenbury, from *Big Momma Makes the World*

**Curse in Reverse**

By Tom Copping

Illustrated by Dirk Zimmer

ATHENEUM

40 pages, Ages 4-8, \$16.95

ISBN 0-689-83096-3

What child could resist a picture book about a wandering witch named Agnezza who puts clever curses on the people she meets? Influenced by Celtic fairy tales and by the Brothers Grimm, author Tom Copping shapes this story using familiar folktale elements—a powerful witch who poses as a needy stranger, the selfish fools who spurn her, the kind-hearted helpers—but in a new twist, he adds a dash of wordplay and riddle-solving. Agnezza's three oddly named curses provide humorously misleading clues and carry unanticipated results.

Copping employs concise, descriptive story-telling language to speed readers through three distinct trials. Arriving in "Humburg" after trudging through the freezing forest, the tired and hungry Agnezza implores Mrs. Ragg to spare her a room at her inn. No? "I give you the Curse of the Silent Night!" spits the witch. When Mr. Fooss turns Agnezza away from the warmth of his hearth, the angry crone bestows the Curse of the One-Eyed Jack upon him. Finally, a young couple welcomes Agnezza into their home, offering food and a warm bed to sleep in, yet they too are given a curse—the Curse of the One-Armed Man. How each curse unfolds becomes the book's delightful ploy, as none turns out to be what its victims imagine. (Case in point: the childless couple who treated Agnezza so well? The meaning of their "one-armed man" curse will be clear to any parent who's ever tried to write a check with a new baby in tow.)

Dirk Zimmer's craggy ink-and-watercolor illustrations are entirely enchanting. The variety of his crosshatching styles lends richness to every page, while bright colors, used sparingly, enliv-



Illustration by Dirk Zimmer, from *Curse in Reverse*

en the darkness of his drawing. Both animals and people exude an array of emotional expression. Zimmer playfully incorporates modern technology into what otherwise appears to be an old European village. A knight riding on his steed to the doorway of "Ye Olde Inn" seems right at home in this setting, yet an electric lamp hangs above the young couple's humble dinner table; and when the one-eyed Jack destroys Mr. Fooss's home, an onlooker records the event with a video camera. An archaic tale is nudged into the present, and its moral is made timeless: it is always wise to be kind to strangers in need.

—Christine Alfano

**A Day in the Life of Murphy**

By Alice Provinsen

SIMON &amp; SCHUSTER

36 pages, Ages 3-7, \$16.95

ISBN 0-689-84884-6

This simple story offers readers a day in the life of an energetic terrier, from sunup to sundown on a farm. The multi-



Illustration by Alice Provinsen, from *A Day in the Life of Murphy*

colored, paw-print-covered endpapers are a sign of the commotion to come. Murphy's point of view prevails as he narrates his frenzied routine in block capital letters. In human communication, this choice of type would connote shouting; here it simply conveys the constant, steady barking of this frenetic canine.

What do we find out about Murphy? First of all, he has a high opinion of himself; the other animals that he shares sleeping quarters with are "A DUMB CAT AND A DUMB HOUND, AND A LOT OF OTHER DUMB FARM ANIMALS." Second, he is a thoroughly normal terrier—which is to say, he acts like a lunatic.

In unending motion, wide-eyed, wire-haired Murphy gives a running commentary on his doggish activities—chewing boots, snacking on scraps, stalking a mouse, and, "OH-OH," a car trip to the veterinarian. Nothing bad happens at the vet's office, but the anxious anticipation in the waiting room is palpable. Murphy is strategic in his description of dinnertime: "HIDE IN THE FOREST OF KITCHEN CHAIR LEGS BENEATH THE OILCLOTH LEAVES. SSSH-H-H. BE QUIET...BE PATIENT. DON'T BEG."

Paintings by Caldecott Medal-winning Alice Provinsen, with their solid colors, generous use of white space, and tiny details, neatly capture the frantic little terrier: his spiky black fur, whirring legs, and wagging tail. Multiple images of Murphy on the double-page spreads convey his ambitious activity. Like the text, the illustrations offer us Murphy's view of the world—the yellow thatched

seat of a dining room chair, the underside of a carved wooden table, side views of cupboards and appliances.

Murphy winds up his day at ten minutes to twelve with a burst of animated barking that wakes the whole household. What got him so excited? A rat? A skunk? A bear? Guess again. "THE MOON! THE MOON! I HEARD THE MOON MOVE!" After this momentous event he is finally ready to settle down with his dear sock, his good old bone, and his good old stick.

—Lisa Von Drasek

### **Ella Sarah Gets Dressed**

By Margaret Chodos-Irvine

HARCOURT

40 pages, Ages 2–5, \$16.00

ISBN 0-15-216413-8

In *Ella Sarah Gets Dressed*, a determined preschooler doggedly strides across the dedication page dragging her rust-colored stuffed cat behind her. Margaret Chodos-Irvine's striking design and printmaking skills recall the picture-book collage art of Ezra Jack Keats, and her simple, direct language speaks volumes:

One morning, Ella Sarah got up and said, "I want to wear my pink polka-dot pants, my dress with orange-and-green flowers, my purple-and-blue striped socks, my yellow shoes, and my red hat."

So begins a preschooler's all-too-familiar struggle for autonomy. Everyone else smugly knows better. The outfit is "too dressy," "too fancy," the colors and patterns obviously clash. Ella Sarah's family eagerly suggests a series of more appropriate selections. Her mother offers her a "nice blue dress" just like her own, with plain short sleeves and pretty pleats. Quietly, head dipping down in profile, Ella Sarah repeats her own preference.

Her father proposes a yellow T-shirt with a basketball pictured on the

front, a choice that complements his own casual, sporty attire. A pajama-clad Ella Sarah dominates the page, fists clenched, cat clutched to her chest, all elbows and knees. Her big sister's offering of purple overalls meets with a similarly negative reception.

Each page reinforces the child-centered point of view. Everyone bigger than Ella Sarah is portrayed as a huge entity, some filling the page, visible only from the shoulders down. The repetition of the text is offset by shifts in Ella Sarah's position—the tilt of her head, the curve of her body—as she fends off each suggestion.

Each spread sings with luminous color and contrasting textures: in Ella Sarah's room, a solid yellow wall sets off a cozy comforter patterned with pale blue lace blocks against bubble-gum pinks.

The scene in which Ella Sarah finally gets dressed bursts with the energy of a four-year-old as she pulls on her pink polka-dot pants, tosses her orange-flowered dress over her shoulders, and lies flat on her back, feet in the air, to pull on her purple-and-blue striped socks.

In the end, Ella Sarah thinks her outfit is "just right." One can imagine that her friends, who arrive for a tea party dressed in similarly outrageous attire, agree.

—Lisa Von Drasek

### **Mystic Horse**

By Paul Goble

HARPERCOLLINS

36 pages, Age 5 and up, \$16.99

ISBN 0-06-029813-8

*Mystic Horse* is a retelling of a cautionary Pawnee Indian tale about a poor boy who learns the nature of a spirit horse that befriends him. Paul Goble's tale centers on the boy's initiation into an adult understanding of the necessity of obedience to the spirit world. That world takes the form of an old worn-out horse that can speak.

The Pawnee are a Plains tribe, with a great dependence on and love for horses. In the myth-time of this tale, the Pawnee are both farmers and buffalo hunters.

The purpose of spirit horses is to replenish and nourish the herds of wild horses the Pawnee rely on.

The boy cares for the mystic horse in hopes of restoring its health. When the tribe is attacked by enemies, the horse instructs the boy to "count coup" on enemy warriors (touch them with a stick without injuring them, to show courage) four times and no more. After four heady successes, the boy rides among the enemy a fifth time, and the mystic horse is slain.

The heavens respond to this death



Illustration by Paul Goble, from *Mystic Horse*

# Picture Perfect

## Picnic

By Emily Arnold McCully

HARPERCOLLINS

32 pages, Ages 2–5, \$15.99

ISBN 0-06-623854-4



How do you make a good book better? In the case of *Picnic*, by Emily Arnold McCully, it does not happen simply by adding words. Originally a wordless picture book telling the story of a mouse child lost on the way to a family picnic, McCully's classic work has been reissued this spring in a larger format, with repainted illustrations—and text.

In a traditional picture book, both the text and the illustrations add something unique to the whole—neither fully tells the story alone. Wordless picture books are a special entity: the illustrations must be created in such a way that the arc of the story is conveyed by the images, and words are not needed. This is no small feat, but it is what McCully achieved in her original, wordless *Picnic*.

In the new edition, the illustrations are essentially the same, right down to the placement of the cat-tails alongside the road, but the format is larger, the illustrations themselves bigger, the detail greater, and the colors lusher—all to the good. One only wishes that the newly added words weren't so distracting.

Part of the problem is that the words themselves are not compelling. Mostly short exclamations ("Everybody out!") or commentary on actions that are perfectly obvious from the scene ("They go to their favorite spot"), the added text does nothing to give readers a perspective or information not available from the illustrations. McCully's mice are so expressive in their actions, no gloss is required to clarify their emotions: wordlessly, we enter with them into the joyous bustle of the picnic preparations—Mama shaking out the picnic cloth, a younger child already gathering flowers, Grandpa exclaiming at the beauty of the location, a little one leaping for sheer joy. Clearly, this is a favorite spot.

In naming the small, lost mouse ("little Bitty") and directly interpreting events (Bitty, we are told, is lonesome and hungry), the words become more than a distraction. They particularize, trivialize, and place the work firmly in the sphere of pleasant, ordinary stories in which small, anthropomorphized animals often sport names similar to "little Bitty" and readers are led to draw a specific meaning from the tale. Whereas the original wordless edition had a certain dignity and gravitas—the double-page spread depicting the moment of reunion was imbued with a particular silent poignancy, the entire family bounding over the hill to find the lone mouse child in the road, its arms outstretched to greet them—that moving climax is diluted, its ambiguity (Is the child surprised?



Happy? Shocked? All three?) destroyed by the text's chipper declaration: "Here I am!"

Throughout the story, the new words limit the reading to one interpretation and take away something vitally important. For by not naming the mouse, by not holding the reader's hand and interpreting the story through the text, the wordless *Picnic* offered earlier readers the chance to identify more intensely with the nameless, lost mouse child. Encouraged to supply their own words and embellishments, they became coauthors of the story. This imagination-stretching invitation to readers is missing from the new edition. (One worries about the potential reissue of *Picnic*'s wordless companion books, *First Snow* and *School*. Will they, too, find themselves saddled with superfluous text?)

The best picture books—be they wordless, like Uri Shulevitz's *Dawn*, or semiwordless, like Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and David Wiesner's *Tuesday*—acknowledge that how a story is told is as important as the story itself, and they employ the full effects, advantages, and power of both words (or their absence) and illustrations.

*Picnic* is still a moving story, and an enjoyable one—Emily Arnold McCully's enchanting illustrations guarantee that. Yet it is sad that today's readers, unfamiliar with the original, will never experience the true delight of the wordless version and will never enjoy the stunning reissue that might have been. The original jacket copy maintains that *Picnic* is a story "that needs no words." This is as true for the reissue as it was for the first edition.

—Kathryne Beebe

with a storm, which the boy endures in a sad vigil for his friend and protector. The horse comes back to life, goes into the hills for four days without the boy, and returns with a herd of new horses for the boy and his grandmother and “those who need them most.”

Goble is known for his devotion to accuracy in depicting Indian motifs; in this book he shows equal devotion to accurately depicting plains wildlife. Barn swallows are stylized but perfect, as are butterflies and a Cooper’s hawk. In one stunning painting, the mystic horse and the boy walk through beautifully rendered prairie lupine.

The horses, though, carry the book. Many-colored wild horses are shown in every gait: they stand, they prance, they canter and gallop like the wind that makes their manes fly. The book’s endpapers are astonishing paintings of multitudes of spirit horses being born out of Earth through the waters of a sacred lake. The work of a master painter, *Mystic Horse* is a feast for the eyes.

—John Caddy

### Stone Soup

Retold and illustrated by Jon J Muth

SCHOLASTIC

32 pages, Age 6 and up, \$16.95

ISBN 0-439-33909-X

This classic tale of turning scarcity to plenty while engendering a sense of cooperation and community has been given no more beautiful treatment than that offered here. As Jon J Muth explains in an author’s note, the story of a collective broth made from stones—or a nail, an ax, or bone buttons, as some versions have it—comes from European folklore, with related stories found in Jamaica, Korea, and the Philippines.

For his retelling, Muth sets the story in China using the Buddha story tradition, in which “tricksters spread enlightenment rather than seeking gain for themselves.” Three traveling monks,



Illustration by Jon J Muth, from *Stone Soup*

Hok, Lok, and Siew—the characters correspond to deities in Chinese folklore who bestow health, wealth, and prosperity—wander the mountains considering the meaning of happiness. They arrive in a mountain village that has suffered famine, floods, and war. Villagers have closed their doors against each other and of course against strangers: “The villagers worked hard, but only for themselves.” The monks agree that the villagers do not know happiness and decide to show them how to make stone soup.

They begin working alone, building a fire and boiling water in a small tin pot, to which stones soon will be added. Suddenly a small girl in a yellow jacket appears and asks what they are doing. “My mother has a bigger pot,” she offers when they explain, and she runs home to get it.

Soon the villagers are looking out their windows. Slowly at first, and then enthusiastically, the villagers bring their own offerings for the pot: carrots, onions, mushrooms, noodles, pea pods, garlic, ginger root, lily buds—all the ingredients for stone soup. (Clearly this is not the version

that would be made in Sweden!) “Something magical began to happen among the villagers. As each person opened their heart to give, the next person gave even more. And as this happened, the soup grew richer and smelled more delicious.”

When the soup is ready, the villagers gather for a feast and after they eat, they tell stories, sing songs, and unlock their doors. The next morning they bid farewell to their guests, saying, “With the gifts you have given, we will always have plenty. You have shown us that sharing makes us all richer.”

Muth’s text is accompanied by watercolors that feel both animated and tempered, in the tradition of much Chinese painting. They make lovely portraits of the villagers in daily life: a farmer feeding his chickens, a tea merchant covering his baskets, a seamstress serving dumplings, a doctor measuring herbs.

Muth has not only retold a classic, he has created one. If you need inspiration for imagining how the inhabitants of this troubled earth might live together, this book offers that inspiration.

—Patricia Kirkpatrick

**Talk to Me about the Alphabet**

By Chris Raschka

HENRY HOLT

32 pages, Ages 2-5, \$16.95

ISBN 0-8050-6782-5

The tone of this alphabet book is set right from the letter A, when a little gentleman dressed in a brown coat and a bowler hat, bearing more than a passing resemblance to Inspector Clouseau, commands his yellow cat: "Give me A is for Attitude and often says 'Ah.'" This lively romp through favorite toddler territory is loaded with attitude and a little French and German thrown in for good measure.

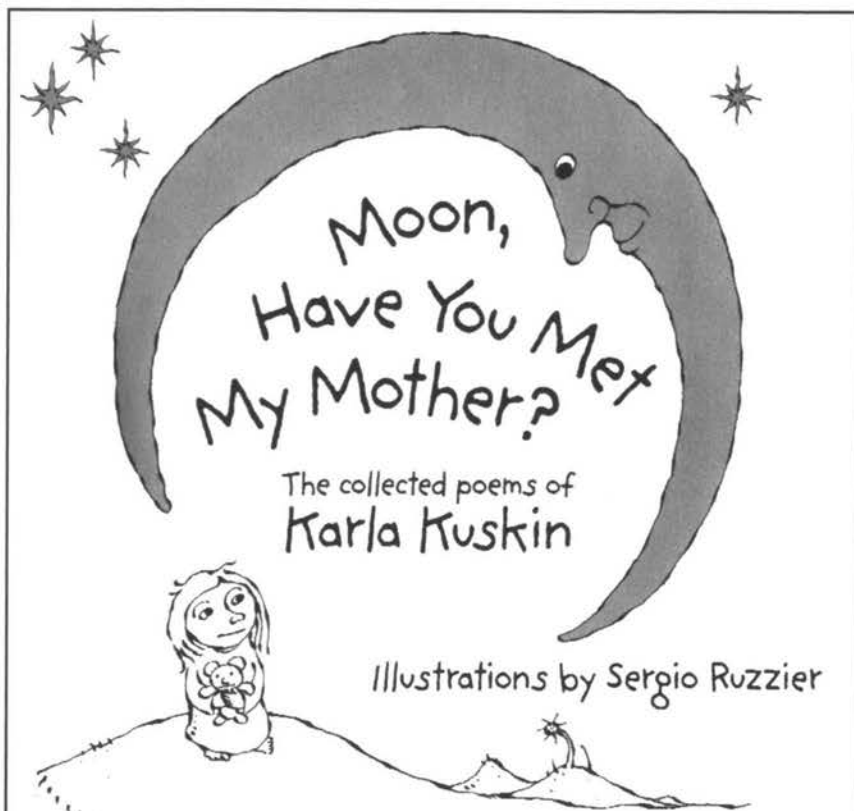
Author and illustrator Chris Raschka is known for grabbing young readers' attention through bold illustrations, few words, and letting the story unfold with the help of a child's imagination. In *Yo! Yes?* he told the story of a budding friendship between two lonely boys walking down a street in less than thirty-five words. The follow-up *Ring! Yo?* detailed a brief, misunderstood phone conversation between the two friends, asking at the conclusion, "Hey! What just happened there?"

*Talk to Me about the Alphabet* is another book of few words, geared for younger readers who will delight in the comical antics of the little man and his cat. The man grins and groans his way through E ("Eh?"), F ("Fffffff!"), and G

("Guh. Guh, guh, guh."). The cat grudgingly endures being smeared with jam but gets even with his companion by swiping a milk glass out of his hand, resulting in O for "Ow!" The tomfoolery is guaranteed to bring laughter.

There are, in fact, many actual

words highlighted throughout the book, like *quiet*, *sleep*, and *time*, not to mention words usually left off preschoolers' vocabulary lists—like *velocipede*, Raschka's favorite mode of transportation through New York City. And since it's never too early for a liter-



★ "Long overdue, this collection brings together more than 40 years of Kuskin's poetry, as well as several newly published selections. The book's handsome design resembles a Shel Silverstein collection with small ink drawings—subtle, funny, and wild—on spacious cream-colored pages. Sly, joyful, wise, and filled with delicious sounds, these are poems that, collected together, will invite generations of children to delight in the simplest words and explore their own secret selves." —Starred review / ALA Booklist

Ages 5 up. \$16.99 Tr (0-06-027173-6); \$17.89 Lb (0-06-027174-4)

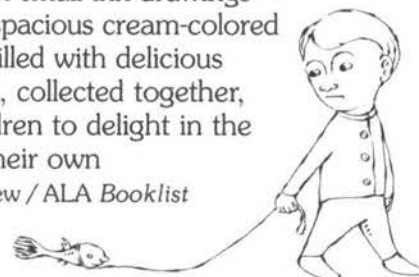


Illustration by Chris Raschka, from *Talk to Me about the Alphabet*

**LAURA GERINGER BOOKS**  
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ary reference, provided it's chosen with its audience in mind, Y stands for "Yo!"  
—Julie Pfitzinger

### Wonder Goal!

By Michael Foreman

FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX

32 pages, Ages 4–8, \$16.00

ISBN 0-374-38500-9

The opening illustration in Michael Foreman's wonderful new picture book shows an expansive soccer field, peppered with miniature figures chasing balls toward scattered nets: a cool green oasis set against the frigid gray skies and dark industrial buildings of a distant English city. To borrow a phrase from a more popular American game, this is the "field of dreams" for young soccer players hoping against hope for a chance to score the wonder goal they believe will set them on the path to world-class superstardom in their beloved sport.

The story's main character is one of those dreamers, although our introduction to him is inauspicious: "The boy hadn't noticed his teammates tie his laces together on the way to the game.... They were good guys really, but he was new to the team and they always teased the new boy." Once he's on the field, the boy takes the chance to prove himself, kicking a "screamer" that turns out to be the wonder goal he's dreamed of.

This goal becomes a moment, frozen in time, recalled by the young player, now grown and a member of a team vying for the World Cup, as he watches another one of his shots fly into the net during a championship game. There is a nice continuity here: once again, as a new member of a team, he is hopeful that his fellow players will respect him, recognizing that his dreams of victory are the same as their own.

Foreman, a two-time winner of Britain's Kate Greenaway Medal, skillfully captures the fluidity of lanky young



Illustration by Michael Foreman,  
from *Wonder Goal!*

players stretching across the goal to block a shot, the surprised expressions on the faces of flag-waving fans behind the net, and, in a particularly lovely drawing, the young boy dreaming under a comforter adorned with jubilant soccer players hoisting a trophy cup just within reach of his sleeping hand.

While interest in soccer in the United States has a long way to go to reach the frenetic level of popularity it enjoys in other parts of the world, it is steadily growing. Foreman, a lifelong soccer fan, taps into that building enthusiasm. And while the subject of *Wonder Goal!* is soccer, its message will appeal to any young sport lover with fantasies about his or her own moment of triumph on the field.

—Julie Pfitzinger

## Fiction

### The Canning Season

By Polly Horvath

FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX

208 pages, Age 12 and up, \$16.00

ISBN 0-374-39956-5

Don't expect warm and fuzzy from Polly Horvath's latest, a quirky, summery

novel set in remote Maine. Her cast—a mismatched menage including nonagenarian sisters Penpen and Tilly, thirteen-year-old Ratchet, and fourteen-year-old Harper—isn't a likely quartet for a story about love and belonging. But, as in Horvath's other novels, an unlikely set of circumstances and a most unusual collection of people coalesce in an insightful story that explores the nature of family.

Ratchet Clark doesn't know what to expect when her flaky mother packs her off to spend the summer with her elderly aunts in the wilds of Maine. There's no way she could have anticipated this eccentric duo, who drink, swear, and delight in the gruesome lore of their family's past. Yet in spite of their quirks, her aunts, who would rather be called "those queer Menuto women" than suffer under the cute, sentimental moniker "the blueberry ladies," manage to make Ratchet feel right at home. The addition of the parentless, loud-mouthed (though ultimately well-meaning) Harper adds to the peculiar dynamics of the household, though by the end of the summer, both teens have discovered that the Menuto sisters' strange lifestyle may be just what they've always needed.

This is a narrative of narratives, for stories beat at the heart of Horvath's tale, just as they did in *The Trolls*. Penpen's and Tilly's reminiscences about their often bizarre childhoods and later years pepper the arc of day-to-day events from the beginning of the summer right into canning season. As time progresses, the storytelling reveals a slice of Menuto family history, incorporating Ratchet's and Harper's own stories into the fabric of the past and present.

Though some of the characters in *The Canning Season* are larger than life, Horvath makes the caricatures seem somehow believable. "Those queer Menuto women" may be rifle-toting,

reclusive Luddites, but what is most striking about Penpen and Tilly is their willingness to accept two misfit teens for who they are.

Horvath suggests that there's no secret recipe for family. Like blueberry preserves, it just takes work, a little gumption, and, of course, some heart.

—*Jenny Sawyer*

### **Flight of the Fisherbird**

By Nora Martin

BLOOMSBURY

150 pages, Ages 10–14, \$16.95

ISBN 1-58234-814-6

*Flight of the Fisherbird* is set on the San Juan Islands off the Washington coast in 1889, a time when prejudice against Chinese immigrants was at an all-time high. Following a period when Chinese laborers filled the canneries and flocked to other bottom-rung employment opportunities in the Pacific Northwest, the Exclusion Act banned the entry of Chinese people to the country. This law trapped individuals outside the United States who had already established a home here—people who were visiting family in China, or who had left the country for other reasons. As a consequence, a rash of smuggling, both of reentering immigrants and determined new arrivals, ensued.

Nora Martin has chosen this dramatic, historically significant backdrop for a novel about the smuggling—and casual murder—of Chinese immigrants and a girl's courage as she discovers the crime and takes action to bring the perpetrator to justice.

Emptying her family's crab traps in heavy fog, thirteen-year-old Clementine is puzzled to hear sudden commotion and the sound of heavy objects being thrown overboard from a boat that is familiar to her. Puzzlement shifts into horror when she rescues a nearly drowned Chinese man in a burlap sack, realizing that his was one of

the three splashes she heard.

The fact that the perpetrator turns out to be her own uncle, in many ways beloved even when she comes to see his darker side, makes Clem's challenge greater. But there is a satisfying logic in the fact that Uncle Doran taught Clem

how to sail, and it is through skillfully managing her family's dory, the *Fisherbird*, that she is able to elude him, carry the surviving Tong-Ling to safety, and bring the law down on Doran and his partner.

*Flight of the Fisherbird* weaves several

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narrative threads, each intriguing in its own right: Clem's discovery of her uncle's crime, and her protection of Tong-Ling; her desire for an education (and resistance to following a more traditional female path); her growing friendship with Jed, the boy who becomes her partner in seeking justice; tensions between Clem and the orphaned Sarah, who gradually evolves from nemesis into sister; and Clem's aspiration to be a writer. With paper in short supply, Clem writes on anything she can find, from can labels to the bark of the madrone tree. Short lists of her observations start each chapter—lists that feel a bit forced, perhaps from wanting too badly to be poems.

Martin's prose is at times heavy-handed, which is disappointing, because this is a good book that could have been a great one. The subject matter is so forceful, it hardly needs boosting, and the setting—the foggy ocean, sailboats sneaking around the islands—is fine and atmospheric. Still, the story is memorable, and the slice of history it conveys is *worth* remembering.

—Martha Davis Beck

### **Locomotion**

By Jacqueline Woodson

PUTNAM

112 pages, Age 12 and up, \$15.99

ISBN 0-399-23115-3

Eleven-year-old Lonnie Collins Motion lost more than his loving parents in the deadly fire that occurred when he was seven—he lost his baby sister, Lili, to a foster mother who didn't want him as well, and he lost the deep knowledge at his center that he was loved.

He has a stable foster home, although he's not entirely sure that Miss Edna likes him, and he gets to visit with his sister occasionally, but his grief and loneliness are so pervasive that he is in danger of losing himself,

too. Fortunately, his teacher gives him a gift that allows him to sort through his feelings, to make sense of his life, and, eventually, to move on. She gives him the gift of poetry. Ms. Marcus tells Lonnie to "write it down before it leaves your brain," and write he does, using free verse to tell stories, shape his memories, and attempt to understand those around him.

As Lonnie reclaims himself through his writing, we see this vulnerable boy beginning to build relationships that will sustain him, and we watch him discover the power of words. His silence has become full of words, so many that "sometimes / they wake you up / and make you write them down real fast even though / there's not a voice saying *Be quiet, Lonnie* in your head / anymore. / Just words. / Lots and lots and lots of words"—while the people around him are "spinning themselves into poetry."

This is a beautifully written novel-in-verse, with Woodson's customary attention to words and richly realized characters. *Locomotion* speaks to the power of words to shape our lives and nudges readers to think about the poems that bubble beneath the surface of people we pass on the street.

—Lee Galda

### **Losing Is Not an Option**

By Rich Wallace

KNOPF

144 pages, Ages 10–14, \$15.95

ISBN 0-375-81351-9

In nine short stories, Rich Wallace isolates formative episodes in the life of a small-town Pennsylvania boy, from sixth grade to his senior year of high school. Ron is a runner, the fastest guy at his school, but less confident off the track. Quiet by nature, he's a bit self-conscious, slightly wary of girls, and very wary of drugs. He's got a somewhat distant relationship with his par-

ents and older brother, and instinctively knows to hide his country music tapes from his friends. In the taboo-busting world of young adult fiction, Ron is an even-tempered anomaly. But unlike the conflicted everyman in Wallace's debut novel, *Wrestling Sturbridge* (Knopf, 1996), Ron keeps the reader at a distance.

Wallace has written about Sturbridge, Ron's hometown, in three previous novels, delineating its limited geography and the lack of options it presents once the final high school sports season is finished. (Some of Wallace's previous high school athletes make brief appearances in this book—truly stuck, it seems, in their hometown.)

Ron doesn't seem concerned about getting out; he is almost completely focused on winning a championship. He goes over past and future races as he trains for the next meet and doesn't let problems with his parents, brother, or potential girlfriends distract him from his goal. Ron narrates every story but the last and never slips from plain-spokenness into pretentiousness, even when he's trying to impress someone. These qualities make him real and likable, but his stoicism prevents him from being compelling. *Wrestling Sturbridge's* Ben trained as hard as Ron, but his struggles off the wrestling mat claimed a good share of his attention, and his self-deprecating humor and emotional honesty drew readers close.

The last and longest story includes Ron's memory of his father telling him and his eighth-grade teammates that "losing is not an option." For those who have grown up playing sports and competing, these words will resonate. For Ron, running hard, they seem to get him where he wants to go. The question hovering over these stories is, where will he go from there?

—Abby McGanney Nolan

**Malka**

By Mirjam Pressler

Translated by Brian Murdoch

PHILOMEL

246 pages, Age 12 and up, \$18.99

ISBN 0-399-23984-7

Who would leave a seven-year-old girl alone, in the streets of a foreign city, and tell her never to come asking for help again?

In a novel about sacrifice and survival during World War II, it seems only mildly surprising—appalling as it may be—that a man might abandon a child, to whom he feels no real responsibility, in favor of saving his own family. And that's exactly what happens to Malka, the protagonist of Mirjam Pressler's story. Having barely escaped Poland with her mother and older sister, Malka falls ill and must be left behind while her family continues on into a comparatively safe region of Hungary. But instead of eventually being put on a train and sent to her mother, as the original plan outlined, Malka is abandoned, captured, and sent to live in a Polish ghetto—alone. As Malka struggles to survive, hiding from the Gestapo, scrounging for food, and encountering an occasional kindness from people she meets along the way, her physician mother, Hannah, searches desperately, in vain, for her missing daughter.

As the novel progresses, both Hannah and Malka become less like humans and more like machines. Malka operates with only one thing in mind—survival—and this means food, warmth, and evading capture. Hannah, meanwhile, who was once passionate about medicine and helping people, now works only to maintain appearances and some sense of normalcy while she searches for Malka. Not caring what the consequences might be, she performs her work blindly and mechanically, desperate to find the child she had to

leave behind. Pressler's character development is effective—and chilling. Both Malka and Hannah remind readers that everyone from soldiers to ordinary citizens fell victim to Hitler's dehumanizing regime.

Such is the extremity of Malka's sit-

uation that even kindly characters with whom she has little contact quickly become three-dimensional, coming rapidly and colorfully into view as splashes of color on an otherwise bleak and monochromatic landscape. These are the bright spots in the book: Malka's



## 2003 Boston Globe—Horn Book Awards

### Picture Book Award

WINNER *Big Momma Makes the World*  
by Phyllis Root and illus. by Helen Oxenbury  
(Candlewick)

HONOR BOOKS *Dahlia*  
by Barbara McClintock (Foster/Farrar)

*blues journey*  
by Walter Dean Myers and illus. by Christopher Myers (Holiday)

### Fiction and Poetry Award

WINNER *The Jamie and Angus Stories*  
by Anne Fine and illus. by Penny Dale (Candlewick)

HONOR BOOKS *Feed*  
by M. T. Anderson (Candlewick)

*Locomotion*  
by Jacqueline Woodson (Putnam)

### Nonfiction Award

WINNER *Fireboat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey*  
by Maira Kalman (Putnam)

HONOR BOOKS *To Fly: The Story of the Wright Brothers*  
by Wendie C. Old and illus. by Robert Andrew Parker (Clarion)

*Revenge of the Whale: The True Story of the Whaleship Essex*  
by Nathaniel Philbrick (Putnam)

The Horn  
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relationship with two mentally handicapped children and her friendship with Shmulik, a hospital worker. Mirroring Malka's own growing detachment and emotional isolation, the tone of this book is, for the most part, stoic, even cold, as it chronicles the Nazi aggression and Malka's quest for survival with measured matter-of-factness.

*Malka* is not a gentle book—but the time it represents was not a gentle time. Yet it expresses enormous sympathy, for everyone whose lives were in some way scarred by Hitler's campaign of terror. The shifting focus between Malka and her mother is an effective narrative strategy, showing how difficult it was—for everyone—to make choices at a time when almost every choice came with a terrible risk. "What would *you* have done?" Pressler seems to be asking her audience. Many difficult questions arise in any work about the Holocaust, but this question is surely one of the most profound.

—*Jenny Sawyer*

**Necessary Noise:  
Stories about Our Families  
as They Really Are**

Edited by Michael Cart

JOANNA COTLER/HARPERCOLLINS

256 pages, Age 14 and up, \$15.99

ISBN 0-06-027500-6

As Michael Cart notes in his introduction to the stories in this volume, only 24 percent of households in the United States are "married with children," and the remaining 76 percent take many forms, some of which are explored by the authors represented in this collection. The ten stories range from serious to hilarious, prose to narrative poetry, and the families they depict range from traditional to nontraditional, functional to dysfunctional. Each captures the intensity of the family bond, whether with a parent, a sibling, or a close friend, and the

importance of talking with one another about what is important to us.

Norma Howe writes of siblings whose lifestyles and beliefs estrange them from one another, and Emma Donoghue gives us two sisters arguing even as they try to save the life of their younger brother. Nikki Grimes retells the story of Ishmael in free verse, while Walter Dean Myers creates a conversation between an estranged father and his son on death row. Joyce Carol Thomas constructs a conversation across time between a mother and her schizophrenic son, followed by Rita Williams-Garcia's exploration of the feelings of a young boy whose mother has just entered into a lesbian relationship. Michael Cart depicts a friendship between two boys that profoundly affects their lives, while Sonya Sones crafts a story in verse that evokes the love-hate relationship between dysfunctional siblings. These stories are bracketed by two humorous looks at the world of family, Joan Bauer's tale of an unusual family fighting to save their business and Lois Lowry's portrait of a college freshman bringing home a totally unsuitable boyfriend to meet her surprised parents. Read separately, each story is thought-provoking. Taken together, they should spark interesting conversations about what family means in the twenty-first century.

—*Lee Galda*

**A Northern Light**

By Jennifer Donnelly

HARCOURT

396 pages, Age 14 and up, \$17.00

ISBN 0-15-216705-6

Mystery lovers—and readers familiar with Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*—will find themselves at home in *A Northern Light*, a story set on the periphery of the real-life events that inspired Dreiser's famous novel. It's 1906 in the north woods, and Mattie

Gokey is working at the Glenmore, "the finest hotel on all of Big Moose Lake," when she finds herself embroiled in the mystery surrounding a murder. One of the guests, a young woman named Grace Brown, has been recovered from the lake, dead. While suspicions are not immediately aroused by her drowning, Mattie—to whom Grace entrusted a packet of letters before she took her final boat ride—knows that something is amiss. In alternating chapters, *A Northern Light* weaves a narrative of the two women's lives, separate stories that become irrevocably intertwined.

While Dreiser's novel was concerned with the issue of class in America, Jennifer Donnelly's focus is more, on a social level, the realm of women's rights, and, on a personal level, the disparity between appearance and underlying character. Questions about intentions, identity, and family secrets all swirl beneath the surface of this novel in which people are not what they seem. From Royal, Mattie's handsome boyfriend, who ends up being more interested in Mattie's father's land than in Mattie, to Miss Wilcox, Mattie's spirited teacher, who emerges as a controversial poet, few characters turn out to be the "simple" north woods folks they initially appear to be. Even Mattie, whom the reader comes to trust, has a few facades of her own, although her complicated, sometimes surprising persona is shaped more by confusion and indecisiveness than by deliberate deception.

Mattie is a farm girl, or so her father says, tied to her family and its acreage by a promise she made to her dying mother, and by a genuine feeling of responsibility to her family. Complicating everything is Mattie's passion for language and literature—and the promise of a glowing future at Barnard College, where she's just been accepted as a student. Donnelly's narrative expresses Mattie's feeling of being caught between two

worlds: stark accounts of north woods farming are offset by the literary images that inspire Mattie. But the contrast is nuanced: rural life includes the warmth of family and community, while Mattie's writerly ambition carries its share of loneliness and alienation, at a time when women didn't even have the right to vote.

Ultimately, Donnelly's novel is about who gets to make choices, and which ones are right. Mattie's own struggle to choose between what's right for her and what seems to be best for her family is authentically rendered, and her anguish and excitement when she finally realizes what she must do are believable. In the end, the fact that Grace will never get to tell her story impels Mattie to write her own. And Grace's lack of choice with regard to the direction her life took spurs Mattie to move decisively toward the place she belongs.

—Jenny Sawyer

**The Random House Book of Shakespeare Stories**

Retold by Andrew Matthews

Illustrated by Angela Barrett

RANDOM HOUSE

128 pages, Ages 9–12, \$20.95

ISBN 0-375-81610-0

Drawing both from Shakespeare himself and from the "Tales from Shakespeare," designed for the use of young persons" of Charles and Mary Lamb, Andrew Matthews and Angela Barrett have set themselves quite a task—adapting eight of the Bard's three-hour plays, to make each fit within the limits of a short, illustrated story, to make them intelligible and interesting to young modern readers, and, in doing so, to justify the project of another collection of Shakespeare for children when similar volumes already glut the market. For the most part, they succeed.

Originally published in Great Britain in 2001, this volume will acquaint American readers not only with Shakespeare, but also with British writer Andrew Matthews, whose retellings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *King Henry V*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Twelfth Night*, *Hamlet*, and *The Tempest*, accompanied by Angela Barrett's dreamlike illustrations, truly will delight and entertain—an accomplishment Charles and Mary Lamb would likely have applauded. The accompanying historical details and

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notes make the volume a fine introduction to both Shakespeare and his world.

Sometimes clarity suffers in the abridgments, as in the knockabout complications of *Midsummer* or *Twelfth Night*, which become a bit crowded and frenetic in the retelling. In other stories, Matthews's choices, while initially startling in their approach (*Hamlet* narrated in the first person by Hamlet himself), do ultimately provide satisfaction, as in *Hamlet*, when the story switches to an immediate present tense at the final dueling scene, lending an air of urgency and weight to the retelling. There are places where the original seems unnecessarily obscured or changed: writing "Catherine" for "Katharine" in *Henry V*, for example, or, in *The Tempest*, having Alonso, not Miranda, wonder: "What wonderful new world is this that has such people in it?" But other extra-Shakespearean additions are intriguing—the retelling of *The Tempest* ends not with Prospero's request for approval, but with a view of

Caliban: "He danced on the beach, turning cartwheels as he whooped, 'I am King of the island! King!'"

Fans of Barrett's illustration will not be disappointed. Her paintings enrich the modern prose with exquisite period detail and a lush sense of the dramatic, expressed with both sensitivity and humor: we see the meeting between Olivia and Malvolio, with his cross-gartered yellow stockings, just from the knees down. Hamlet rushes to speak with the ghost of his father on the battlements of Elsinore, wrapped in wind and swirling snow. Cleopatra's barge beautifully evokes Enobarbus's description of "a burnish'd throne" with its deep-purple sails. And when Macbeth meets the Weird Sisters, they hover before him, terrifyingly indistinct, spiky and shadowy and obscure all at once.

—Kathryne Beebe

### The Silent Boy

By Lois Lowry

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN

188 pages, Ages 9–12, \$15.00

ISBN 0-61-828231-9

Like her affecting 1999 memoir, *Looking Back*, Lois Lowry's new novel comes complete with black-and-white photographs that help transport readers back in time. In *The Silent Boy*, one photo begins each chapter in a narrative that proceeds from September 1908 to October 1910. The result is a portrait of a precocious girl and her small New England town at a time when cameras were a novelty and an automobile was a shocking noise and a smoky smell.

*The Silent Boy* is told through the crystal-clear memories of Kate Thatcher, an eighty-four-year-old great-grandmother and former surgeon. There is a bit of unnecessary overstatement in her prologue as she introduces her subject—"I wondered, then, as I still do, about the boy who had once given me



Photograph from *The Silent Boy*

a kitten and changed my life forever"—but it's one false note in a compact, compelling memory book.

Introducing her own memoir, Lowry writes that it has "no plot.... It is about moments, memories, fragments, falsehoods and fantasies." There are few falsehoods or fantasies in the mind of young Katy, who is blessed with a kind mother and a doctor father who recognizes her genuine concern for others, especially those who are ill or wounded, and for matters of birth and death. When it's clear that she doesn't understand how new babies could possibly be discovered in backyard gardens, Dr. Thatcher shows his daughter a medical model of a fetus in a mother's belly. He also speaks frankly about patients whose illnesses he couldn't cure.

In her community, Katy is particularly drawn to the quiet farm boy Jacob Stoltz; his older sister Peggy, who comes to work for the Thatchers, describes him as "touched." During his rounds in his horse-drawn buggy, Katy's father picks Jacob up when the boy's wanderings

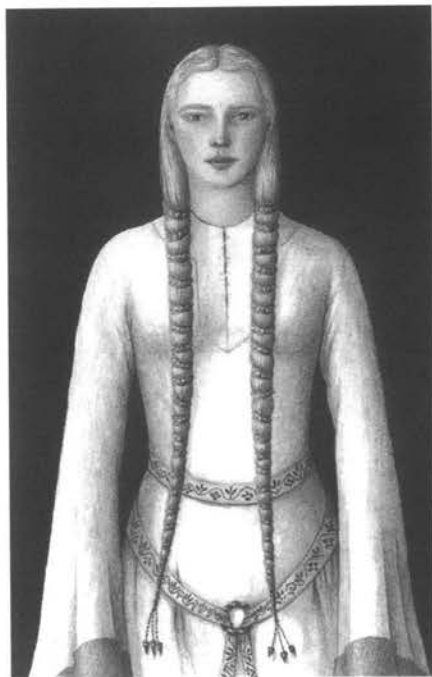


Illustration by Angela Barrett, from  
The Random House Book of  
Shakespeare Stories

have taken him far from home. Katy seeks Jacob out, intrigued by his gentle way with animals and the sounds he makes—imitating the “shooda, shooda, shooda” of a mill’s grindstone, humming a soothing song for the horses he tends. Jacob never talks, but Katy goes ahead and speaks to him, sensing that he wouldn’t mind some companionship.

Several plot strands converge at the end of *The Silent Boy*—a troubling romance, Katy’s father’s dutiful response to emergency, and Jacob’s incomplete understanding of the world. Disturbing elements surface, bearing out the narrator’s suggestion at the outset that this tale is “not really a story for children.” Katy’s response to the events reflects her upbringing. It was not Jacob, it seems, but her empathetic father who had the biggest impact on her life.

The old photographs used in *The*

*Silent Boy* are haunting. In a note, we learn that some of them belong to Lowry’s own family, some were given to her by friends, and some she found in a New Hampshire antique store. Artifacts of another time, when life’s hardships and challenges were less openly discussed but made their imprint nonetheless, they evidently inspired her to create this unusual and compelling novel.

—Abby McGanney Nolan

**The Slightly True Story of Cedar B. Hartley (Who Planned to Live an Unusual Life)**

By Martine Murray

ARTHUR A. LEVINE/SCHOLASTIC

258 pages, Ages 10–14, \$15.95

ISBN 0-439-48622-X

Plenty of girls might consider Cedar to be an interesting, even stylish, name.

But twelve-year-old Cedar B. Hartley, born when her mother was “in a deep hippie phase,” would prefer Hollywood to real wood—a name like... *Lana Monroe*.

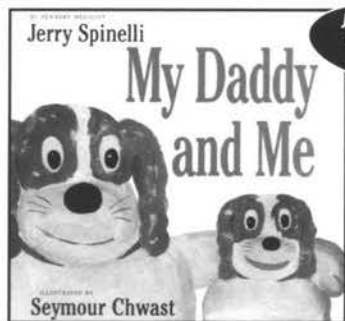
Cedar is the creation of Australian writer Martine Murray, and this lively novel is set Down Under, where, American readers will discover, the same issues confront kids stuck in that in-between phase when they’re “too old for making water bombs” but not old enough to hang out in the teen neighbor’s bungalow (a “permanent parent-free zone”). Cedar’s perceptive account of the social interactions that surround her, and her lighthearted musings on life, provide the wiggly throughline of an engaging narrative.

Cedar is a girl with integrity. “I never laugh when I’m supposed to,”

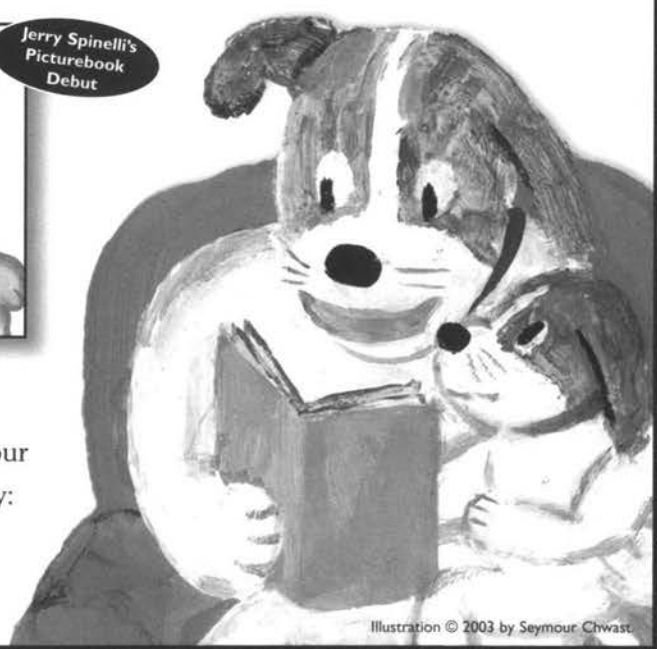
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she says. "I only laugh by accident." She is drawn to people, of all ages, who are interesting and friendly. She isn't afraid of the neighborhood bully. She disdains football. ("I don't get how you can know which direction that egg-shaped ball is going to

bounce. It's capricious.")

This mildly eccentric protagonist is part of a mildly eccentric family, with its share of quirks and failings. Cedar's older brother, Barnaby, left home under circumstances not fully explained until the novel's end. The

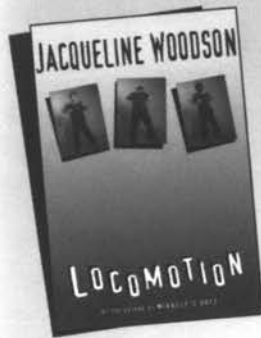
story is peppered with his self-consciously poetic postcard messages, messages that are loving but, as they never disclose his whereabouts, cause his mother stress. Cedar and Barnaby's father died shortly after Cedar was born. Cedar's romanticization of him—as a musician with high ideals—is poignant, and by necessity evolves as she learns more about her parents' marriage. (Her father's political activities, it seems, often took priority over family.) Her mother is an openminded, somewhat frazzled single parent who effectively holds down the fort under trying circumstances.

While family, in its many varieties, is a focus of the novel (two gay men with a newly adopted baby live down the street), friendship takes center stage—in particular, the friendship that forms between Cedar and a boy named Kite, the son of (now divorced) circus performers. Cedar and Kite share an interest in acrobatics, and the two are soon training for a benefit performance to pay for an operation needed by the beloved dog of their Yugoslavian neighbor. The loyalty and connection expressed in this project—as well as in Cedar's friendship with the shy, overweight, artistic Caramella Zito, and in Kite's friendship with Oscar, a bright young man made awkward in his speech and movement by a brain injury—are inspiring.

As this kind of friendship branches out, it becomes community. The model for community in Murray's story seems to be the avant-garde circus: an odd assortment of individuals who come together to create something artful and amazing, and make their neighbors laugh—by accident, and with pleasure.

—Martha Davis Beck

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by

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★ "As she did in *Miracle's Boys*, [Woodson] places the characters in nearly unbearable circumstances, then lets incredible human resiliency shine through." —*School Library Journal*, starred review

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**Starry Nights**

By Judith Clarke

FRONT STREET

148 pages, Age 12 and up, \$15.95

ISBN 1-886910-82-0

Published in Australia before Alice Sebold's supernatural literary blockbuster *The Lovely Bones* appeared here, *Starry Nights* shares that book's concern with family trauma, its emotional wallop, and its reassuring, almost convincing sense of closure. Both books go beyond the realm of most ghost stories. Judith Clarke's carefully calibrated writing delves into the roiling relationship between two sisters as skillfully as it dispenses clues and twists.

Clarke's opening pages take the reader into a mysteriously sorrowful world. A family has moved from Avalon, their beloved seaside home, after Mum has had a mental breakdown. Her husband and children (ten-year-old Jess, fourteen-year-old Vida, and their seventeen-year-old brother Clem) come into her room and talk to her, but she doesn't respond, seeming to find respite in sleep. Left in the care of a well-meaning older woman while their father works in the city, the girls struggle with their memories, their nightmares, and each other. While Vida plunges herself into the occult in an effort to restore their mother to her former self, Jess discerns, almost against her will, the developing shape of a little ghost girl in their new garden. A shadowy figure himself, Clem is even more at a loss.

Clarke's previous work of fiction, *Wolf on the Fold*, dealt beautifully with the difficulties in piecing things together when you're growing up; with the misconceptions, misunderstandings, and revelations that adults don't usually notice—"the sort of thing that stopped your tongue," as a character in that work describes one jarring discovery. These concerns are revisited in *Starry Nights* and made even more potent by guilt,

grief, and apparitions. Jess and her family eventually begin to make peace with the blows they've received.

One disturbing element in the story is the notion that the time after death might be experienced as a dream, one of those frustrating not-quite-nightmares where you can't get anything accomplished or think through a problem. It's a haunting thought in a very moving novel.

—Abby McGanney Nolan

**True Confessions of a Heartless Girl**

By Martha Brooks

FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX

192 pages, Age 12 and up, \$16.00

ISBN 0-374-37806-1

Noreen isn't really heartless, despite what her jilted boyfriend, Wesley, may think. Actually, she's just misunderstood—and alone. With a rough history that includes an alcoholic mother and a stepfather she calls Stupidhead Bob, Noreen seems destined for rebellion and trouble. And rebellious and troublesome she becomes, quitting school, getting involved in a series of dead-end relationships, and ultimately running away from home. When Noreen lands in the town of Pembina Lake, things go from bad to worse, or so it seems. But the impact she has on the residents of this prairie town is ultimately beneficial for all, impelling literal and figurative renovations in a place that has a hard time letting go of the past.

Even though Noreen's mistakes are the catalyst for much of the action, she isn't the story's sole focal point. Perspectives shift smoothly throughout this novel about growing into womanhood, alternating between seventeen-year-old Noreen; thirty-six-year-old Lynda, a café owner and single mom; and seventy-six-year-old Dolores, town wise woman and secretly grieving mother. Together, these characters' interwoven

narratives explore the ups and downs of being a woman, from relationships to motherhood to the quest for identity. While Noreen is the only character granted her own section in which to bare her soul, as *True Confessions of a Heartless Girl* progresses, it's clear that each one of these women has a few things to get off her chest. It's only when each has done so that Noreen, Lynda, and Dolores start to discover the hearts they'd hidden for fear of being hurt again.

Martha Brooks is a master of atmosphere, and this novel abounds with scenes and settings so visceral that the reader is right there on the Canadian prairie, able to feel "the hot sage-smelling wind blowing off the land and filling up the truck with the kind of peace and quiet you only get when you forsake the well-traveled spaces." Brooks's imagery creates a strong sense of place and mood, and her use of feminine metaphors reinforces the theme of the power of womanhood that runs throughout the book.

At the end, there's no indication that everything will turn out well, but there is hope. As Noreen discovers, life wouldn't be life if people didn't make mistakes, but there's always the opportunity to start over again tomorrow.

—Jenny Sawyer

**Nonfiction**

**Close to Shore:**

**The Terrifying Shark Attacks of 1916**

By Michael Capuzzo

Illustrated by Lars Hokanson

CROWN

140 pages, Ages 10–16, \$16.95

ISBN 0-375-82231-3

Four-time Pulitzer Prize nominee Michael Capuzzo published his first *Close to Shore* in 2001. By crafting together material drawn from hundreds of sources including scientific journals,

medical records, newspaper interviews, academic transcripts, diaries, letters, movies, novels, and love poems of the early twentieth century, Capuzzo created a painstakingly researched account of 1916's notorious "beach panic." In July of that year, four swimmers died from shark wounds sustained on Atlantic beaches, and several more escaped unharmed after frightening encounters with what appears to have been a "rogue" great white shark. Clearly deeply interested in sociological phenomena, Capuzzo subtitled his book *Terror in an Age of Innocence*. Now Crown has adapted *Close to Shore* for middle-school and teen readers and given it a more dramatic subtitle to attract their attention.

The result is a fascinating book, especially for those with a taste for tales of danger buttressed with a little American history. *Close to Shore* is divided into twenty-two chapters carefully arranged



Illustration by Lars Hokanson  
from *Close to Shore*

either to provide information on pre-World War I social mores or to offer lively descriptions of the life cycle of the great white shark. Between the two are sensitively rendered accounts of the actual attacks. Some of Capuzzo's vocabulary is a bit advanced for readers on the young side of the target age group, but his journalistic writing style is so solid that *Close to Shore* makes an excellent choice as a book to read aloud.

In Capuzzo's telling, beachgoers at

New Jersey resorts were terrorized by a series of random and brutal attacks on swimmers in waters as shallow as three and a half feet. Panic swept across the Eastern seaboard, and President Woodrow Wilson was called upon to reassure Americans that they would soon be safe from this "mysterious and monstrous" ocean menace. Complicating the population's desperate hunt for answers was the reluctance of scientific authorities (despite testimony from eyewitnesses) to identify the species responsible for the fatalities, as sea turtles, swordfish, and whales were at that time believed to be far more capable than sharks of killing humans.

This is a book made up of many stories, some quite poignant, all connected by the confusing events of that terrifying summer. It is a nonfiction mystery complete with a true-life hero, an African big game hunter who ultimately finds himself locked in desperate combat with the summer's killer shark. He wins that battle gloriously but loses his next skirmish (a much more complicated confrontation with the human ego), as his dramatic accomplishment threatens the authority of a powerful individual. That the events of 1916 remain "officially" unsolved in spite of enormously compelling evidence illustrates the darker side of human politics, while the quiet manner in which Capuzzo reveals an unquiet truth offers readers insight into and even sympathy for our own frailties.

—Roz Ramstad Hawley

## "THERE ARE LAUGHS HERE FOR EVERYONE."

—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

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## Hop Frog

By Rick Chrustkowski

HENRY HOLT

32 pages, Ages 4-7, \$15.95

ISBN 0-8050-6688-8

*Hop Frog* is a fine introduction to the life of a frog, frogs, and amphibians. The book illustrates the life cycle of the leopard frog, or grassfrog. The

story of one tadpole's metamorphosis—from egg to swimmer to land hopper, from vegetarian to insectivore, from no legs to two legs to four—is so different from our own body experience that a child is likely to become engrossed in it.

Rick Chrustkowski has created both text and art for this appealing tale about losing a tail. In his careful illustrations, Chrustkowski creates a rich context with great economy. In large part, this is a book of illustrations of water—how light dances underwater in reflections, how it ripples, how it splashes. Many details go unmentioned in words, but alert children will note them. Bubbles of methane or “swamp gas” rise lazily toward the water's surface. The ramshorn snail, giant pond snail, water boatman and diving beetles, and caddis fly larva with house are accurate and charming. Throughout, the pond is presented as a lively tableau of growth and change.

Duckweed, often maligned, is presented accurately here, as a basic food source for freshwater life. Too often duckweed is perceived as “pond scum,” when in fact it's a tiny flowering plant

with hanging roots that give food and shelter to many kinds of life. Happily, however, the author conveys the intricacy and interdependence of life systems while avoiding words like *metamorphosis* and *biodiversity*.

In this small book, Chrustkowski offers children several opportunities for discovery: a dragonfly nymph almost eats our tadpole but is later seen transformed into a beautiful adult dragonfly coursing the surface of the pond, his life nicely paralleling the tadpole's change from tadpole to froglet. Similarly, the author shows cumulative changes in tadpoles without pointing them out in the text: when the tadpole becomes an air-breather, its external gills simply disappear, again leaving it to the alert child to verify the change.

At a time when frogs the world over are in decline, *Hop Frog* presents its story of one frog's birth and transformation in a way intimate enough for readers to care about this life. The book concludes with a circular illustration neatly summarizing metamorphosis, and a brief “Frog Facts” essay.

—John Caddy

### King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography

By Chris Crutcher

GREENWILLOW

260 pages, Age 14 and up, \$16.99

ISBN 0-06-050249-5

In *King of the Mild Frontier*, the author of such entertaining young adult novels as *Whale Talk*, *Ironman*, and *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* offers readers fourteen chapters plus an epilogue of self-deprecating humor, bits of stories that border on the tragic but still make you laugh, and wry observations about the world of children and adolescents. We see him as a “total dweeb” in elementary and middle school, watch him begin to grow up in high school, and come to understand his current perspective as a fifty-something-year-old man. Instead of using a traditional narrative structure—in this case, tracing the path from youth to maturity—Crutcher focuses each chapter on an important idea and relates events throughout his youth that helped him learn about this idea. This structure creates the feeling that the reader is sitting down with Crutcher, talking about life and telling funny stories.

The stories Crutcher tells will not surprise those who are familiar with his books, but even those new to him as an author will enjoy them. The bumbling but well-meaning hero, a staple of Crutcher's fiction, is always present, but this time it is Crutcher himself. The young man who makes less-than-perfect choices and then tries to work through the consequences appears over and over, and there are cameo appearances of people and events in Crutcher's life who found their way into his books, with Crutcher pointing them out along the way. The epilogue, fittingly, helps to tie the author's life and art together, with a nod to the unpredictable nature of the world, an aspect of life that Crutcher clearly finds fascinating.

—Lee Galda

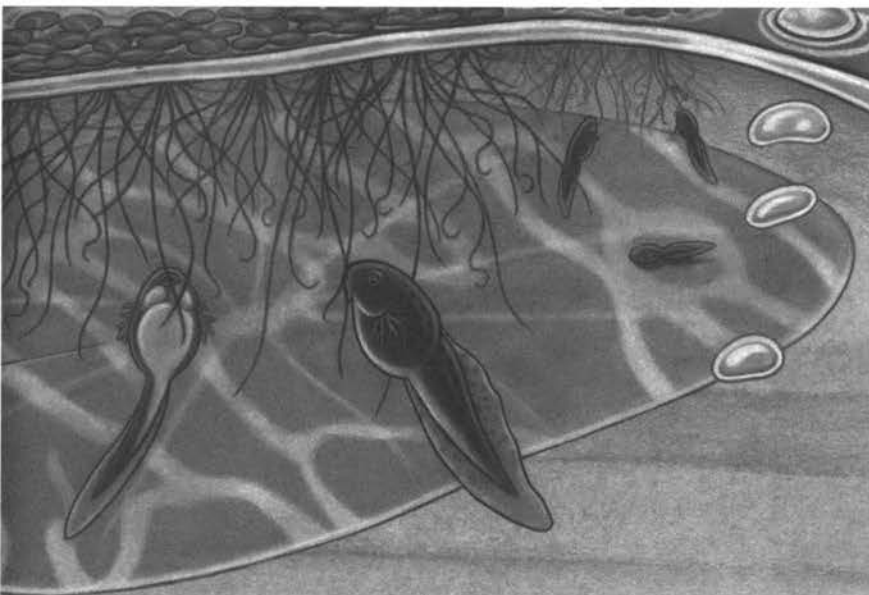


Illustration by Rick Chrustkowski from *Hop Frog*

## The Man Who Made Time Travel

By Kathryn Lasky

Illustrated by Kevin Hawkes

FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX

48 pages, Ages 8–12, \$17.00

ISBN 0-374-34788-3

Kathryn Lasky and Kevin Hawkes, author and illustrator of *The Librarian Who Measured the Earth* (Little, Brown, 1994), team up once again to honor an individual who dedicated himself to discovering something new for the world.

*The Man Who Made Time Travel*, a biography of the man who developed a reliable means for determining longitude, opens with an account of a deadly storm off the English coast in the fall of 1707. In one night, two thousand sailors died in shipwrecks because their captains didn't know precisely where they were. By telling this tragic tale, Lasky demonstrates that the search for an accurate method for measuring longitude was a matter of life and death. It's an exciting beginning, one that establishes interest in a rather obscure subject and gives readers a reason to continue reading.

In fifteen segments, Lasky tells her story. She explains that the solution to

determining east-west location was to find a way to transport a precise clock on the high seas. The solution went against the wisdom of the day: in the early eighteenth century, scientists assumed the answer to be in the stars.

The British Parliament announced a competition, with a prize to be awarded to the first person who solved the longitude problem. Lasky tells how an uneducated carpenter, through persistence and curiosity, eventually built a highly accurate clock. John Harrison worked on the problem for almost sixty years before Parliament finally awarded him the prize money.

Passion and stubbornness drove Harrison to solve the longitude problem. Before readers have opened *The Man Who Made Time Travel*, they are cued to this passion by Kevin Hawkes's cover illustration, a close-up of Harrison, dark except for the light focused on his gleaming eyes.

Throughout the book, Hawkes intersperses full-page paintings with vignettes and ample white space, an attractive combination. He evokes clocks and wheels with some of this spot art and in beautiful endpapers,

which feature one of Harrison's clocks. The characters who populate this story—laborers, sailors, an egg-toting villager, and Harrison himself—communicate a wide range of emotion, which lends warmth to the story.

In an afterword, Lasky describes her own transatlantic sailing experience and her joyful reaction to seeing Harrison's clocks in British museums, larger versions of the same chronometer she used on her own sailing journey. In relating information about the life experience that inspired her, Lasky drives home the continuing relevance of Harrison's discovery and answers that perennial question, Where do you get your ideas?

—Lisa Westberg Peters

## Uncle Andy's: A Faabbbulous Visit with Andy Warhol

By James Warhola

PUTNAM

32 pages, Ages 4–8, \$16.99

ISBN 0-399-23869-7

It's 1962, and for a seven-year-old boy who's spent long hours crammed in a station wagon with his parents, five brothers and sisters, several suitcases, and a bolt-covered magnet bigger than he is, New York City is the destination that makes an uncomfortable odyssey worth every cramped mile. To Jamie Warhola, New York City means more than neon lights and traffic jams, tall buildings and busy sidewalks. New York City means a visit with Uncle Andy, an artist who wears black turtleneck sweaters and a tousled white wig and spends his days painting pictures of objects like Coke bottles and soup cans.

Somehow, the very premise is surprising—yes, Andy Warhol, born Warhola, father of pop art, did have a family and a life outside of the Factory, his notoriously hip studio. James Warhola, an illustrator and the artist's



Illustration by Kevin Hawkes, from *The Man Who Made Time Travel*

nephew, has written a story recounting one of his many childhood visits to the four-story brownstone where his famous uncle lived with his mother (James's grandmother Bubba), twenty-five cats, and lots and lots of "stuff."

Bubba doesn't seem to mind that a huge crushed-metal sculpture fills the front hall, while cookie jars tumble about and a rooster weathervane perches on a stack of boxes. A presidential marble bust frowns at an immense leering Punch figure while handsome glazed Arts and Crafts vases share floor and shelf space with Warhol's silkscreen portraits and hand-painted soup crates. But Jamie's mother is shocked. Looking at all the clutter, she asks "Gee, Andy, when are you going to get rid of this stuff?"

This fascination with "stuff" is enthusiastically shared by the brothers Warhola. We learn from Jamie's father (a happy-go-lucky junkyard operator) as well as from his famous uncle that everyday objects, even those that are cast aside, can become art through our attention and appreciation.

It's the faithful and charming rendering of this "stuff" that will give *Uncle Andy's* appeal not only to young readers but also to Warhol fans of all ages who will delight in identifying the artist's works as well as those of other pop artists of the day. (That huge crushed-metal sculpture in the hall reminds Jamie of his dad's junkyard full of wrecked cars, but it is actually an important work by sculptor John Chamberlain.) It's fun, also, to identify pieces from Warhol's vast collections (folk art, Native American baskets, antique shoes, carousel horses, and ceramic cookie jars, to name a few).

James Warhola's story is a simple one, quickly absorbed. Consequently, readers may find themselves enjoying the book's dense and friendly illustrations without much reference to the narrative, choosing instead to roam



Illustration by James Warhola, from  
*Uncle Andy's*

about Warhol's cluttered brownstone unguided. As Jamie tells us in a burst of wonder, Uncle Andy's house is just like an amusement park.

And that bolt-covered megamagnet that traveled to New York City? Just the perfect gift for a much loved uncle, that's all.

—Roz Ramstad Hawley

### The Woods Scientist

By Stephen R. Swinburne

Photographs by Susan C. Morse

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN

48 pages, Ages 8–12, \$16.00

ISBN 0-618-04602-X

This season, Houghton Mifflin offers another book in its superb Scientists in the Field series. The scientist subject is Susan Morse, a habitat ecologist who studies the interaction patterns of different tracts of land, focusing on the top of the food chain: her special interests include bears, bobcats, and lynx. She lives in and studies a mixed-woods area called Wolfrun in the Green Mountains of Vermont. Her cabin is her office; her laboratory is the vast woods she lives within.

Morse grew up in idyllic Pennsylvania woods that have now been erased by development. She is a fourth-generation forester; her work of preservation and stewardship was begun by her great-grandfather. As she says, "Forestry runs in my sap."

Women wildlife scientists—Jane

Goodall with chimps, Dian Fossey with mountain gorillas, Anne LaBastille with the giant auk, Birute Galdikas with orangutans—seem especially successful with the kind of field study that requires long observation, enormous patience, and willingness to postpone career rewards. Each of these scientists has gone beyond study to active campaigning for preservation of her subjects' habitat. Susan Morse belongs to this nurturing tradition.

Morse's metaphor for biodiversity is the puzzle:

Imagine the forest as a huge puzzle in motion, and the variety of living things—trees, shrubs, flowers, mushrooms, mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and insects—as moving pieces in that puzzle... dependent on one another, living together in sun and rain, throughout winter, spring, summer, and fall. Now imagine removing a piece of the puzzle—say, an insect or bird: the puzzle loses its strength. Kill off enough pieces, or species, and the puzzle falls apart. Every living thing counts.

A superb nature photographer, Morse has provided most of the fine photographs that appear throughout *The Woods Scientist*. We see wonderful pictures: a black bear stands to embrace a birch tree; a buck whitetail in velvet relaxes in a meadow; a cougar is shown with its kill; a lynx in snow stares at the camera. Morse is shown on site in the woods teaching students of all ages. We see them finding all kinds of signs: moose tracks, claw marks on trees, deer rubs, bobcat ledges. She calls her method "ground truthing." Discovery and connection are key to her teaching. One of her mnemonics:

If your eyes are in front—you  
hunt.

If your eyes are to the side—you'd  
better hide.

The book's design is excellent—photos and text support one another gracefully. *The Woods Scientist* does far more than inform, it advocates for the work of Morse's Keeping Track Youth Program, provides contact information for several other ecological organizations, and offers suggestions for further reading. The book closes with a useful glossary of naturalists' terms.

—John Caddy

## Poetry

### blues journey

By Walter Dean Myers

Illustrated by Christopher Myers

HOLIDAY HOUSE

48 pages, Age 8 and up, \$18.95

ISBN 0-8234-1613-5

This poignant picture book by renowned writer Walter Dean Myers and his son, writer and artist Christopher Myers, begins with an introductory discussion on the origin, history, and composition of the blues. Long considered a uniquely American form, blues music is described here as a fusion between the cultures of Africa and Europe. African slaves brought the “call-and-response” singing form and the pentatonic or five-tone blues scale to America. The first two lines of the blues—the call—are the same; they are followed by the singer's own response:

Going on a journey,  
looking for my supposed-to-be  
Going on a journey,  
looking for my supposed-to-be  
I'm riding that blues highway,  
and Lord, it's riding me.

After the Civil War, when African American musicians became freer to be influenced by European music, they extended the pentatonic scale and explored more complex lyrics as their knowledge of English grew.



Illustration by Christopher Myers, from *blues journey*

Myers emphasizes the blues as a form of poetry. Many blues lyrics present a universal theme spoken in a personal voice, and, like the best poetry, use an encoded language rich with metaphoric possibilities. Thus, the suffering endured under slavery becomes “that raging storm” and a landlord's greed is “cold as a death row shave.” Both these phrases are from the elder Myers's own compositions, which constitute most of the book's text and are beautifully accompanied by his son's art. Some blues lyrics raise powerful questions, as is the case with these lines, addressing the music itself: “Are you my pain and misery, / or my sweet, sweet company?” Some recite love and appreciation. Other verses tease with humor and irony:

If you see a dollar, tell it my full  
name  
If you see a dollar, honey, tell it  
my full name

Say I'm being sociable, and it can  
do the same.

Christopher Myers's palette of blue, black, brown, and white supports both the intensity of and the limitations presented by this musical form. Using blue ink, white paper, and brown paper bags, the artist depicts an array of textures evoking screen doors, sheets hanging on a line, concrete sidewalks, and somber fields. Yet his borders of small white shapes have a gaiety that is reminiscent of the prints children make using their hands, apples, or squares of linoleum. Ending with an informative time line and glossary, *blues journey* offers a great deal to readers of all ages, including teachers of writing and literature, who may be inspired to include the blues alongside other honored poetic forms—the sonnet, the ballad, haiku—in the classroom.

—Patricia Kirkpatrick

**How to Cross a Pond:  
Poems about Water**

By Marilyn Singer

Illustrated by Meilo So

KNOPF

48 pages, Ages 8–12, \$14.95

ISBN 0-375-82376-X

Marilyn Singer describes poetry in the following way: “A good poem...uses words wonderfully and it uses them to capture specific moments in a fresh way, a way that makes the reader exclaim with delight, ‘Yes, that’s it! That’s right.’” This aim is fulfilled in the first stanza of Singer’s own poem “Rain Forest”:

In the rain forest, where the  
ground is a limitless  
sponge  
drinking in cloud after cloud’s  
worth  
of water,  
the treetops are ablaze with  
private ponds  
each no bigger than a flower’s  
cup.

*How to Cross a Pond* is a follow-up to Singer’s first collaborative effort with illustrator Meilo So, *Footprints on the Roof: Poems about the Earth*. This time, Singer reflects on the beauty of water in its many forms. Its stillness is noticed in “What Water Can Be,” where she describes a tear as “one drop on your eyelash / water, selective”; its sound is the subject in “Water Music”: “Water hums lullabies of home / sings ballads of journeys great and small.”

“Water Guns” celebrates one of water’s most playful uses—a water gun fight: “a spurt and squirty / clean but dirty / I’m-gonna-find-you / Look-out-behind-you.” However, as the grandma in “Wells” points out, water’s power also lies in its being a necessity:

Learn to understand  
that water is the true treasure  
of small villages and great cities.

Only then will you never squander  
what is not yours to own.

So’s drawings, done in a rich dusky blue on cream-colored pages, flow as gently or as powerfully as their subject matter. A young child in “Fair-Weather Friend” quietly hides under a great umbrella, circles of puddles formed around her rubber-booted feet. The explosive spurts of cooling water from a fire hydrant in “City River” virtually spring off the page: “Who could believe our sudden summer stream / our splay and spray / just today / waterway.”

The miniature images on the cover of *How to Cross a Pond*—such as a storm cloud, a rose, and a schooner ship—celebrate the many ways water is an indispensable part of our world. As Singer reminds us: “Even when it whippers / we hear water’s call / and answer with need, in hope, by choice / Water has such a powerful voice.”

—Julie Pfitzinger

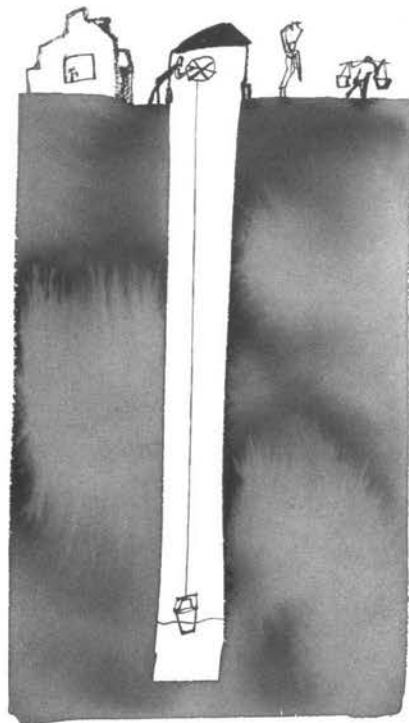


Illustration by Meilo So, from  
*How to Cross a Pond*

**Knock on Wood:  
Poems about Superstitions**

By Janet S. Wong

Illustrated by Julie Paschkis

McELDERRY

40 pages, Ages 7–10, \$17.95

ISBN 0-689-85512-5

What makes a horseshoe lucky? If your ears itch, is someone talking about you? How do you lift the curse of a broken mirror? And why shouldn’t you open an umbrella indoors? From the award-winning team that created *Night Garden* comes a delightful collection of seventeen original poems exploring superstitions—some common, some less well known.

The sounds and rhythms in these short poems make them a pleasure to read aloud. Poet Janet Wong has a smart turn of phrase and a light and thoughtful touch on the subject of folkloric beliefs. Take hats, for example:

Don’t put your hat on the table.  
Don’t put your hat on the bed.  
Don’t put your hat on backward,  
please,  
and don’t tell me now if you did.

As Wong notes in her afterword, people used to believe that guardian spirits lived in trees—unique sprites for each variety of tree, reachable by tapping on the wood. Therefore,

Call on them  
so your luck stays good:  
Soul to soul,  
knock on wood.

Julie Paschkis has created a tapestry of images based on each theme, and the richly illustrated pages overflow with layered watercolors. The “Knock on Wood” spread features a colorful figure of a girl in a green smock and blue trousers knocking on wood, a blue bird perched on her long brown braid as if it were a branch. Both the girl and the poem, laid out on the facing page, are

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framed in green-toned designs of fantastical trees intertwined with wood sprites and forest creatures.

As a bonus, Wong has included brief, interesting notes that relate discoveries from her research. We have all heard that ladybugs are good luck—but how many of us know that the redder the bug is, the better the luck?

—Lisa Von Drasek

## **A Pet for Me** **Poems Selected by** **Lee Bennett Hopkins** Illustrated by Jane Manning

HARPER: I CAN READ SERIES  
48 pages, Ages 4–8, \$15.99  
ISBN 0-06-029111-7

In this set of easy-to-read poems, collected by anthologist Lee Bennett Hopkins, turtles remember the taste of lettuce leaves, a gerbil sits still for an after-dinner story, and plenty of more traditional pet activity—such as tail-chasing—ensues.

The subject of pets has great appeal for young readers, and the twenty poems in *A Pet for Me* are short (none require a turn of the page) and accessible. They are well chosen, offering variety in poetic style: some poems rhyme, some don't; some lines read like sentences, some are phrases in which the sound and play of words are paramount.

Avis Harley's "Hamster Hide-and-Seek" stands out with its refreshing rhymes and imagery:

With marble eyes  
She stops and peeks;  
lets me stroke  
her knapsack cheeks.

Then ripple-of-fur  
takes her leave  
to probe new roads  
inside my sleeve.

In "Lullabies," Katie McAllaster Weaver offers guinea pig owners a way to



Illustration by Jane Manning, from  
*A Pet for Me*

enjoy the potentially annoying noises that their busy rodents make at night:

Late at night  
my guinea pig  
sings me lullabies.

She squeaks and chews  
a song for me  
until I close my eyes.

Jane Manning's stylized illustrations are amusing and almost relentlessly cheerful: every creature is smiling a wide smile, even the turtle on a flat rock "sitting still and thinking." Manning uses whimsical spirals, in the form of snails, curled-up snakes, wrought-iron curlicues, and textured background designs, on almost every spread. The spiral motif and consistent tone effectively unify the poems. One illustration is so striking, it overshadows the verse: Manning portrays a bespecta-

pled girl, sprawled on a summer lawn with her feet in the air, spikes of grass and daisies suggesting a backyard cage for a hairy but friendly-looking tarantula perched on the girl's head.

—Lisa Westberg Peters

**A Poem of Her Own  
Voices of American Women  
Yesterday and Today**

Edited by Catherine Clinton

Illustrated by Stephen Alcorn

ABRAMS

80 pages, Age 12 and up, \$17.95

ISBN 0-8109-4240-2

Following their previous anthology of African American poetry, historian Catherine Clinton and artist Stephen Alcorn have teamed up again to produce an anthology of poetry by American women. *A Poem of Her Own* is a handsome book that presents many fine poems, yet something about this effort doesn't add up to a satisfying whole.

More than a quarter of the text is devoted to background material—an introduction, biographies of the poets, editor's and illustrator's notes—which feels disproportionate to the number, and in some cases the quality, of the poems included. The purpose of the anthology—to celebrate women's poetry, or women's lives as expressed in poetry—is not entirely clear.

Clinton's eight-page introduction is chiefly a historical overview that places the poets' lives and poems in the context of their times, beginning with Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley. This historical discussion would benefit from at least a short discussion of the varieties of poetic form and its uses by the poets. The sense of cause and effect implied by some of Clinton's juxtapositions is misleading. Poets Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, for example, struggled with serious mental illness throughout their lives, as Clin-

ton states, but it seems inappropriate to suggest that their illness was related to their position among women poets who, as they gained a foothold in the predominantly male literary world, "found they paid a high price for their struggles to break down the barricades." And although Anne Sexton did inspire many of the women writers who followed her, it is not accurate to say that "she stimulated a blossoming of feminist creative expression, which included Marge Piercy and Adrienne Rich, among others." Rich was writing well before Sexton was.

Many of the selections are rich, ambitious poems not often made available to young readers. Alice Dunbar-Nelson's "I Sit and Sew," Louise Bogan's "Women," and Anne Sexton's "Her Kind" all speak to the darkness of women's experience, as in these lines from Dunbar-Nelson: "I sit and sew—a useless task it seems, / My hands grown tired, my head weighted down with dreams." Given the generous space allotted to each poem, readers may expect the selections to be emblematic not only of an author's body of work but also of something distinctive in American or literary history, yet not all the poems are up to such a task. Adrienne Rich, a major poet of the twentieth century and now the twenty-first, seems arbitrarily represented by the poem "Bears." Some readers may question whether Lydia Maria Child's "The New-England Boy's Song about Thanksgiving Day" ("Over the river, and through the wood, / To grandfather's house we go") merits three pages of text when Emily Dickinson's work receives one. Because the book is spacious, offering more poems by each poet—and making the background material more succinct—might have made for a more effective presentation of these voices to young readers.

—Patricia Kirkpatrick

**Reviewers in This Issue**

**Christine Alfano** lives in Minneapolis with her family. A Riverbank Review contributing editor, she also writes about children's books for Ruminator Review.

**Martha Davis Beck** is the editor of Riverbank Review.

**Kathryne Beebe** is currently studying medieval history at Oxford University.

**John Caddy** is a poet and earth educator. His new book, *Morning Earth: Field Notes in Poetry*, was published this summer by Milkweed Editions.

**Lee Galda**, coauthor of *Literature and the Child*, is a professor of children's literature at the University of Minnesota.

**Roz Ramstad Hawley** lives in Minneapolis. Her essay "Reading on the Road: Beyond Guidebooks" was published in the Summer 1999 issue of Riverbank Review.

**Patricia Kirkpatrick** is a poet and the author of *Plowie: A Story from the Prairie* (Harcourt, 1994). She teaches at Hamline University and Macalester College in St. Paul.

**Abby McGanney Nolan's** reviews appear frequently in the New York Times Book Review and the Washington Post Book World.

**Lisa Westberg Peters** is the author of several books for children, including *Our Family Tree: An Evolution Story*. She lives with her family in St. Paul.

**Julie Pfitzinger** is a freelance writer who lives with her family in West St. Paul, Minnesota.

**Jenny Sawyer** is an editor and freelance writer living in Boston.

**Lisa Von Drasek** is a librarian at the Bank Street School in New York City.



## one for the shelf

An ingenious blend of geography lesson, tribute to nature, and adventure story, *Paddle-to-the-Sea* is now sixty-two years old, sturdy and spry. It has withstood changes in the landscape and technology it portrays as well as questions about its portrayal of Native Americans. It is old-fashioned in the way of the classic habitat dioramas in natural history museums, immersing viewers in the details of the nonurban world.

The first spread is an apt and inviting introduction to the book, and indeed also to Holling Clancy Holling's other works, which make use of similar formats to explore single subjects with thoroughgoing geohistorical enthusiasm. Here begins a journey, as a Native American boy from the territory north of Lake Superior completes work on a piece of pine. The righthand page is filled by a full-color painting of the boy looking intently at a foot-long canoe and Indian figure within; on the left is the text, gently framed by black-and-white line drawings, one of which shows the words carved on the bottom of the boat: "PLEASE PUT ME BACK IN WATER I AM PADDLE TO THE SEA."

Most people would put such an object on a shelf, where they could admire it. But in the next spread, the boy places his canoe on top of a snow-covered hill. Inspired by some new knowledge—that the melting snow on that hill flows into a river, which flows into the Great Lakes, then into another river that leads to the sea—he launches Paddle on a grand voyage. "You will go with the water," the boy tells Paddle, "and you will have adventures that I would like to have."

The vision and resourcefulness of the boy and the dignity of his carved figure signal Holling's respect for Native Americans. Growing up in rural Michigan, he read everything he could about them; in the 1930s, he wrote and illustrated *The Book of Indians*, an informational treasure trove that was cited by the U.S. Indian Service as being "almost unique in having no misstatements, either in the text or the pictures."

Some have objected to the use of the word *Injun* in

### **Paddle-to-the-Sea**

By Holling Clancy Holling

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN, 1941

64 pages, Ages 8–12

hardcover: \$20.00, paperback: \$14.00

ISBN 0-395-15082-5 (HC); 0-395-29203-4 (PB)



*Paddle-to-the-Sea*, but it's important to note that it is used in only two of twenty-seven chapters, both times in the quoted speech of characters who aren't particularly observant or sympathetic. The first instance occurs when a group of fishermen accidentally catch Paddle in their nets; as it happens, he soon escapes from them. Everyone else who picks him up along the way is impressed by the carving and its purpose. Each tries to help Paddle on his journey to the ocean. One man gives him a new paint job and fastens a thick copper plate to the bottom of the canoe, on which subsequent finders scratch their locations. The second utterance of the word comes at the end of the book, where it's effectively (and I would argue deliberately) countered by the quietly dramatic reappearance of Paddle's creator. Four years older, tall and strong, the young man is pleased and moved when he learns about the long journey his now-famous "Little Traveler" has made—all the way to France!

A Caldecott Honor Book, *Paddle-to-the-Sea* works on different levels for readers of different ages. Younger children search for little Paddle in the midst of the landscapes he navigates, rooting for him as he narrowly survives the buzzing steel of the sawmill, the heat of a forest fire, and the huge plunge of Niagara Falls, or as he gets stuck somewhere until nature eventually intervenes. Older readers can track Paddle's progress on the maps provided and absorb the details of Great Lakes culture—locks, sawmills, factories, and shipwrecks—drawn and described by Holling in the margins.

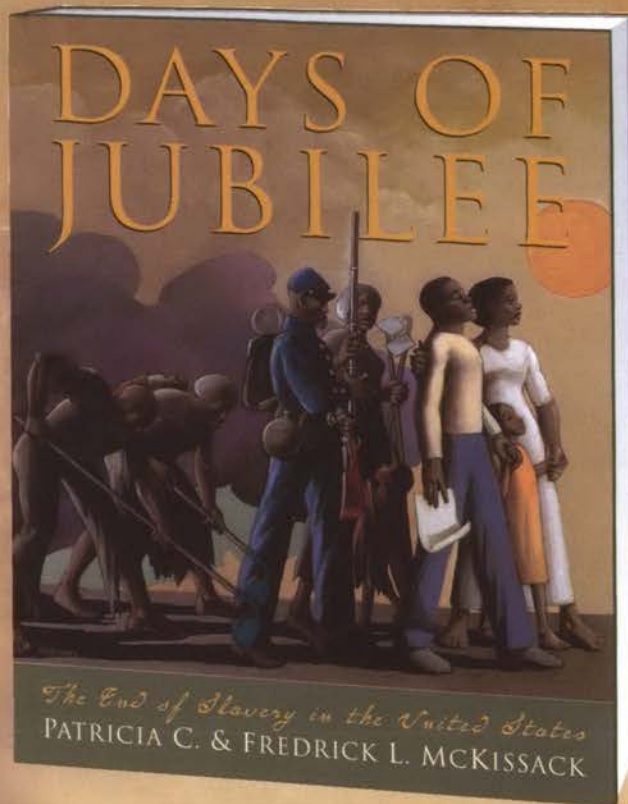
The stalwart Indian miniature has made an outsized impression on many readers who encountered this story as children. I suspect that hundreds of figures in canoes have been carved and launched in honor of *Paddle-to-the-Sea* (both the book and the pine figure). Holling's work has the power to send off many more.

—Abby McGanney Nolan

Abby McGanney Nolan is a frequent contributor to Riverbank Review.

“Much-needed...an important work.”

—Kirkus Reviews



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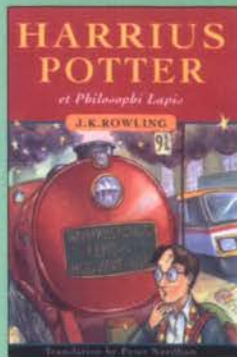
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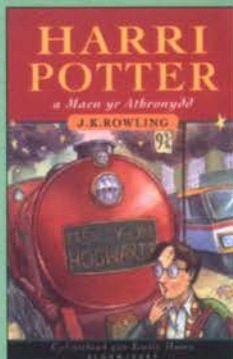


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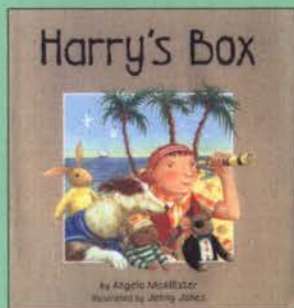
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