

# Story Monsters Ink

SEPTEMBER 2025



The Literary Magazine for Teachers, Librarians, and Parents

One to Read:

## Hayden Coles



Diane  
Green

Grant  
Merritt

Kat  
Maconie

Susannah  
Lloyd

PLUS:

Judy  
Newman

Conrad's  
Classroom

Monsters at  
the Movies

Liv on Life

Fall  
Reading List

Book Reviews  
and More!



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One to Read:

# Hayden Coles

by Raven Howell

“Right now, I’m working on my 13th book. I set myself a goal called ‘13 by 13,’ to write 13 books by 13 years old,” says author/illustrator Hayden Coles, who is now 13 years old. “At first it just seemed like a fun idea because the number sounded cool, but after a while it turned into something bigger. It became a challenge that kept me motivated and gave me something to aim for.”



Hayden has been creating inspirational adventure story books since he was just 9, with the first *Axolotl Adventures in Minecraft* book series.

“Every time I finish a book, I add it to the others in a pile, and when I look at that pile, it doesn’t feel like just stories anymore. It feels like a library of my imagination, a record of everything I’ve written since I was 9. What I like most about having this goal is that it keeps me going even when writing gets hard or when ideas don’t come as fast. Because of this, I’ve realized that my creativity isn’t just about getting inspired; it’s about motivating myself to make the time to write and get my ideas on paper. For me, ‘13 by 13’ is about proving to myself that if I set a dream, I can actually make it real,” he says, committedly.

“For the last five years, I’ve been working on my books pretty regularly. Two or three times a week, I meet with my writing coach, mentor, muse, and friend, Ms. Rhonda Asbenson, for about an hour, and on weekends or during school breaks, I add in time for illustrations.”

Ms. Rhonda also created some original stories with Hayden when he was just 5 years old and in junior kindergarten, which included characters like a robot dog, a bearded dragon, and a brown dinosaur. She turned these stories into booklets with clip art for him, which inspired Hayden to continue creating stories, because he didn’t even realize that someone could care enough about them to turn them into books. “It’s become such a steady part of my life that I can’t imagine not doing it.”

Hayden started his writing sojourn earnestly during the Covid pandemic. “Everyone was stuck inside, and it felt like the whole world had gone quiet and scary. I remember thinking about how many kids my age must have felt lonely or bored, and I wanted to give them something fun and hopeful to focus on. That’s when I got the idea: What if my characters could be like friends for kids who needed them? Friends who were always up for an adventure, who could make you laugh, and who showed you that courage and imagination can help you through tough times.”

“So I started my first series. At first, I thought it was just a way to keep myself busy (I had nothing else to do), but pretty quickly it became more than that. Soon, writing became a way to connect with people I hadn’t even met. It became a mission to make kids around the world less lonely and more hopeful. Now, a few years later, whenever I hear that one of my readers had fun with my story or felt a little less alone because of it, it reminds me why I began in the first place. Knowing that

something I wrote could brighten someone’s day, even during tough times, makes all the effort worth it.”

Hayden says the first thing he remembers drawing well was a landscape. He’s also had a love for drawing dinosaurs and sea animals. “They felt so mysterious, almost like creatures from another planet, and I think that’s why I couldn’t stop drawing them.”

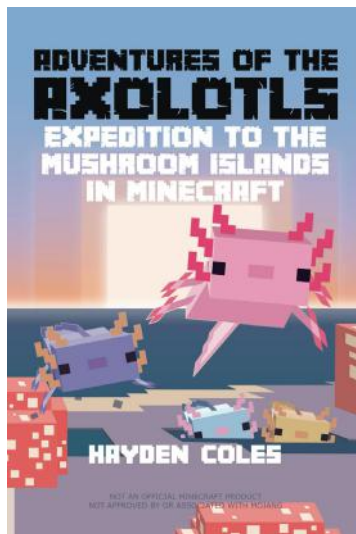
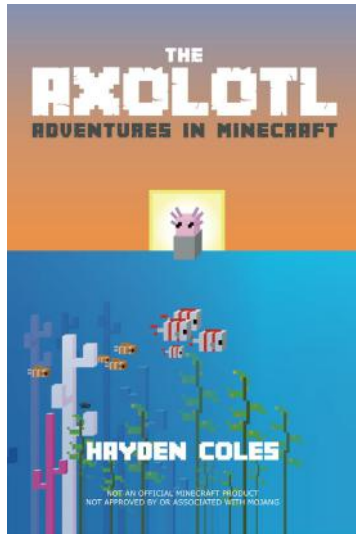
By the time he reached first grade, *Minecraft* had entered his life, and his style started to shift into a blocky, 3-D world. “I especially loved drawing axolotls, as they were so quirky and full of personality. They ended up becoming my first real attempt at 3-D characters.”

“In second grade, I became obsessed with jellyfish again, but this time I decided to draw every single kind I could find. Their names were funny, their shapes were so unusual, and each one looked like it had its own personality. I brought a whole stack of those drawings to class, and my teacher, Mrs. Schifferle, did something important—she didn’t just say ‘nice job.’ She told me to keep going and even encouraged me to start writing stories to go with my pictures. That changed everything.”

“The very first *Minecraft* story I ever wrote came from that classroom, and it opened a door in my imagination that I didn’t even know was there. Suddenly, drawings weren’t enough; I needed words to bring my worlds to life, too. Not long after, I woke up one morning with a whole series in my head. Four books, all at once. I knew all the titles, chapters, characters, and stories. I couldn’t write fast enough to get it all down, so I spoke the stories out loud to my mom or to my coach, Ms. Rhonda, while they wrote them for me.”

At that time, Hayden says writing and reading along with being left-handed wasn’t easy for him, but it motivated him to work harder. He also had speech therapy to help improve a few letter sounds. He practiced with Ms. Rhonda, writing paragraphs, reading fluently, speaking clearly, keeping pace, and slowly it clicked. “The ideas that once spilled out too fast to catch finally started to flow neatly onto the page. That’s when I realized something I’ve never forgotten: even challenges can become part of your story, as long as you don’t give up.”

*Minecraft*, a block-based sandbox video game, involves the player gathering resources, crafting items, and building anything imaginable in a procedurally generated environment. Hayden says, “*Minecraft* was one of the very first games I ever played, and it felt completely different



from anything else. It wasn't about winning or trying to beat someone; it was about building, exploring, and imagining whatever you wanted. That freedom hooked me in a way I hadn't seen with other games, and what I loved most was how easily I could mix my own imagination into the game. It was almost like the game and my creativity were working together."

"That's when I started writing stories about it, because *Minecraft* gave me a world where my ideas could live and make sense to other kids, too. It reminds me of how I started as a storyteller: just a kid exploring blocks and creatures, turning them into adventures that could go anywhere."

"When I started my second series, I thought it would be fun to come up with a whole new set of axolotl characters and adventures. But as I was writing, I kept feeling like the first series wasn't really finished, like something else could've been added. I started weaving the old and the new together."

"Blending the two series showed me that stories don't always have a clear ending. Characters and worlds can keep growing if you listen to them. My job as the writer is to follow where they lead, even if it takes the story in directions I didn't expect."

Hayden's latest series, *The Adventures of the Axolotls*, is going to see the publication of books 2, 3, and 4 in the series over the coming months. "One of the biggest challenges (and also one of the most fun parts) is bringing characters from different series together," he explains.

"It can feel tricky, almost like trying to put two different puzzles together to make one big picture. I have to make sure each character still feels like themselves, but also fits into the bigger adventure. Sometimes that means carefully deciding who gets to talk when, or making sure personalities balance so no one gets lost in the crowd. But I actually love figuring that out, because every time I do, the world feels bigger and more connected."

"In *The Adventures of the Axolotls* series, all of the axolotls from the first and second series, *The Axolotl Adventures* and *The Curious Axolotl*, finally meet. Each one has its own quirks and strengths, and I wanted to show what happens when they're thrown together on a single journey. As the story goes on, their differences actually make the adventure stronger. For me, that's the reward: watching all these characters I've created meet each other."

An even bigger reward for Hayden is seeing other kids reading his books and enjoying them. "It's one thing to hold the finished copy in my own hands, but it feels completely different when I see someone else flipping the pages and getting pulled into the story. Sometimes I'll notice kids laughing at a scene or telling me which character is their favorite, and it feels like I've shared a secret part of my imagination with them. That's when all the hours of writing, editing, and drawing feel worth it, because at the end of the day, the story isn't just mine anymore, it belongs to them too."

"I heard from a teacher who uses my books in her class, and how my books help students practice reading and writing. Another parent told me her 8-year-old son, who usually reads in Spanish, was so excited by my stories that he started reading them in English too. Hearing things like that makes me really happy."

Hayden says another wonderful thing that's come from publishing is being able to give back. "I donate part of my book earnings each month to charities like Shriners Children's, St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital, and Newman's Own Foundation. Knowing that my writing can help others in a real way is an amazing feeling."

"But above all, I love knowing my books might give someone else the same feeling I've gotten from my favorite stories—a mix of comfort, excitement, and inspiration. To me, that's the best reward: creating something that sparks joy, courage, or imagination in someone else. It's one of the reasons I keep writing, because I know that someone out there might enjoy it."

For more information about Hayden Coles and his books, visit [dougypress.com](https://dougypress.com). ●

# Inspiring Stories of Unity and Courage

Everyone can make a difference!

Embodies the true meaning of the holiday season!

## Freedom Pancakes for Ukraine



Dr. Janice Cohn

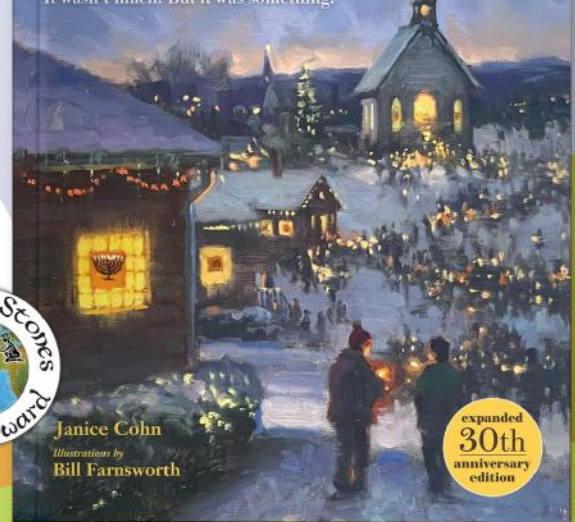
Illustrated by  
Yana Holubiatnikova

Purple  
Dragonfly  
Book Award  
SM  
WINNER

## The Christmas Menorahs

How a Town Fought Hate

"Just one tiny candle, we lit.  
It wasn't much. But it was something."



Janice Cohn  
Illustration by  
Bill Farnsworth

expanded  
30th  
anniversary  
edition



A moving story that explores the power of kindness and community in the face of war. Take an emotional journey from war-torn Ukraine to the heart of a compassionate volunteer in Poland—and even across the ocean to a young girl in the United States.

*"...heartwarming sentiment runs steadily throughout, teaching young readers how to stay brave in the face of new beginnings, and how even the smallest acts of kindness can change the world."*

—BookLife Reviews

*"Original, unique, memorable, emotionally engaging, Freedom Pancakes for Ukraine is a compelling, inspiring, and unreservedly recommended addition."*

—Midwest Book Review

Originally published to critical acclaim, this beloved children's book resonates with people of all ages as it recounts the true story of how the people of Billings, Montana, stood together against hate and antisemitism in December 1993. Updated and expanded for a new generation, this true story serves as a poignant reminder of the impact that acts of solidarity can have in the face of bigotry. A powerful testament to community, courage, and unity.

*"...one town's fight against bigotry is the subject of this award-winning book. Cohn's powerful narrative tells how two children, two families—one Jewish, one Christian—and a community resolve to stand together against the shameful actions that have been happening in their hometown."*

—Scholastic Magazine

*"A must-have book for all ages—child and adult. Powerful."*  
—Pick of the Lists, American Bookseller

[www.freedompancakesforukraine.com](http://www.freedompancakesforukraine.com)

[www.thechristasmenorahs.com](http://www.thechristasmenorahs.com)

# Diane Green

Uplifts Readers with Stories of Joy, Friendship, and Family

by Raven Howell

Children's author Diane Green writes from the heart. "I never chase trends," she says, "but share the stories I'm called to tell."

"My life has been both wonderful and challenging. Faith and positivity are often where I land on the last page of a book. In a recent book, *The Last Voice of Innocence*, appropriate for young adults, a story is told, and the last sentence is: *Until one day the song is never lost, and mankind takes a step forward.*"



“For the *Becky Chalmers* series, it wasn’t uncommon to hear a contemporary speak about a memory, like ‘pop beads.’ When I sit down to write about them, I’m back in the local hardware store buying pop beads and paper airplanes with money earned by selling a big fish to the A&P grocery store. The stories grow almost by magic,” she explains.

Diane’s early years were spent in Yardley, Pennsylvania, and then Holden, Massachusetts. She was an avid reader as a

child, with favorites such as *Ellen Tebbits* by Beverly Cleary, *Homer Price* by Robert McCloskey, and *What Katy Did* by Sarah Chauncey Woolsey topping her list.

“I wanted to live in a world of books, perhaps reside in a library. I wrote my first book at 12 years old. In seventh grade, I decided that I would be a historian. I graduated from college with a degree in history and a minor in English.”

“My first book as an adult was a memoir of a family member. From there, I wrote *Santa and the Cotton Tree*, about a Christmas tradition in my cousin’s family. I introduced Becky Chalmers and her family in this book. What followed was a series of books about growing up in Yardley from Becky’s perspective. Linda Jones, a dear friend, offered to illustrate the first four books in the series. Her artwork was phenomenal and traditional—it fit Becky Chalmers to a “T.” The series went on to receive several awards from Story Monsters and other organizations.”

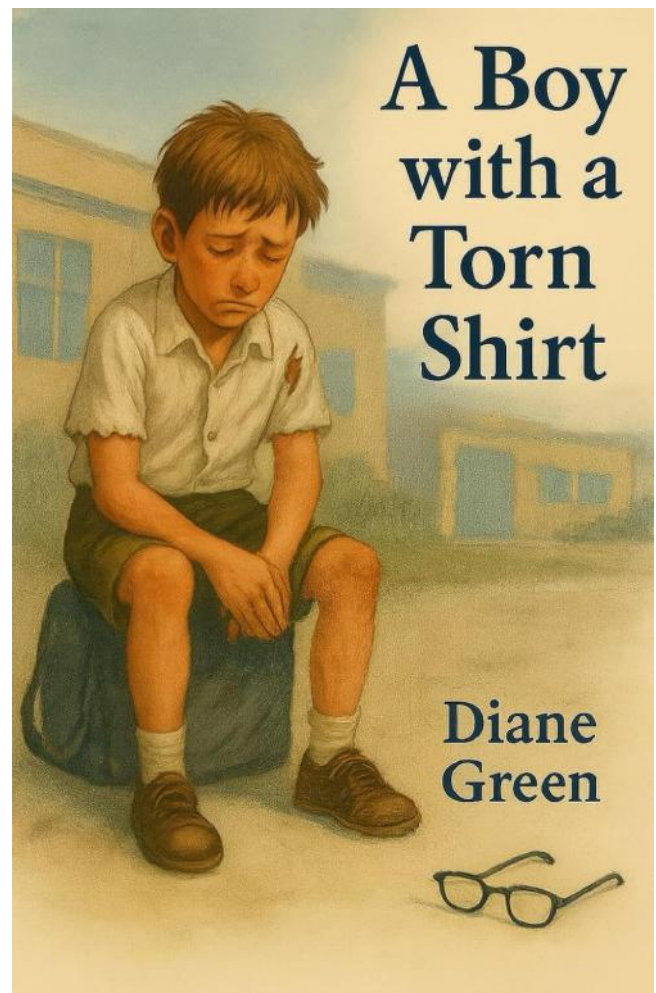
Diane claimed a small bedroom in her home for her writing office. She grins, “It took some years to get the bed out of there, but it is now home only to my creativity and all the physical necessities to write.”

“I have a large stack of notebooks in my office. I stock up during back-to-school sales. I write entire stories longhand in these notebooks, and the first edit is done as I enter the story into my computer. It’s archaic, but solid proof I am the author, and something to look back on to see how my technical skills have grown. Some notebooks contain stories never published. Or, in the case of a character like Lacey Fletcher, the final story became entirely different from what it was in the beginning. *A Candle Snuffed* and *A Candle Glows* are two novellas that reflect that journey—with one ending in haunting darkness and the other in joyful light.”

She says drawing from her own life informs her writing. “Childhood memories came back in a landslide after *Santa and the Cotton Tree*. I would write one childhood story, and others would come to mind immediately afterward. Later, I wrote three picture books—*Trueberry Town*, *At Kornbury House We Eat Healthy*, and *Sadie Delilah’s Window Seat*—illustrated by Judith Gosse. I let my inner child and imagination take me on a journey from a teddy bear factory, to planting beans, to observing life from a little girl’s window seat.”

“When I edit, I focus on the whole story first,” she tells me. “No fatal errors in plot or word choice, and does it really reach the right tone? Does it snap? Have I left the reader in a better place? Then I polish the technical details—spelling, repetition of words, punctuation.”

“I take my time, especially in the editing process. I enjoy the upfront creative process the most, but the fine-tuning is just as important—especially for a book like my latest release, *A Boy with a Torn Shirt*. The story is about a child who stops a school shooting. All of the characters go through complicated emotions afterward. The subject matter is intense, and



it deserved a thorough vetting to ensure it would bring understanding to my readers.”

Diane says she wrote *A Boy with a Torn Shirt* before recent events, and it is not based on any specific tragedy. “My intent is never to mirror real-life heartbreak but to explore courage, healing, and the way faith can bring light into dark places. This book is ultimately about resilience, forgiveness, and the hope that grace can still reach us in the hardest moments. I want readers to find comfort and inspiration here, not pain.”

I ask Diane to tell us a little bit more about *A Boy with a Torn Shirt*. “Christian Turner was only 10 when he acted with unimaginable bravery—stepping in front of a classmate with a loaded gun and stopping a school shooting before it began. As the years pass, Christian struggles with memories he can’t shake and expectations he never asked for. Maggie, a quiet girl with a grieving heart of her own, sees the pain behind his brave smile. Together, they find hope in the unlikeliest place: a

Christmas tree in August, decorated with courage, forgiveness, and second chances. This is a deeply human story about trauma, redemption, and the quiet strength it takes to believe again.”

“I hope the book offers a community perspective. The thoughts and feelings of all the characters involved are explored. To my knowledge, few authors have attempted to fictionally imagine this type of event. I wanted to raise the “what ifs.” For young readers, I hope it provides reassurance that there are good and brave people of every age who want to protect them—and that school life can return to being about the playground, as it was when I was a child.”

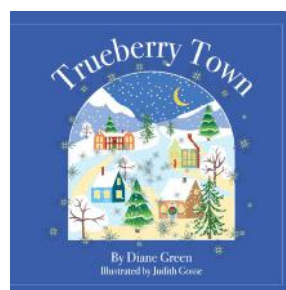
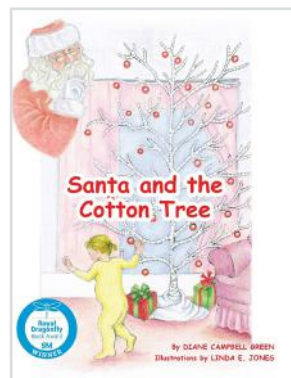
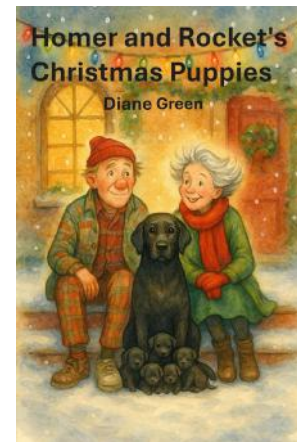
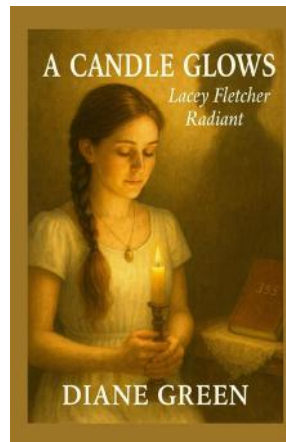
“For me, *A Boy with a Torn Shirt* was emotionally exhausting to write and release,” Diane admits. “My other books have come from a place of joy in my heart. *A Boy with a Torn Shirt* came from a place of sorrow that was ultimately transformed by faith.”

“Nevertheless, I felt it was important for me to write this story. If I could start life all over again, I think I might choose to be a teacher. For a short period of time, I was a teacher’s aide, and I saw firsthand the profound influence a teacher can have over a child. *A Boy with a Torn Shirt* needs to be read by a wide audience. Why me? I’m not really sure yet—but I felt compelled to write it.”

Diane’s *Homer and Rocket’s Christmas Puppies*, a 2025 release, is another engaging story based on unlikely friends and the lessons of kindness and giving. Diane says that when she posted the cover of *Homer and Rocket’s Christmas Puppies* on Facebook, the response was gratifying. “A reader even commented that he’d buy the book just for the cover. The illustrations were created with the help of ChatGPT, using very specific directions and a lot of back-and-forth. The end result is warm, unique, and follows the storyline perfectly.”

Last year, Diane published *Eleven Pennies, A Christmas Story*. “*Eleven Pennies* brings sadness, community, redemption, and joy—all wrapped up in the special season of Christmas. It is a short story with a distinct beginning, middle, and end in fewer than fifty pages. The characters are well imagined, and the three little girls—Annabelle, Isabelle, and Lulabelle—are as real as eleven pennies from Heaven.”

As Diane was writing, the main character, Gretchen Willmer, surprised her from the very beginning. “I lost my mother a few years ago, and during that time I experienced some extraordinary moments—one of which was finding eleven



pennies on the ground while visiting her nursing facility. Gretchen begins her journey at a low point, impoverished and feeling guilty, she goes in search of a new place to live. A kind stranger takes her in. Three mysterious little girls appear, and the magic begins. What could be more enchanting than a Christmas Shop? Her transformation in the end is so positive that it reminded me how, once past the bad times, life can truly become good again.”

When asked why she thinks children’s books are important, Diane says, “I think children’s books are important because they stretch a child’s understanding of the world. Books can become a refuge, a happy place, and sometimes the answer to ‘Why?’”

“I have the privilege of living in a society where retirement exists. I choose to write. I never watch the clock, and I am drawn to this little room where wonderful children—and some adults—are created and then go out into the world.”

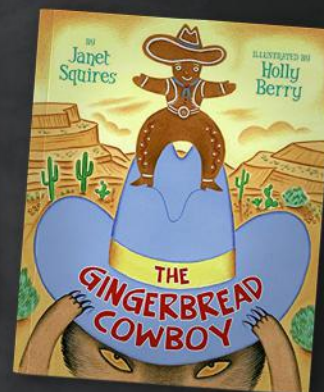
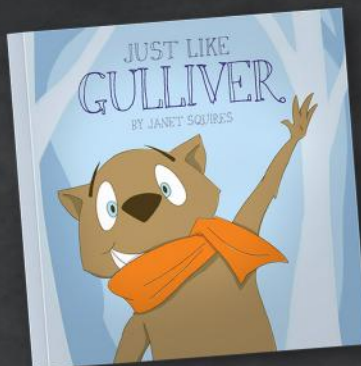
“Right now, with almost sixteen active stories, I am juggling writing, editing, and marketing well over forty hours a week. I’ve also learned to use Artificial Intelligence as an assistant since my resources are limited.”

“I have one young adult book in the works now—a sequel to *A Candle Snuffed*—that brings one of my favorite characters, Lacey Fletcher, full circle. I’ve also written three books for middle graders about a fictitious inn in New England that includes plenty of haunting and humor. I call it *The Minutemen’s Inn* series. There might be a compilation book coming.”

“Outside of that, what I most enjoy are friends and family. And decorating for Christmas,” she adds. “I love traveling with my son, and I’m joyfully pleased when someone tells me they love my books. The biggest reward for me is spreading joy.”

For more information about Diane Green and her books, visit [dcgbooks.com](http://dcgbooks.com). ●

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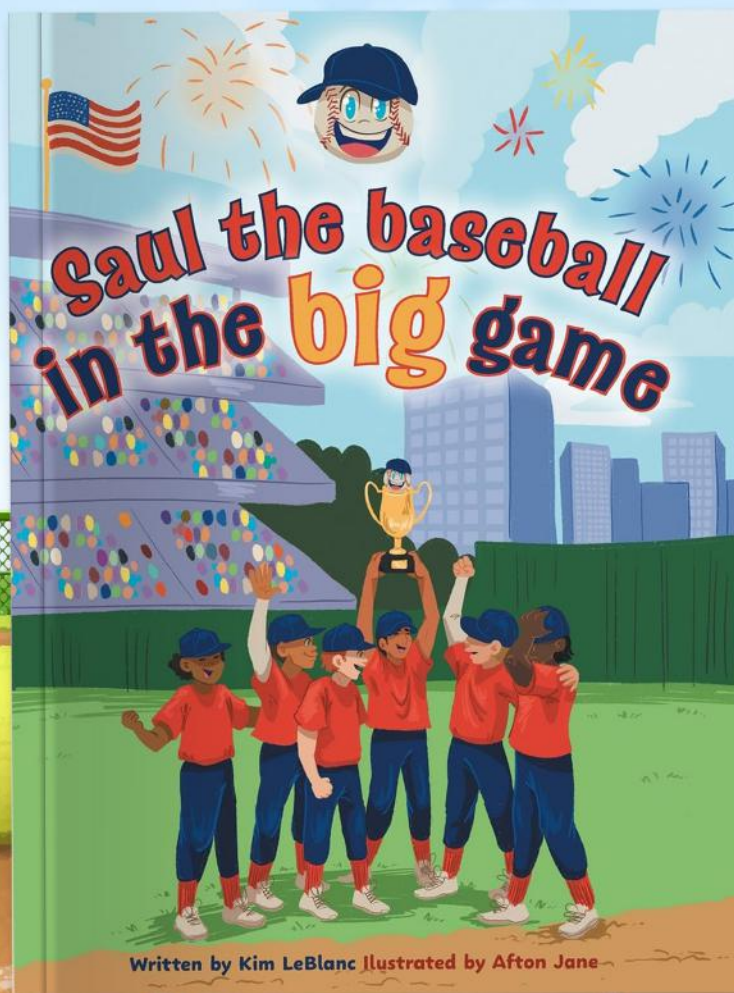
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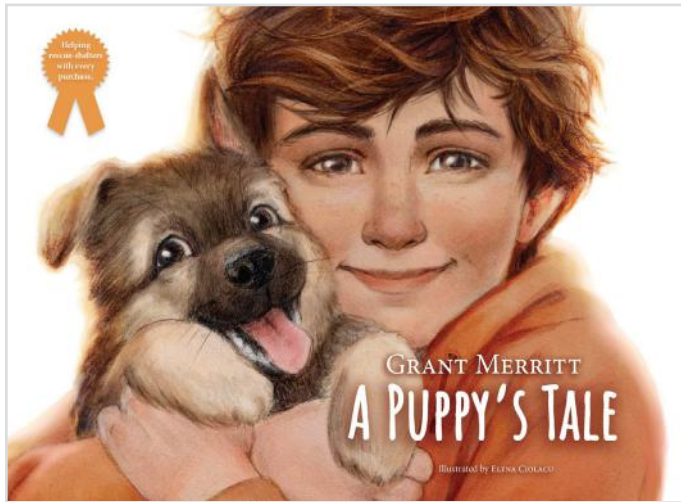
# Grant Merritt

Pens a Touching Tale of Puppy Love

by Raven Howell

Grant Merritt's book, *A Puppy's Tale*, is receiving significant acclamations and star reviews, including being named the Grand Prize Winner of the 2025 Purple Dragonfly Book Awards. "It feels amazing, but I think it's still sinking in," Grant tells me from his home in Los Angeles. "My version of celebrating right now is sharing the news with as many people as I can and connecting with readers who are discovering the book. Honestly, the best part of this celebration is seeing how families are responding to the story and knowing it's finding its way into new homes."





*A Puppy's Tale* is about a boy named Evan who meets a German Shepherd puppy, Achilles, and their subsequent journey growing up together. Grant elaborates, “It shows all the little moments that make the bond between a kid and his dog so special. I was inspired by my own dog, Achilles, that I had for 13 years. Writing the book became my way of honoring him and sharing the love, joy, and even the loss that comes with having a pet.”

“From the beginning, I wanted the book to have a connection to rescue organizations. I’ve worked with Wags & Walks, and I’m still figuring out the best ways to give back, but I’d also love to get involved on a volunteer level moving forward.”

“I think my book brings something almost everyone can connect with. At its heart, it’s about the joy and bond between a kid and his dog, which is something so many families have experienced. Children are drawn to the fun and warmth of the story and the illustrations, even if they don’t fully understand the idea of loss yet. For parents, it can also be healing because it opens the door to those deeper emotions in a gentle way.”

Grant concedes that a lot of the story came from real life. “Evan is actually my middle name, and even though I didn’t get Achilles until I was 21, the character represents my inner child in a way. There are also small details throughout the story that come straight from our life together, like Achilles wearing his red bandana, his love for chasing squirrels, and the way he used to deflate my footballs and basketballs. The mom in the book is based on my own mom’s likeness, and the boy and Achilles both carry our real traits, too. There are plenty of little Easter eggs like that sprinkled in, which makes the story feel very personal while still being universal.”

“It felt important to write *A Puppy's Tale* when I did because the loss of Achilles was still so fresh. Writing through grief was tough but also very cathartic. Putting the story on paper gave me a way to honor him and keep his memory alive, but it also became a creative outlet that helped me work through my emotions. I didn’t set out thinking it would be healing, but that’s exactly what it turned into. And in the process, it turned into something that could connect with other people who have felt the same bond with their pets.”

The loss of Achilles happened in May of 2024. Grant says he had accomplished a fair amount of writing in college and through his acting training, but didn’t know he wanted to be a children’s book author until Achilles passed. “That loss really pushed me to put something on paper. It felt like a creative and healing way to honor him, and that’s when the idea for *A Puppy's Tale* really came to life.”

Grant grew up in Texas and recalls the heat of the long summers. “But it was also a great place to grow up with wide open spaces, sports, good food, and a strong sense of community. It gave me a lot of amazing friends, good memories, and a solid foundation before I made the move out to California.”

“During childhood, I wanted to be a professional baseball player, then a football player, and eventually a working actor. I still act, and now I’ve added children’s book author to the mix.”

“*Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch was a favorite book of mine growing up. It’s such a touching story and one that really sticks with you even as you get older. I even have a copy my mom gifted me years back with a sweet note she wrote inside, and I still keep it out.”

Now that he’s written his own touching story with *A Puppy's Tale*, Grant says the biggest reward has been hearing from people who connected with the book. “When someone tells me it reminded them of their own dog, or a parent shares that their child loves the book, that means more than anything. People tend to open up to me right away once they know what the book is about or after reading it, and those conversations have been special. Knowing that something I created in memory of Achilles is now part of other families’ lives has been the most meaningful part of this whole journey.”

Readers are praising the book’s illustrations, saying how effectively they capture the bond between boy and dog. “Elena Ciolacu is an incredible illustrator, and I feel really lucky to



have worked with her. She's not only talented and creative, but also extremely professional and easy to communicate with, which was important since we were working from different parts of the world. What stood out the most was her ability to really understand my vision and then bring her own ideas to the table in ways that made the story even stronger. She has a gift for capturing emotion on the page, which is so important for a story like this. From the playful moments to the more tender ones, she was able to translate the heart of the story into art that kids and adults can feel connected to."

"My illustration notes were extremely detailed because I wanted to give Elena a clear sense of what I was trying to achieve with the story. At the same time, I always left space for her creativity to come through. Certain pages had details that needed to be very specific, and she understood that right away. She also had a natural intuition for the words and the emotion behind them, which made the collaboration feel

effortless. I enjoyed playing with the fact that it's told from the dog's point of view. Sometimes the text says one thing, but the illustrations show the opposite, which adds a touch of humor. It really felt like my vision and her artistry worked hand in hand."

Grant hopes *A Puppy's Tale* finds its way into more classrooms and family homes. "I'd love for it to be a story that kids grow up with, one that sparks conversations about love, friendship, and pets. And if I could dream big, I'd love to see it translated into different languages so it could reach children and families all around the world. Maybe one day it could even travel onto the television screen or the big screen as a series or a film. That would be pretty special."

The heartwarming personalities of dogs beg for fun interpretations. "If German Shepherds had three rules, I think the first would be 'always outsmart your human.' I used to

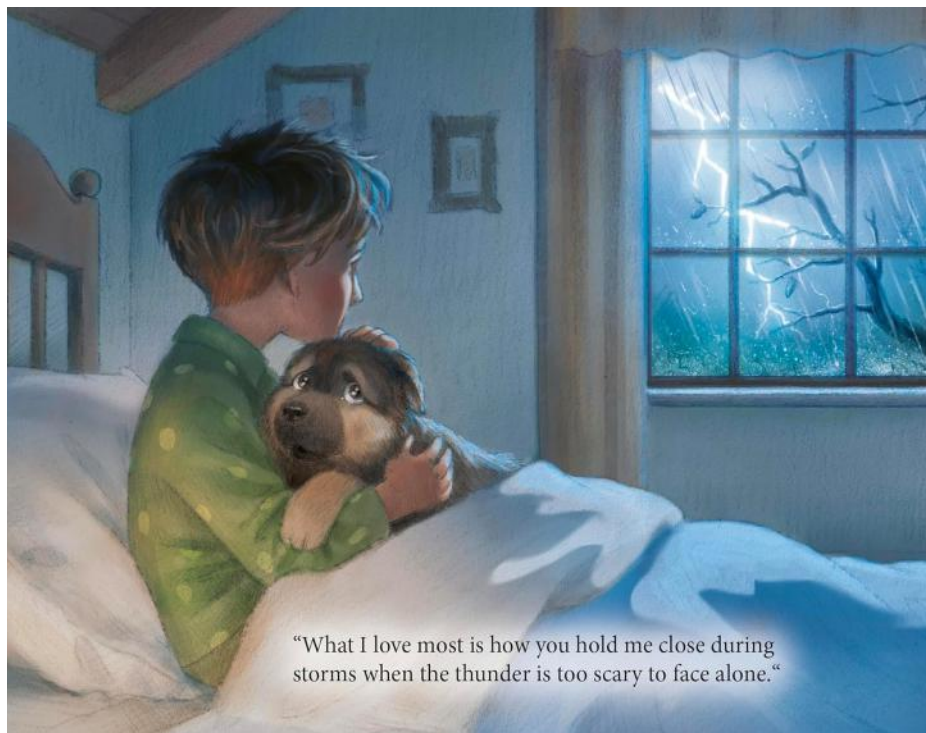
joke that Achilles was the best actor in Hollywood because he was so smart it sometimes felt like he was manipulating me. The second would be ‘never say no to affection,’ since they are big softies at heart. And the third would probably be ‘protect your family,’ because as playful and loving as they are, they’re also loyal and protective to the core.”

“I see *A Puppy’s Tale* as the foundation for a series, with this book being the main story we branch off from. Evan and Achilles would remain the heart of it, and I already have ideas for several other books that would continue their journey in different ways. I’m excited about where it could go and I’m looking forward to bringing more of their adventures to life.”

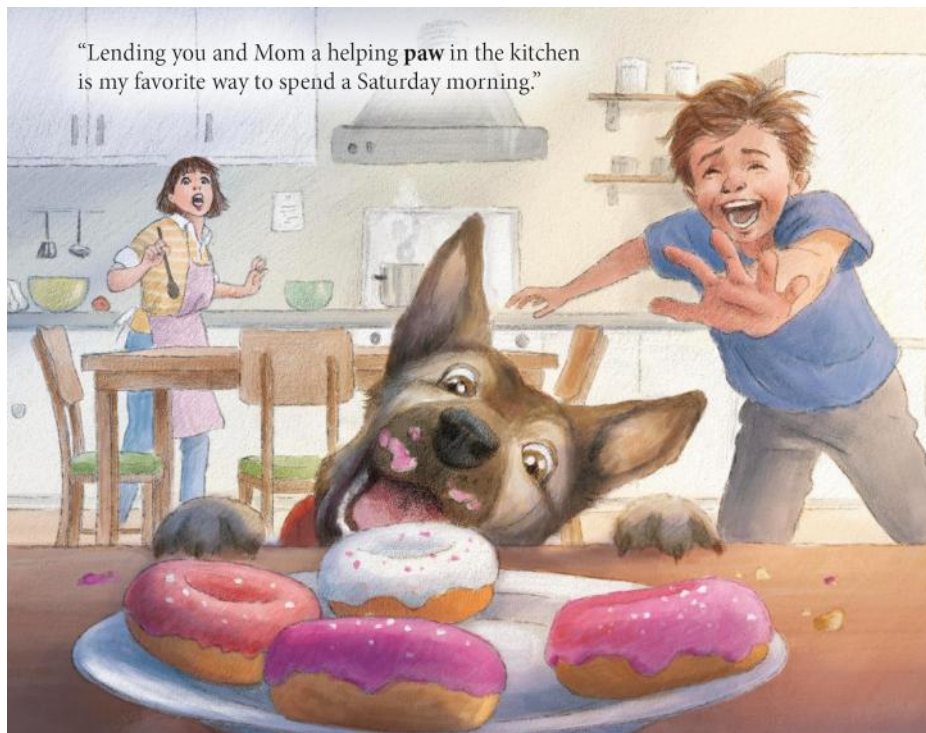
“In my career, I’d say discipline and self-motivation have helped me the most. Playing sports growing up and then football in college taught me the importance of hard work and consistency. I’ve always been ambitious and willing to set my mind to something and see it through, and that mindset has carried over into both my acting and writing. I’d also add empathy, because being able to connect with people on a personal level has opened a lot of doors and made the journey more meaningful.”

“These days, I look forward to the simple things, like spending time with family and friends, and continuing to grow both as an author and an actor. I also look forward to connecting with new readers and seeing how *A Puppy’s Tale* continues to reach people. That kind of feedback and connection keeps me excited about what is ahead.”

For more information about Grant Merritt and his work, visit [apuppystalebook.com](http://apuppystalebook.com). ●



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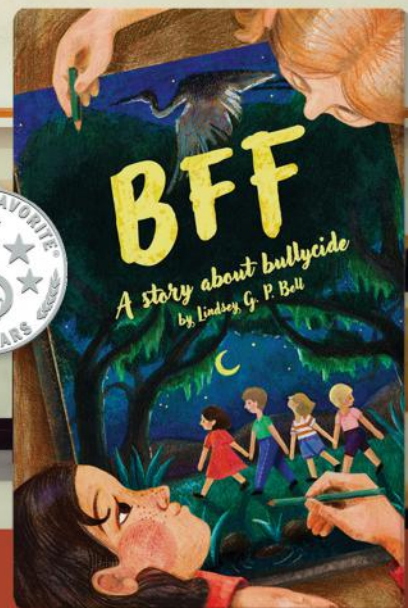
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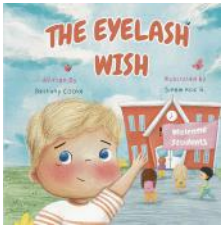
New girl Abby spends the summer rescuing an injured heron with three local kids, but when school begins, she's shocked to learn her new BFF is a bullied outcast...who eventually takes her own life. BFF attempts to show that suicide is never the answer. If you're feeling hopeless, tell everyone...until someone hears you.

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## FALL READING LIST

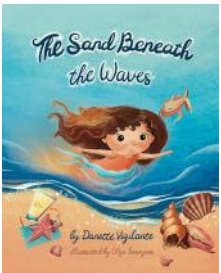


### **The Eyelash Wish**

by Bethany Cooke

It's the first day of school ... and one little boy isn't so sure he's ready. But when his kind teacher introduces a simple, silly game, everything starts to feel a little easier—and a lot more fun.

This sweet, rhyming story gently reassures young children that it's okay to feel nervous—and that school might hold more joy than they ever imagined. *The Eyelash Wish* is perfect for preschool and kindergarten readiness. Signed copies available on [bethanycookebooks.com](http://bethanycookebooks.com).

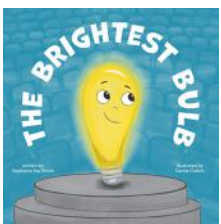


### **The Sand Beneath the Waves**

by Danette Vigilante

What secrets hide beneath the waves? Discover them in *The Sand Beneath the Waves*, a lyrical picture book that reveals the surprising life of sand and the sea creatures who depend on it. Filled with facts and imagination, it invites young readers to dive into a world of

discovery. Ideal for grades PreK–4, it blends engaging text with rich illustrations, making science fun and unforgettable while sparking curiosity long after storytime ends.

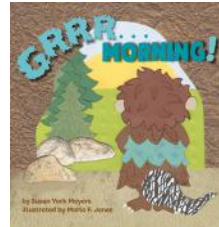


### **The Brightest Bulb**

by Stephanie Kay Smith

Join Flicker, a small light bulb tired of waiting to be useful, as he embarks on a courageous adventure to find where he belongs. Along the way, children will learn important lessons about self-

acceptance, perseverance, and finding their place in the world. *v* is a brilliant tale that shines with wisdom and heart—perfect for bedtime reading, classroom discussions about self-worth, or anyone who has ever felt like they don't quite fit in.

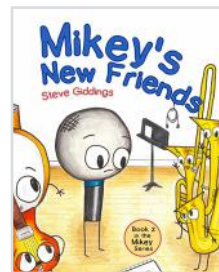


### **Grrr... Morning!**

by Susan York Meyers, Marla F. Jones

“Grrr morning,” Granny says. “Rise and growl.” Woolsey is excited. It's the first day of school for this little monster! But as they walk to the school raft, he begins to worry. What if the teacher

asks me a question and I don't know the answer? What if no one plays with me at recess? Join Woolsey as he bravely faces his first day of school! The fun follow-up to the award-winning picture book, “Grrr...Night!”

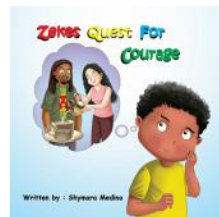


### **Mikey's New Friends**

by Steve Giddings

Back-to-school pick: *Mikey's New Friends* is the second book in the *Mikey* series, following *Mikey the Microphone* as he explores big feelings, belonging, and collaborating with new friends. This rhyming tale fuels SEL-rich conversations while inviting music-

making. Teacher-friendly extras include ready-to-use lesson plans, discussion prompts, literacy tie-ins, and music activities—plus access to the free *Mikey's Beats* rhythm app. Perfect for teachers, librarians, and families seeking empathy-building stories that get kids reading, talking, and making music.

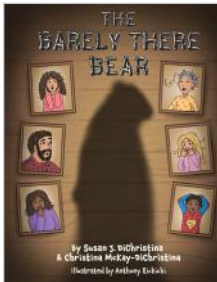


### **Zeke's Quest for Courage**

by Shymara Medina

In *Zeke's Quest for Courage*, young Zeke is nervous about his upcoming spelling test. His family encourages him with love and support, but his fears linger. Suddenly, Zeke is swept into a magical

adventure where he encounters a tricky troll who challenges his bravery. Through determination, Zeke defeats the troll, discovers a hidden courage potion, and learns that true strength comes from within. A heartwarming tale of courage, confidence, and believing in yourself.



### ***The Barely There Bear***

by Susan J. DiChristina  
& Christina McKay-DiChristina

A family is on summer vacation. Sun and fun by day, but by night, madcap disarray! Bedlam reigns as Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa, sisters, aunt, and cousin ... EVERYONE shares the bewildering nighttime chaos. Who hears

the ruckus? Who hears the bear? Who calls the police? Is the bear up the stair? *The Barely There Bear*—a four-time award winner!—is a zany, befuddling whodunit where early readers ask, “Was the bear really there?”



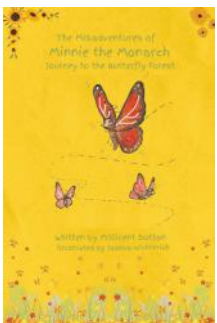
### ***The Biggest Bubble Ever!***

by Stephen Mangels

It all began when three children, Dylan, Emma, and Josh were sitting on the curb one beautiful summer day. They were so bored trying to think of

things to do. Then Dylan gave each

friend something that changed their boredom to laughter and adventure because of one little sticky thing! This is a wonderful story about friendship, fantasy, challenges, and exhilarating good times. In the end, they can't wait to tell their parents about it!

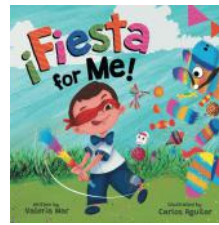


### ***The Misadventures of Minnie the Monarch: Journey to the Butterfly Forest***

by Millicent Sutton

Embark on the journey with Minnie, a miniature butterfly, who sets out on a 3000-mile trek in search of her kaleidoscope family. Get ready for a page-turning chapter book filled with colorful illustrations, unforgettable characters, and exciting twists that will

keep kids reading from cover to cover and is sure to engage even the most reluctant reader! This heartwarming story of hope and perseverance will inspire young minds to dream big and never give up!

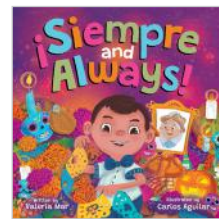


### ***¡Fiesta for Me!***

by Valeria Mar

What does honoring yourself, your family, and your culture look like to you? *¡Fiesta for Me!* is a joyful story about embracing everything that makes each of us special and unique. Follow

Zac as he celebrates himself, his family, their traditions, and Latino culture. A wonderful story encouraging children to feel proud, confident, and joyful in who they are.

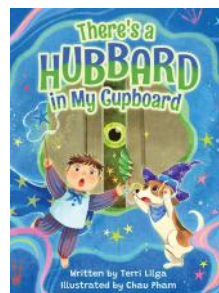


### ***¡Siempre and Always!***

by Valeria Mar

Discover the magic of Halloween and Día de los Muertos with Zac and his grandpa's timeless connection! As Zac remembers his grandpa through cherished fall traditions, and the vibrant celebration of

Día de los Muertos, he learns that love lives on in every memory. *¡Siempre and Always!* is a heartwarming story offering comfort, joy, and a reminder that the bonds of love never fade.

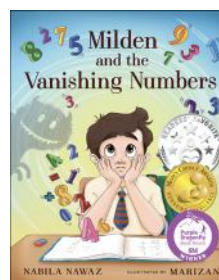


### ***There's a Hubbard in My Cupboard***

by Terri Lige

When a boy and his dog, Beatnik, suspect something strange is happening inside their kitchen cupboard, they decide to investigate—only to find a peculiarly messy situation when they open the cupboard doors! Collaborating to chase the mischievous creature away that

created the havoc draws them into a whimsical adventure, where their imaginations and quick wits become the best resources they have to work with. But do they succeed in chasing this wily creature away forever?

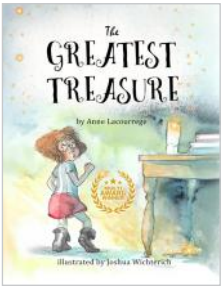


### ***Milden and the Vanishing Numbers***

by Nabila Nawaz

When Milden stands at the board and wishes he could disappear ... the numbers do instead! Where did they go? Join Milden on a magical adventure filled with clues, patterns, and a Number Monster who is afraid of math, too. Together, they discover that math

isn't just boring drills. It can be full of fun and adventure. A heartwarming story for ages 4 to 7, with helpful tips to turn math worries into confidence and curiosity.

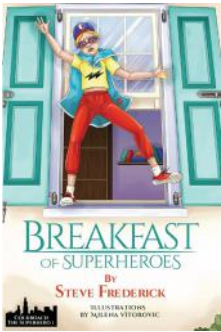


**The Greatest Treasure**

by Anne Lacourge

A lonely child living in a house by the banks of the Mississippi River. The house is mysterious, with a closed door between two apartments. The child hears a voice encouraging her to open the door, but it is locked. Ultimately, the key is found. The child is scared to

open the door, but at the same time, her curiosity is piqued. What is trapped behind the door?

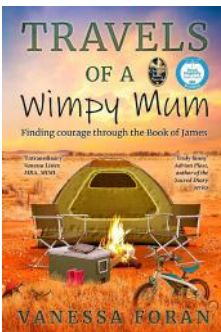


**Breakfast of Superheroes**

by Steve Frederick

This first book in the award-winning *Cockroach the Superhero* series introduces Kyle Alexander, a clumsy, timid kid who suddenly gains superpowers. Though he fears heights and flights and fights, he faces his fears when confronting nasty criminals. Packed with humor, heart, grit, and adventure, this middle-grade

story shows readers that courage isn't about being fearless, but acting despite fear. It inspires kids to discover their hidden strengths and do the right thing, even when it's hard.

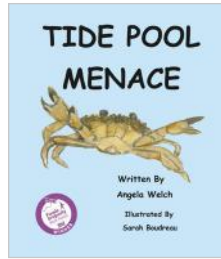


**Travels of a Wimpy Mum**

by Vanessa Foran

While Jane wrangles her family away on a trip around rural Australia, she dreams of fourteen weeks where every day is a Saturday. Instead, parenting challenges are compounded, camp toilets need digging, and she must pack the car again and again like a reluctant Tetris master. Raw, luminous, and at

times hilarious, *Travels of a Wimpy Mum* is a piercingly relatable memoir, essential reading for anyone muddling out their faith in the relentlessness of family life.

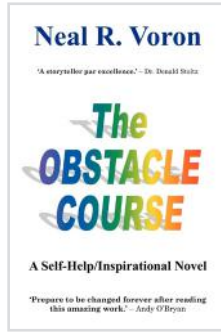


**Tide Pool Menace**

by Angela Welch

New Hampshire has twelve miles of seacoast and beautiful beaches where tide pools form when the tide goes out. These pools are wonderful places to explore and discover various forms of sea life native to the New Hampshire

coast. However, there are green invaders that are now menacing our tide pool natives. See the tide pool community and discover the green menace that endangers the inhabitants.

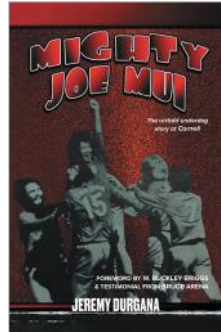


**The Obstacle Course**

by Neal R. Voron

In this fun, fast-paced novel for ages 10 to 100, an old, but untraditional teacher, Dr. Ernest Acton, takes his students on an adventure toward self-growth and personal accountability for success in the "Obstacle Course" of life. The story has been lauded by Sharol Brunner, an educator, as "the 'classroom' experience

of a lifetime....this book will give you simple insight into some of life's toughest ... greatest lessons."



**Mighty Joe Mui:**

**The Untold Underdog Story at Cornell**

by Jeremy Durgana

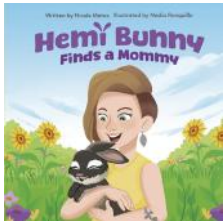
From his experience of living in China's poorest region to playing Division I soccer under the bright lights of the NCAA, Joe Mui shares his compelling story of perseverance and tenacity. From his late introduction to English to his acceptance into Cornell

University, Mui reflects on how his humble origins forged him into one of the greatest underdog sports stories yet to be told until now. Written by actor, teacher, and best-selling author Jeremy Durgana.



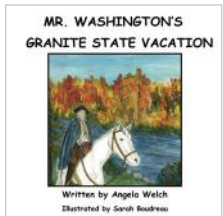
**Dax to the Max:  
Blah Blah Blobs vs. Power Pods**  
by Scott Feld

Dax, a typical kid, is having some Stink Think (negative self-talk) creating Blah Blah Blobs-Yikes! Along comes MAX, Dax's Inner Super Power. He shows Dax (and you) how to Power Think which creates Power Pods, the only thing strong enough to defeat the pesky Blobs-Woo-Hoo! It's an empowerment, confidence-building adventure written for kids but useful to all of us! Come join Dax and MAX and let's all Power-UP together!



**Hemi Bunny Finds a Mommy**  
by Nicole Metas

Families don't always look the same or come from the same place. Hemi is here to remind us that every family is unique and special in their own way. Some are created through adoption or fostering, some are blended through marriages or partnerships, and some families evolve as time goes on. You might not look or sound like anyone in your family, but that's okay! All that matters is the love you share.



**Mr. Washington's Granite State Vacation**  
by Angela Welch

In the fall of 1789, George Washington decided to visit the northern states to talk about the new Constitution. He wanted to meet and listen to the people he met along the way. During his trip, he crossed the Merrimack River in Massachusetts, heading for Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the capital of the state at that time. Come along as President Washington takes his Granite State vacation.

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**The Secret of One-Eyed Cogburn,  
The Dreaded Pirate Captain**  
by Diane Merrill Wigginton

Three adventurous friends—diverse in background but united in spirit—spend their summer in a magical tree fort that whisks them into daring journeys. This time, they set sail across enchanted seas and discover a treasure chest aboard their ship. When the fearsome Captain Cogburn and his rowdy crew arrive to reclaim it, the children strike a clever bargain. With courage, kindness, and a pinky-swear, they keep the pirate's secret, restore his dignity, and earn an unexpected treasure of their own.

## Join Patches on His Journey!

Follow the inspiring adventure of a guide dog named Patches in training! Patches' mission is to become a devoted guide to Sam, his blind future owner, as they start navigating the bustling city together.

This book not only captivates young minds but also aligns seamlessly with social studies standards of empowering children to grasp essential signs and signals during emergencies.



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MONSTERS  
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***Dora and the Search  
for Sol Dorado***

**Grade: B**

reviewed by Nick Spake

*Dora the Explorer* has been one of Nickelodeon's most lucrative cash cows for almost twenty-five years. Despite not growing up with the show, I was pleasantly surprised by the 2019 live-action feature, *Dora and the Lost City of Gold*. What seemed like a film exclusively for the Nick Jr. crowd wound up being subversive and self-aware, proving just as much fun for adults. One could even argue it predated the *Barbie* movie, embracing the source material while evolving it for an older demographic. At its core was a star-making turn from Isabela Merced, who has gone on to play Dina in *The Last of Us* and *Hawkgirl* in the DC Universe.

Given Merced's busy schedule, it's not surprising that she didn't return for *Dora and the Search for Sol Dorado*. Neither do director James Bobin nor co-writer Nicholas Stoller, who previously worked on 2011's *The Muppets*. With a new cast and creative team, *Search for Sol Dorado* is essentially a reboot. Or maybe *Dora the Explorer* is just like the older *James Bond* movies, which didn't follow much continuity between Connery, Moore, and Brosnan. It might not reach the same heights as *Lost City of Gold*, where the writing was on a whole other level. Yet, it's nonetheless a charming adventure for kids with enough entertainment value for adults.

Like Merced, Samantha Lorraine (*You Are So Not Invited to My Bat Mitzvah*) is a charismatic Dora who quickly wins the audience over. Similar to Joy from *Inside Out*, Dora is always trying to put a positive spin on even the most dire circumstances. Even Dora struggles to find a silver lining when she loses her beloved Map. Dora refers to her Map and Backpack as if they were real people. Objects don't talk here like in the cartoon, although Dora still has a monkey named Boots, who only she can understand. She also has a cousin named Diego (Jacob Rodriguez), who gets her a job at a jungle amusement park. This makes way for a clever *Wild Thornberrys* reference.

While the animals at the park are fake, Dora stumbles upon a real bracelet that leads her to the legendary wishing star, Sol Dorado. Diego accompanies Dora on her journey along with two siblings (Mariana Garzón Toro, Acston Luca Porto). Following them is the villainous explorer Camila (Daniella Pineda), who seeks to restore her reputation after an incident similar to Gerald's opening of Al Capone's vaults. Although there aren't as many laughs this time around, director Alberto Belli brings a lively sense of adventure akin to *Young Indiana Jones*. It might

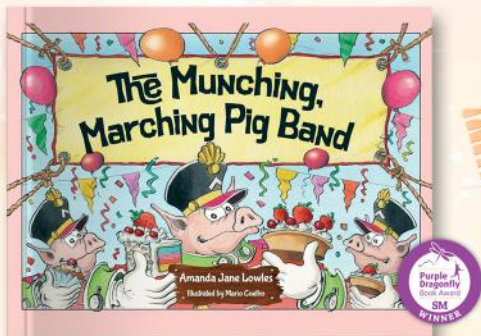


be more kid-focused than *Lost City of Gold*, but *Sol Dorado* maintains an edge with pits of skeletons and henchmen falling to their doom.

*Dora and the Search for Sol Dorado* is best described as *Legends of the Hidden Temple* meets a Nickelodeon sitcom. That might sound like a backhanded compliment, although as someone who was raised on Nickelodeon game shows and Nickcoms, I assure you it's praise. While it doesn't have the biggest budget, the production design is inventive and draped in an old-school atmosphere. It's in the spirit of classic treasure-hunting movies, even if the treasure isn't what matters here. It's about what the characters learn along the way, and the film does have a good moral about being your own map. It's not the first film, but in a sea of so many lifeless live-action adaptations of animated properties, *Sol Dorado* is a small gem. ●

**Nick Spake** is the author of *Bright & Shiny: A History of Animation at Award Shows Volume I*. For more information on the book, please visit [CartoonContender.com](http://CartoonContender.com).

**Join the Jellies and Cakes,  
the Buns and the Bakes,  
and Follow the Fun!**



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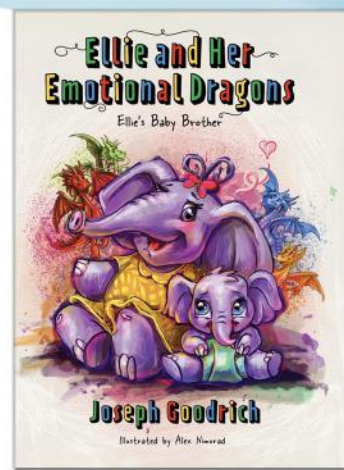
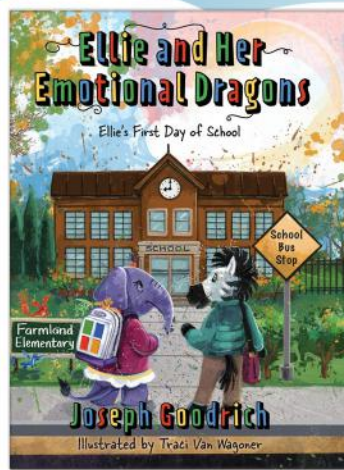
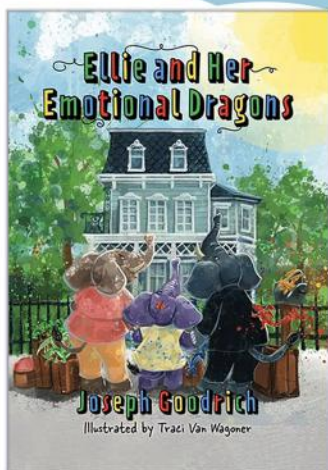


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JUDY NEWMAN LIFE OF A READER

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# The Most Wonderful Time of the Year

by Judy Newman



There are lots of things going on in America today. But for me, one of the most wonderful—and important events—is that kids in America are heading back to school.

Back-to-school season is a fresh start for children who are moving into a new class. And for their teachers and

administrators who are (mostly) buoyant with all the possibilities ahead for the new students in their classrooms. And for their families, who are excited to see what new skills their children will learn and how they will grow from now through the end of the school year.

For me, every new school year is an opportunity to set the following three goals:

- Every child must have yearlong access to choose and own their own books and develop their **choosing muscles** and self-confidence as readers.
- Every classroom teacher needs the resources to support their students' literacy development, which comes *both* from teaching children how to read *and* giving them the opportunity to practice their reading with books they choose that **motivate them**.
- All families and caregivers need relatable, accessible resources and affirmations to support their children's literacy development, regardless of their own levels of literacy.

I have worked in children's book publishing—specifically with classroom-to-home book club programs—for decades. Based on research and a two-year pilot in every US state (plus Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico) with 48,000 students, I know that Scholastic's new program, the United States of Readers (USoR), can achieve these three goals in a sustainable, scalable way. And we can do it quickly because we know the program works.

Once the USoR is adopted by a school, it serves as a foundation that attracts other programs and interventions that support the literacy growth and overall well-being of every child in the school equally. No one is left out.

At the United States of Readers, which we developed at Scholastic, and is delivered by a new nonprofit **Impact Reading**, we are moving fast to bring this program to the 10 million children living in poverty and attending under-resourced schools in the US. We need to act with urgency because we don't want to waste any more time.



All kids need to learn how to read, through the Science of Reading or whatever curriculum works for their school. But once they learn how to read, they need to practice their reading with titles they choose that motivate them to read. We know from extensive research that when kids choose their own books—books which interest them and in which they see themselves reflected—they read more.

Sending best wishes for a happy, healthy, and successful new school year filled with lots of brand-new books. It is indeed the most wonderful time of the year.

If you are interested in joining our movement, please contact me at [judynewman@impactreading.org](mailto:judynewman@impactreading.org). •

Judy Newman, Chief Impact Officer, Scholastic.



# SPOT THE DIFFERENCE!

**MARCEL**, what have you been up to?!

Can you spot what's changed? Write down the **5** differences below!

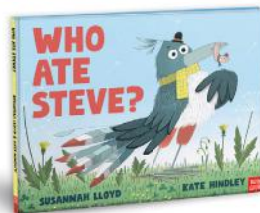


- 1 .....
- 2 .....
- 3 .....
- 4 .....
- 5 .....



**ANSWERS:**

1. Marcel's hat band is yellow.
2. Steve has gone.
3. Marcel's scarf has a different pattern.
4. Marcel's tail feathers are purple.
5. Marcel's napkin has gone.



## WHO ATE STEVE?

SUSANNAH LLOYD  
& KATE HINDLEY

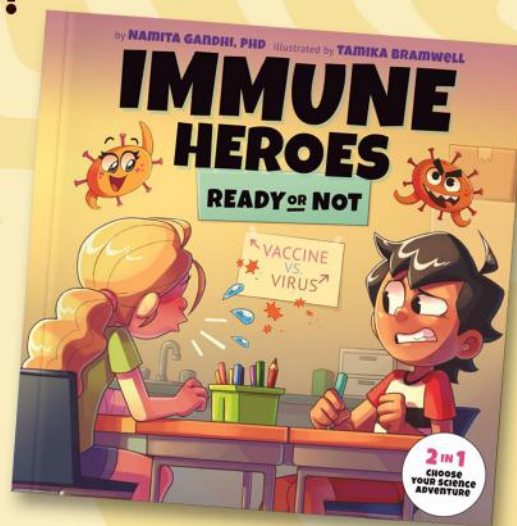
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## Turn the page, choose your path, and let the discovery begin!

Dive into a choose-your-own-science-adventure inside Mayu's body—will his immune cells be ready when a virus attacks? Meet the superhero power of the immune system, featuring Helper T cells, Memory B cells, and antibodies along the way!

Perfect for ages 5–10, this story combines real science with a kid-friendly exploration of the immune system's power, sparking endless questions and curiosity.



[www.immuneheroes.com](http://www.immuneheroes.com)

Available on Amazon.com



## Does Halloween Have You Spooked?



### A Heartwarming Tale About Braving Your Fears!

Join Kai on a heartwarming journey through the changing seasons as he learns to embrace the magic of Halloween. Filled with vivid rhymes and whimsical illustrations, this delightful story celebrates friendship in unlikely places and the courage it takes to face your fears.

*364 Days Until Halloween* is a perfect read-aloud for:

- Children ages 4-10 who are nervous about Halloween
- Parents looking for a fun and relatable story about overcoming fears
- Teachers and caregivers searching for a charming book to share during Halloween festivities
- Anyone who needs a reminder that even the smallest light can shine brightly



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## BOOK REVIEWS



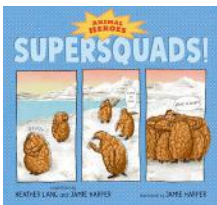
### **Wriggle and Buzz: My First Book of Bugs**

by Simon Mole, Adam Ming (Candlewick)

Reviewer: Lindsay Moretti

An entertaining and vibrant introduction to the world of bugs, this playful collection of poems brings the world of crawlies to life. Colorful illustrations and witty verse offer

readers an exploration of the important roles bugs play in our ecosystem and celebrates their diversity. Engaging back matter extends the learning, explaining the difference between bugs and insects and offering practical tips for supporting these critters in our environment. (Ages 2-5)



### **Animal Heroes: Supersquads!**

by Heather Lang, Jamie Harper (Candlewick)

Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

For kids (and adults) interested in animals in the wild, this comics-style book offers an engaging presentation

about animal squads and their communication, leadership, organization, diversity, and unity. You'll learn that spiny lobsters take turns at the front of the line when navigating to warmer waters. Ostriches use their keen eyesight and team up with zebras and their excellent sense of smell to create a defense against predators. Chickadees add extra "dees" to their calls to warn their flock. Complete with creative illustrations, interesting animal facts, and resources in the back. (Ages 3-7)



### **Oh Dear, Look What I Got!**

by Michael Rosen, Helen Oxenbury (Candlewick)

Reviewer: Lindsay Moretti

Another delightful read-aloud from the beloved creators of *We're Going on a Bear*

*Hunt*. Sent on a simple errand to buy a carrot, the main character returns with an unexpected—and increasingly wild—menagerie of animals instead. With Rosen's signature rhythmic repetition and Oxenbury's charming, expressive illustrations, this playful tale overflows with humor and heart. (Ages 3-7)



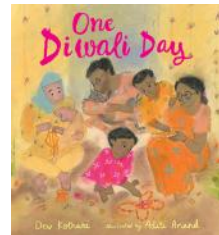
### **Sometimes You Find a Dragon**

by Viviane Schwarz (Candlewick)

Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

There's creativity in all of us ... and there are many ways to express ourselves through words, art, and more. Like when a dragon (twig) falls to the ground after a storm, the first step is to figure

out what it needs and wants, and then put your creative energy to use. There are dragons (different forms of art and expression) in every paintbrush, musical instrument, dance step, and more. A wonderful message for all kids (and adults) to give their creativity a try. (Ages 3-7)



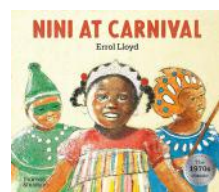
### **One Diwali Day**

by Dev Kothari, Aditi Anand (Candlewick)

Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

Diwali is the Hindu festival of lights, and little Ronak is excited for all the joyous activities that it brings: There are rangolis to draw with colorful powders

and chalk, new outfits to wear, lots of sweets to eat, and bright fireworks to light up the sky. Little readers can experience the excitement with him and even learn to make their own Diwali Pedas using the instructions in the back. (Ages 4-6)



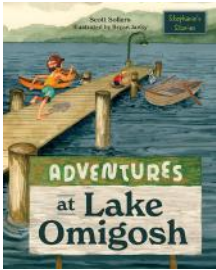
### **Nini at Carnival**

by Errol Lloyd (Thames & Hudson)

Reviewer: Lindsay Moretti

Originally published in 1978, *Nini at Carnival* is a timeless celebration of friendship and community. When

Carnival day arrives, Nini feels left out and disappointed as she has no costume to wear. But with the help of a "fairy godmother," she discovers the magic of Carnival isn't just in the costumes, but in the spirit of celebration itself. Filled with rich color and textured illustrations, this classic story continues to bring joy to its readers. (Ages 4-8)



**Adventures at Lake Omigosh**

by Scott Sollers  
(Mascot Kids)

Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

For many years, kids and adults have flocked to Lake Omigosh in New Hampshire, where some claim to have witnessed a mysterious creature drifting on the lake. When best friends Felix and Harry arrive at summer camp on the lake, they're super excited to go biking, hiking, and canoeing ... so excited that they ignore camp rules and take the canoe out right before a big storm arrives. See what happens (and learn a lesson about following rules) when their canoe flips over, stranding the boys in the lake. (Ages 4-8)

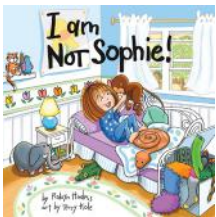


**My Brave Friend: Emma and Noah Face Cancer Together**

by Suzanne Stone, Brett Fox  
(Mascot Kids)

Reviewer: Lindsay Moretti

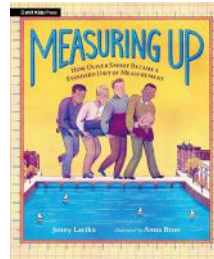
*My Brave Friend* is a heartfelt tribute to the power of friendship during life's toughest moments. When Noah learns his friend Emma has cancer, his initial fear gives way to understanding and support. With clear, kid-friendly language, the book explains what cancer is and how it affects people, helping young readers process a difficult topic. This story thoughtfully reminds us that what brave kids need most is love, empathy, and support. (Ages 4-8)



**I am NOT Sophie!**

by Robyn Hodess, Terry Kole (Mascot Kids)  
Reviewer: Lindsay Moretti

A joyful celebration of imagination and playful identity. Sophie insists she's not herself, but rather a different wild animal each day of the week. From a roaring tiger to a chomping alligator, her mom happily joins in on the fun. This spirited story captures the magic of pretend play. Vibrant and energetic, it's sure to spark laughter and inspire young readers to unleash their own creativity. (Ages 5-8)



**Measuring Up: How Oliver Smoot Became a Standard Unit of Measurement**

by Jenny Lacika, Anna Bron  
(MIT Kids Press)

Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

What's a smoot? The true story of an MIT student and his classmates will give readers the answer. At five-foot-seven-inches, Oliver Smoot was selected by his student friends to be used to measure the length of a bridge that runs over the Charles River from Boston to their college in Cambridge ... one lying-down Oliver Smoot at a time. See how Ollie became famous for his height and what became of the smoot. Entertaining and informative with a unique presentation to get kids interested in mathematics. Learn more about smoots, MIT pranks, and unusual measurements in the back of the book. (Ages 5-8)



**Some of Us: A Story of Citizenship and the United States**

by Rajani LaRocca, Huy Voun Lee  
(Little, Brown)

Reviewer: Lindsay Moretti

A thoughtful nonfiction exploration of the many paths to American citizenship. With clarity and heart, the book highlights the diverse journeys people undertake in search of opportunity, and the various processes they navigate to become citizens. Vibrant illustrations add depth and warmth to the narrative. It is a powerful message, both timely and truthful. Whether born on this soil or choosing it as home ... we are all Americans. (Ages 5-9)



**Unicorn Post**

by Emma Yarlett (Candlewick)  
Reviewer: Lindsay Moretti

Engaging and full of heart, this delightful novelty book invites readers to open letters and join a young girl on her quest to find the perfect home for a unicorn. From pet shops to grand castles, each stop on the journey captures the magic of friendship, determination, and the joy of finding a place where you truly belong. With delightful interactive elements, this is a warm, enchanting read that's sure to captivate young readers. (Ages 5-9)

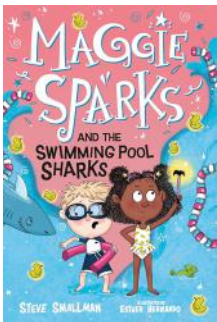


***Galaxy Mapper: The Luminous Discoveries of Astrophysicist Hélène Courtois***

by Allie Summers, Sian James

(MIT Kids Press) Reviewer: Deb Greenberg  
Astrophysicist Hélène Courtois, the only woman in her science classes, learned to map the compositions of galaxies.

This book about a contemporary female scientist will fascinate young readers and science enthusiasts interested in the cosmic landscape (and even those who might not yet be interested). With lyrical text, captivating illustrations, and additional interesting information in the back, *Galaxy Mapper* is a wonderful story for all kids. (Ages 5-9)



***Maggie Sparks and the Swimming Pool Sharks***

by Steve Smallman, Esther Hernandez

(Jolly Fish Press) Reviewer: Deb Greenberg  
The curly-haired, freckle-faced witch is up to mischief again in book 2 of the *Maggie Sparks* series. Despite not being allowed to do magic on her own, and especially not weather spells, Maggie not only makes snow for her and best

friend Arthur to play in, she also warms her boots, then falls through the ice and into the freezing water ... which creates a small problem: she can't swim. That's when her mother signs her up for swimming lessons, and the real shenanigans begin. Dive into the magical world of Maggie Sparks, as she uses her powers to help Arthur and to reach the ranks of Sharks swimmers. (Ages 7-11)



***I Am America: Brave Bird at Wounded Knee***

by Rachel Bithell, Eric Freeberg

(North Star Editions)

Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

Patsy Antoine is a young girl in Denver, Colorado in 1973. Her mother is white, and her father is Lakota. When she learns in school about the Battle of Wounded Knee, she realizes it's near the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota,

where her relatives are. They are stuck amid the conflict between American Indian Movement activists and Oglala Lakota tribe members, and federal marshals and FBI agents. Follow Patsy as she gets caught up in the protests, and learn more about the Lakota and U.S. history. Part of the *v* series, which features fictional stories based on important events. (Ages 8-12)



***The Stolen Songbird***

by Judith Eagle, Jo Rioux (Candlewick)

Reviewer: Christine Irvin

Caro's mother often takes off for parts unknown to participate in adventures Caro is never part of. But Caro's mother always comes back, even if sometimes it takes longer for her to do so than others. Until this time. This time, Caro's mother not only disappears,

but no one really knows where she has gone. Caro must go to live with her grouchy great-aunt, someone she barely knows and doesn't like. She also discovers a piece of art hidden in the lining of one of her mother's old suitcases. The combination of a new home, the uncertainty of her future, and the mystery surrounding the artwork thrust Caro into a precarious position. Author Judith Eagle weaves these elements together into a story readers can enjoy. (Ages 8-12)



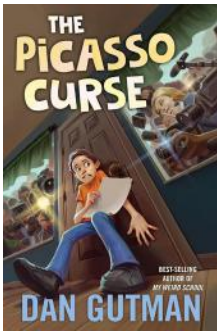
***Bunns Rabbit***

by Alan Barillaro (Candlewick)

Reviewer: Christine Irvin

Bunns Rabbit is born with an abnormality: instead of having long ears, she has two very small ears. Even though they work like regular ears, they don't look like everyone else's. So, of course, every rabbit in the burrow makes fun of her. There is also talk

of ostracizing Bunns and her family. Bunns runs away from home in an effort to protect her family and also with the hopes of finding a magic cure for her ears. What transpires is an unexpected journey of danger and self-discovery that takes Bunns far away from home, where she realizes it's okay to be different and that being different is oftentimes better than being "normal." Alan Barillaro is an award-winning writer, director, and animator. He uses his skills to bring some "magic" to the hearts of both the young and old. (Ages 8-12)



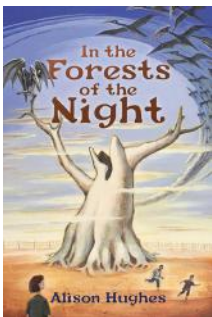
**The Picasso Curse**

by Dan Gutman (Holiday House)

Reviewer: Christine Irvin

Edwin Hodge bought a poster of Kobe Bryant at a local flea market. He paid \$10 for it. He liked the poster but he didn't like the frame it was in. When he removed it from the frame, a piece of paper with what looked like a scribbled doodle fell out. Turns out the "doodle"

was allegedly a Picasso original. Of course, that discovery changed everything—and not necessarily for the better. Author Dan Gutman mixes fact with fiction for an exciting story that, as he says, is like "watching a movie." And just like in a movie (a good one), you never know what is going to happen next. (Ages 8-12)



**In the Forests of the Night**

by Alison Hughes (DCB Young Readers)

Reviewer: Christine Irvin

Ellis lives in an orphanage, one that is anything but bright and sunny. Ellis now has no friends at the orphanage as her only friend, Lora, disappeared about a year ago. Since then, Ellis has been haunted by Lora's last words, spoken in a dream, "We must get to the forests of

the night." Many unexpected twists and turns of the narrative put Ellis in danger, where she must fight for her very survival, all the while trying to figure out what Lora meant. This is a story of a world run by evil people who want to control everything. It's a dark tale, but it has a good ending. (Ages 9-12)



**Sweet, Tart**

by Kara Thom (Candlewick)

Reviewer: Christine Irvin

Halle loves horses and is heartsick after witnessing the death of a racehorse. She has just moved to a new home, which is a short distance from the horse farm where the racehorse that died was raised. Halle meets the farm's

owner and spends time with the other horses there. While she learns to take care of horses, she also learns how to slowly let go of her grief. The author shares with readers not only some trivia about horses but also some insight as to how horses can be used for emotional therapy, all while telling a good story. (Ages 9-12)



**Magicalia**

by Jennifer Bell (Walker Books US)

Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

In the first book in a new fantasy series, after Bitsy's dad is kidnapped by a woman with a giant hamstoceros, Bitsy and her best friend Kosh find themselves in a world of magical creatures, ancient meteorites, strange beasts, and secret organizations,

following clues that take them on an around-the-world adventure in an attempt to rescue him from a mysterious villain. Another imaginative fantasy from internationally bestselling author Bell. (Ages 9-12)



**Biggest Fake in the Universe**

by Johan Rundberg (Amazon Crossing Kids)

Reviewer: Christine Irvin

In an effort to impress a girl, Mo takes up the sport of skateboarding, although he's never been on a skateboard. After a few weeks of learning to ride, Mo and others are given a chance to show off their skills. Mo is sure he will wipe out and end his short career. But he accidentally manages

to not only stay on his board but to make some maneuvers that impress everyone, so much so that his exploits go viral. He knows his performance was just a fluke, but how can he convince others without making a fool of himself? This is a story that accurately portrays the angst of growing up—understanding your strengths and weaknesses and figuring out how to be comfortable being who you are. (Ages 9-12)



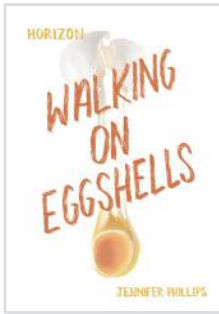
**Undisclosed**

by Aya de León (Candlewick)

Reviewer: Christine Irvin

Amani Kendall's family is part of an organization of spies known as the Factory. Their mission is to safeguard people of color. Their cover might soon be blown by Danielle, a teenager whose father was killed in the line of duty for the Factory. She feels the need to share

her story with unauthorized people, and that puts everyone in the organization at risk. Amani goes undercover in an effort to stop this from happening. This is the third installment of *DeLeon's Factory* series that features the Kendall family as they fight for truth and justice for people of color. The storyline provides an interesting take on the topic of racism, as well as an interesting story overall. (Ages 12-14)



**Walking on Eggshells**

by Jennifer Phillips (Jolly Fish Press)

Reviewer: Deb Greenberg

Kai, a 16-year-old aspiring chef, must learn how to accept help after he experiences his first episode of psychosis. He now has medications to take, his dad is always hovering, and everyone at school keeps staring at him.

But Kai is determined not to let any of

that distract him from making it as a chef as he attempts to focus on his culinary arts program. Things start to spin out of control, and he struggles with who he can trust. Another winner from Horizon's Hi-Lo books that provide simple sentence structures and an accessible format, making them perfect for teen reluctant readers. (Ages 14+)

To submit your book for review, email Cristy Bertini at [cristy@storymonsters.com](mailto:cristy@storymonsters.com) for submission guidelines.

**Every Book is an Adventure!**

The Chesapeake Bay series fosters appreciation for the environment while sparking curiosity about its unique creatures.

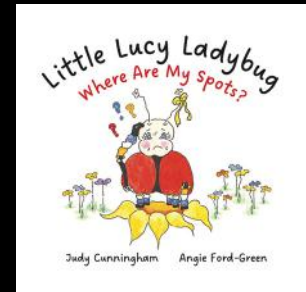
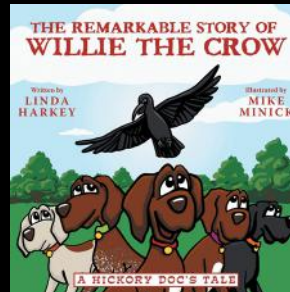
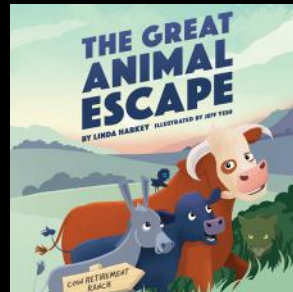
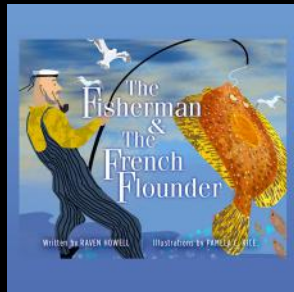
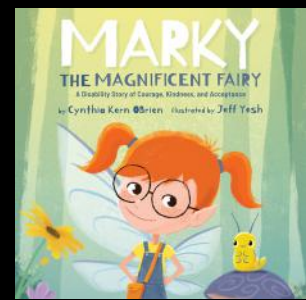
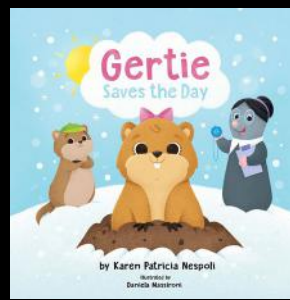
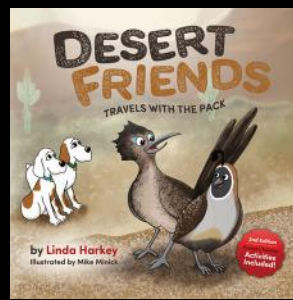
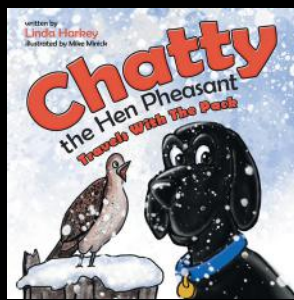
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Q&A  
WITH

# KAT MACONIE

by Julianne Black DiBlasi

From sparkly stilettos to cozy slippers, animals everywhere are stepping out in style! Alligators splash in waders, cats twirl in ballet flats, and elephants pack sneakers for their journeys. But really, can you blame them? They are of the imagination of the same woman who brought the world some of the most beautifully artistic compositions ever to be worn on feet!

But when it comes to hippos, the question fashionistas everywhere want to know: what kind of shoes does a hippopotamus choose?

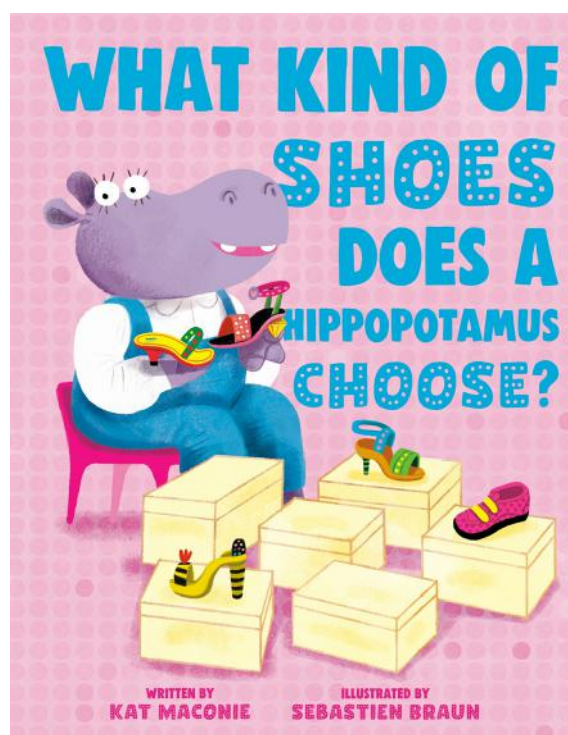
Prolific shoe designer Kat Maconie has brought to life a real gem, and the pairing of vibrant illustrations by Sebastien Braun creates a playful, rhyming picture book that celebrates fashion, fun, and self-expression. With clever animal-and-shoe couture combos on every page, children can't help but giggle, guess, and delight in the lead-up and big reveal, but I won't spoil that for you!

Perfect for storytime, mini fashion designers, or anyone who loves a whimsical twist to their storybook ending, *What Kind of Shoes Does a Hippopotamus Choose?* is fun to read and read aloud. A slice of bedazzled sunshine that reminds us all to dream big and step out in style on our own journey. We are grateful to have caught up with Kat to ask her a few questions about the book!

**Q: What sparked the idea of combining shoes with animals? Was there a particular “aha” moment, and how did you choose a hippopotamus as the central character instead of another animal?**

**A:** The idea came naturally when a friend asked what animal comes to mind when I think of one wearing my shoe designs. Instantly, it was a hippo heading to a party, a fun and lively character, and slightly whimsical, just like my shoe collections! A hippo with a colorful shoe collection just adds humor and charm, making the theme creative and playful.

**Q: I can see parody-style fashion ads with your animals as an accompanying shoe guide, going into all the**



**different types mentioned. For many kids, the maximum shoe choice is flip-flops or sneakers. How did you decide how far to take the explanations vs. when to rely on the image of the shoe style to explain fashion vocab like “espadrilles” or “stilettos?”**

**A:** I wanted the illustrations to do most of the work; they're like visual teachers. The text is simple enough to introduce new terms without overwhelming kids, who can quickly recognize familiar shoes like sneakers or flip-flops. It's about striking a fun balance: vivid visuals paired with just enough new words to spark curiosity.





**Q:** Were there specific collections of shoes (from your own life or imagination) that inspired the hippo's giant closet of choices?

**A:** Absolutely! My own shoe collections are full of variation, color, and fun, which is exactly what you see in Hippo's collection, from winged boots to sparkly mules, you can find them in the vibrant, magical closet. It's a celebration of diverse styles, reflecting the joy and creativity shoes bring to everyone.

**Q:** The book has a fun, lyrical rhythm that really makes it fun to read out loud! Did you write it more like poetry first, or did it evolve as a picture book in your head from the start?

**A:** It started as a rhythmic, poetic piece to inspire beautiful illustrations, focused on rhyme and musicality. I aimed to create a lively, memorable rhythm that kids would love to hear read out loud over and over!

**Q:** I've always wished books had an "outtake" section or blooper reel, so I love to ask—if you could sneak in one animal-shoe pairing that didn't make it into the book, what would it be?

**A:** Not technically an animal but "a peacock in platforms that sparkle and soar" could have been super fun, and I am sure Seb would have created a beautiful illustration to accompany it!

**Q:** Were there any images by the book's fabulously talented illustrator, Sebastien Braun, that made you laugh or surprised you because they looked different from what you first imagined? Did you have any interaction with that process, or were you just excited to see how it unfolded?



We've often seen cats wearing smart ballet flats as they gracefully land on their feet.

**A:** Sebastien's talent shines through, and I cried with happiness when I saw the first round of illustrations! I was delighted by how he brought characters to life with humor and style, especially the crocodiles. It's exciting to see how his detailed, charming illustrations add new layers of fun every time you look at them. We discussed how important the color palette was and how it needed to spark a feeling of positivity and confidence, which he captures perfectly, and of course, not forgetting to make sure every character is laden with fab accessories!

**Q:** This story will certainly inspire kids to view clothing as a form of creativity and play, rather than just a necessity. Beyond the fun and fashion, what message do you hope children take away from the book?

**A:** I want kids to see clothes and shoes as a canvas for their imagination. Dressing up is a way to express who they are inside, boost confidence, and have fun. It's about celebrating creativity and self-expression.

**Q:** While sharing the story with kids, which animal-shoe pairing makes them laugh the most? Do you have any fun stories to share about reactions from readings or school visits?

**A:** We get a lot of giggles over the crocs in stiletto heels and lots of questions about what a stiletto is! A description of a stiletto is quite absurd, really, if you describe it! Kids find it hilarious and so much fun to imagine.

**Q:** And finally ... what shoes are YOU wearing today?

**A:** Today, I'm in my Henni pumps—because who says you can't wear something sparkly before 6 p.m.? It's all about adding a touch of shine to every day! ●

Julianne Black DiBlasi • Mom, wielder of pixel, paint, and pen. [krakenSky.com](http://krakenSky.com)

# SUSANNAH LLOYD

## Reveals Who Ate Steve

by Raven Howell

“I love writing books that feature scoundrels, blunderers, and shenanigans, and so every one of my books tends to start off with at least one of those!” exclaims children’s author, Susannah Lloyd. “Writing dialogue is my favorite part of the process. As long as a character or narrator begins whittering away in my head, I know I have something to work with.”

Susannah has written six picture books: *The Terribly Friendly Fox*, *This Book Can Read Your Mind*, *Here Be Dragons*, *Oh Monty*, *Here Be Giants*, and *Who Ate Steve*, plus two chapter books: *Badgers Are Go*, and the follow-up, *Badgers Are Go: Revenge of the Claw*.

She grew up in Oxford, U.K. “My parents always read me bedtime stories, and when I was older, I would go to sleep listening to audiobooks on tape cassette,” she tells me.

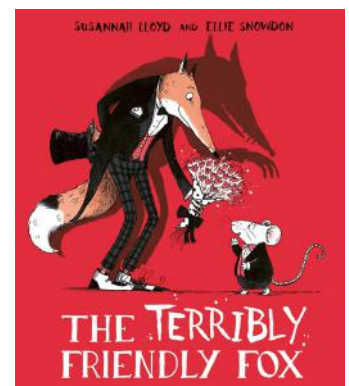
“My teachers in primary school always read to us at the end of the school day, and I went to the library every weekend to stock up on new books. I feel that reading is rocket fuel for the imagination. At break time in school, I was always out on the playground, imagining I was a character in a book, and acting it out. I still have my first picture books, written around age five, stapled together by my mum and full of felt-tip pen illustrations. They were on very similar themes to some of my books now—naughty characters and a little dash of peril!” she laughs.

“As a child, I was a daydreamer—and still am! To me, writing is just like playing as a kid, but in your head. And books are portals. So I got off to a roaring start, having my first go at writing picture books when I was five, and then writing an Agatha Christie-style murder mystery novel when I was 11. But I stopped writing at around 13, disheartened because my writing wasn’t coming out ‘perfect.’ I didn’t take it up again until I was 40. It was the longest tea and biscuit break in writing history, and also a major mistake.”

But one day, she says, it all clicked. “When my kids were small, we visited a few exhibitions by authors like Julia Donaldson, Anthony Browne, and Michael Bond. I saw all their scribbled first ideas and first drafts, full of revisions and crossings out, and then the penny dropped! People don’t write finished books in one go, but they start with messy scribbled half-ideas, and gradually build up from there. It felt incredibly liberating to learn this. Around this time I read *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott, which also emphasizes the importance of getting an absolutely dreadful first draft onto paper.”

“I remembered a half-formed idea I had had years before, when I had passed by a pub in London called The Fox Reformed. It had made me wonder what a reformed fox would actually be like, and that was the little germ of an idea that finally got me writing again. That idea became my first picture book, *The Terribly Friendly Fox*, with Ellie Snowdon, which came out in 2019.”

“I work in a study, where I put all my ideas together, usually from big piles of scribbled notes that I generate from when I’m out and about. I get inspired by dusty old museums and old black and white movies. Quite a few of my books have also been based on old beloved pets and their peculiar habits.”





“If I feel stuck in a storyline, I now know that I need to leave my desk and get walking. Rebecca Solnit wrote that the mind works at its best at three miles an hour, and I am sure that must be true for me. I can’t generate any new ideas at all at my desk,” Susannah admits.

“Endings are the most challenging part of my writing. It is easy enough getting characters into trouble but getting them out of trouble is the hard part! I love the Clive James’ description of ‘turning a phrase until it catches the light’ as

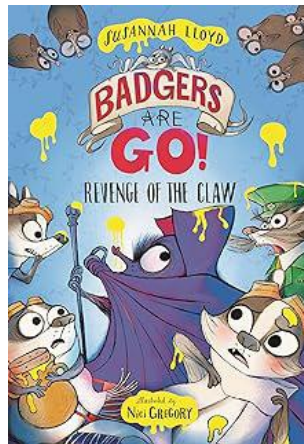
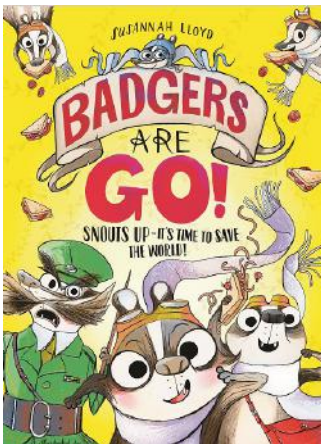
far as revising. So it’s about slowly reworking something until it finally feels right.”

Susannah considers playfulness her leading strength. “My best writing comes when I am feeling at my most playful. And the books I like to read the most give me the impression that their authors and illustrators were having a lot of fun when they were making them.”

“Children’s sections in bookshops and libraries are my happy place. They are little windows into other lives and other worlds, and the books I read as a child really shaped me as a person. I love funny children’s books in particular. Danish comedian Victor Borge said that laughter is the shortest distance between two people, and funny books help to make that possible.”

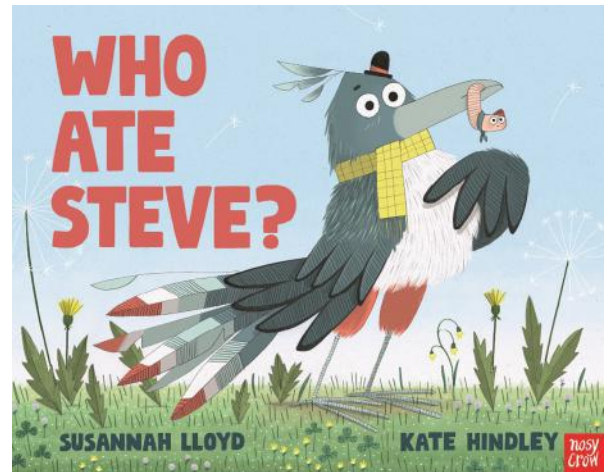
*Badgers Are Go* is one of Susannah’s most popular books. The story starts with a normal badger named Lulu Whifferton-Rear who discovers certain humans are not what they seem. “When Lulu, a young, dreamy badger, receives a call to attend the Rumpington Academy of Badgering, she is shocked to discover that badgers have been ruling the world for centuries and ‘getting things jolly well done,’ with the help of their trusty Badger Operated Persons,” Susannah says, explaining the book’s premise.

There’s a sequel now, too: *Badgers Are Go! Revenge of the Claw*, published in the U.K. this summer.



But it’s Susannah’s *Who Ate Steve?* that’s featured widely in public libraries and kids’ bookshelves in the U.S. The hilarious picture book mystery is a big hit with the 2-5-year-old range.

“The character of Marcel was originally inspired by my son’s tiny pet praying mantis, who went by the name of Luke Skywalker. I was in charge of popping crickets in his pot for him to eat for breakfast. Sometimes I would wander past him later in the day, and I would laugh because he would freeze as I entered the room, in the middle of a pounce, and he would slowly swivel one eye to look over at me, exactly as though he was trying to figure out if he had been caught red-handed. Luke’s soul lives on in the character of Marcel, who cannot believe he keeps getting thwarted as he tries to gobble up poor Steve.”



“I think all young readers will recognize the narrator’s voice as things escalate, with familiar lines such as ‘You are not just letting yourself down, Marcel, you are letting everyone down.’ I think readers of all ages will see a little of Marcel in themselves. After all, we all struggle with impulse control

from time to time, especially if it is about something delicious! I think children love a little chaos and a little mischief too, and this book has that in bucket loads.”

Presently, Susannah plans on writing more chapter books. “There are a few ideas in the pipeline, but nothing I can share yet. The most wonderful thing about writing is the endless possibilities. And for me, hearing that one of my books is somebody’s favorite is a feeling I would love to bottle.”

“My life is very busy! I work as a speech therapist in addition to writing books, and am a mum of two boys, so it’s all about juggling, but I also love visiting schools! I have so much fun, and I always leave feeling energized. I try to shape each workshop around generating an idea or a character, because without a character you are intrigued by, or an idea you love, the motivation to write won’t be there, for any of us. I hope to get all children excited about writing, especially those children who might think of themselves as not good at writing but who are actually brimming with imaginative potential.”

“My own writing usually starts in either a very visual way, imagining the images first, and adding the text in later, or in a playful way, letting the characters start chatting away to each other in my head. In my workshops, I try to do something similar, stepping back from the actual writing stage, and focusing on supporting the children to build ideas that make them feel excited about putting pen to paper.”

“I’d like to leave any readers who are thinking of trying their own paw at writing, a special message from Wilfred C. Crumblepaw, a badger from my book: ‘You can do this, I just know you can.’” Then, Susannah whimsically adds, “Trust me! I can feel it in my whiskers.”

For more information about Susannah Lloyd and her books, visit [susannahlloyd.com](http://susannahlloyd.com).



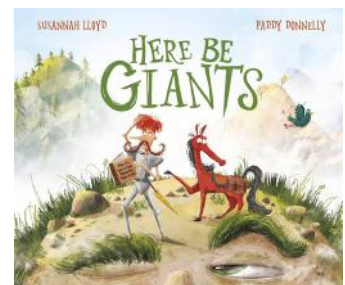
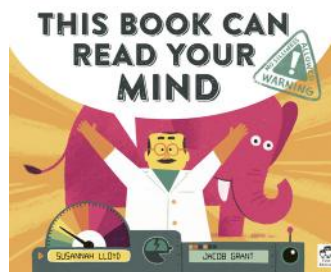
Sharing book time.



Susannah at a workshop.

Andy Brown photography

Raven Howell is an award-winning children’s author and poet. [ravenhowell.com](http://ravenhowell.com)





# SQUIRRELS, MASTODONS, AND KANGAROOS ... IN OHIO?

by Conrad J. Storad • photos by Conrad J. Storad

Late summer and early autumn afternoons are the perfect time for some backyard daydreaming. My wife and I spend lots of pleasant hours on the patio watching a menagerie of wildlife parade through the wooded lot behind our home.

We've seen deer, raccoons, groundhogs, a red fox, and the occasional opossum. This summer, we saw what we later identified to be a mink. It's returned several times. Regarding daydreams? I sometimes wonder what creatures might have wandered near my favorite spot ... but 100 years in the past. Or 1,000 years ago. Or 20,000 years ago.

While working on a book about the history of my hometown, I learned that the land we call Northeast Ohio was once mostly dense forest for hundreds of square miles. There were millions of trees. It was like this for thousands of years. During the last Ice Age, glaciers almost a mile thick bulldozed the forests and scoured the ground.

The geography of what we know as Ohio continued to change when the glaciers retreated north. The melting ice left Lake Erie and lots of smaller lakes, called kettle lakes. A giant swamp formed to the northwest. It was called the Great Black Swamp.

New forests filled with millions of trees grew again almost everywhere else. There were plenty of other plants and flowers as well. The spot that became my backyard and my hometown was trees, trees, and more trees. It was heaven on Earth for the ancestors of the squirrels that raid our bird feeders today.

Other animals lived here as well. There were giant beavers that could grow 7 feet tall. They were the biggest rodents in North America during the *Ice Age*. But there were even bigger creatures.

If you watched the movie *Ice Age*, you probably know about woolly mammoths. They looked like huge hairy elephants. But 20,000 years before my backyard was here, the area was home to mastodons. They were cousins to the mammoths. People have found fossil mastodon bones all over Ohio.



I recently attended Akron's football game vs. Wyoming. I was a student equipment manager for the Akron U football team 50 years ago. I got to meet Zippy in person ... many years removed from my first meetings with the famous mascot. Photo credit: Tom Enright, starter and tight end on the 1975 Zips football team.

The gigantic animals had shaggy hair. Their tusks grew to 16 feet long. The first Native people who lived here hunted mastodons for food.

But what about kangaroos? Did you know that there are still kangaroos in northern Ohio? In 2025? Of course, to see one, you need to attend a sporting event at the University of Akron, home of the Zips.

What the heck is a Zip? If, like me, you are a graduate of the University of Akron, you already know the answer. The answer is obvious once you see Zippy, the school mascot. A Zip is a kangaroo—an Akron, Ohio variety. For a time, the school's modern rally phrase was "Fear the Roo."

Huh? A kangaroo mascot? To get some history, go to Zippy's website at: [uakron.edu/zippy/](http://uakron.edu/zippy/). Once you learn more about kangaroos, you'll understand why the creature is a wonderful mascot for a college team.

Kangaroos are strong, agile, and fast. They have keen vision and a superb sense of hearing. Any athlete in search of glory in his or her sport of choice would love to embody the traits of this amazing creature from the down under continent of Australia.

Fully grown red kangaroos use their powerful hind legs to move at speeds of more than 35 miles per hour. They bound in leaps—almost 6 feet high—that measure up to 25 feet long per hop.

In comparison, big jackrabbits in Arizona can jump 5 to 10 feet per hop. How far can you jump in a single hop?

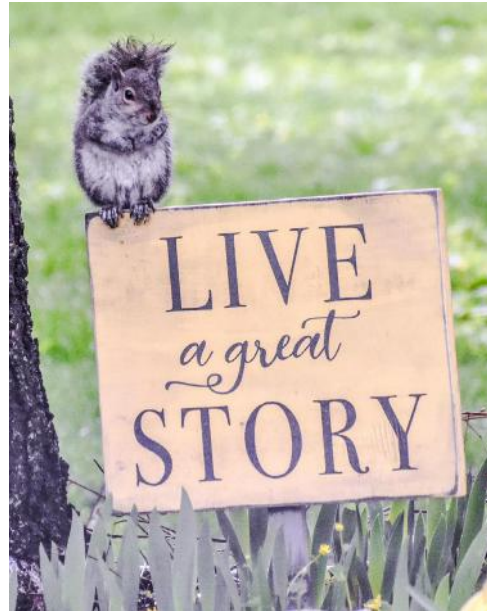
Most young readers probably already know that kangaroos are different in many ways. Kangaroos are marsupial mammals. Humans and tigers and monkeys and elephants and horses and bats are placental mammals.

Like all mammals, marsupials are hairy and warm-blooded. The mothers produce milk for their young. But marsupials have an outside pouch where their young grow and develop.

A baby kangaroo is called a Joey. The Joey is hairless and only the size of a Lima bean when it is born. The tiny Joey must climb from the birth canal into its mother's pouch. During six months in its mother's pouch, the Joey will grow 2,000 times bigger than its size at birth.

More than 60 kinds of kangaroos live on Earth today. The musky rat kangaroo is the smallest. A full-grown adult weighs less than a pound. Big red kangaroos can weigh up to 175 pounds.

Powerful hind legs give the kangaroo its hopping power. But how many legs does a kangaroo have? You say four, of course.



Backyard daydreams are filled with stories.



I'd like to meet a kangaroo!



Do squirrels daydream of long-ago ancestors?



Shutterstock image purchased by Conrad J. Storad

Kangaroos do exist in Ohio ... if you are a University of Akron Zip.

Nope. Not according to a 2015 research study published in *Biology Letters*. The correct answer is five legs, say scientists from Australia's University of New South Wales. A walking kangaroo can actually propel itself with its muscular tail. The tail acts like a fifth leg.

The scientists learned that the tail of a walking kangaroo works as hard as our legs work when we walk down the street. No other animal is known to use its tail in this way. ●



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Red kangaroos are powerful runners and jumpers.

## HOPPING FUN FACTS

- A group of kangaroos is called a mob.
- A Wallaby is a kangaroo that weighs less than 45 pounds.
- A kangaroo has a head like a deer, can stand upright, and can swim.
- Kangaroos are browsers. They eat a variety of leaves and vegetation.

## RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE

### BOOKS:

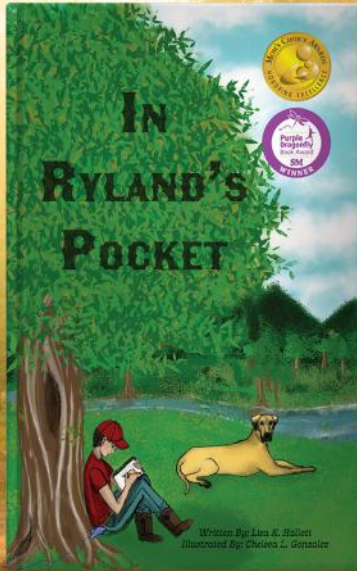
- *Big Red Kangaroo*  
by Claire Saxby
- *Kangaroo to the Rescue (National Geographic Kids)*  
by Moira Rose Donahue
- *Kangaroos: The Symbol of Australia*  
by M. Martin

### WEBSITES:

- **National Geographic Kids – Kangaroo**  
<https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/animals/kangaroo/#kangaroo-hopping.jpg>
- **Kangaroo Facts and Photos – Bush Heritage - Australia**  
<https://www.bushheritage.org.au/species/kangaroos>
- **Basic Facts About Kangaroos – Defenders of Wildlife**  
<https://defenders.org/kangaroo/basic-facts>

**Conrad J. Storad** is the national award-winning author or editor of more than 50 science and nature books for children and young adults. His first book in a new series, *Night Watchers: Nocturnal Creatures of North America*, is out now. [conradjstorad.com](http://conradjstorad.com)

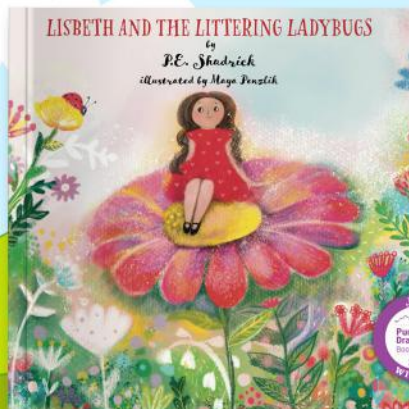
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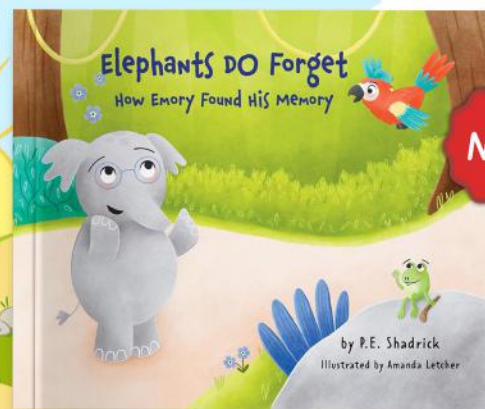
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# If You Close the Door

by Olivia Amiri

Poetry, to me, is a powerful art form that captures complex emotions, vivid imagery, and profound ideas using just carefully chosen words. Unlike prose, which often relies on detailed explanations, poetry distills meaning into its most essential and evocative elements. What makes poetry so great is its flexibility and intimacy—it gives voice to thoughts and feelings that might otherwise go unspoken and every possible emotion can be expressed. Because of its brevity and intensity, poetry can linger in one’s mind. Poetry encourages readers to slow down, reread, and find new meaning each time. In just a few lines, a poem can offer comfort, insight, or a fresh perspective, making it one of the most powerful tools of human expression.

## ***If You Close the Door***

*The summer of which I kept,*

Our fingers knot  
An evasive handshake  
Her eyes shine  
The good beginning  
As we chased each other  
Across the sand  
Racing for time  
  
Her eyes flatten  
Her gold  
Gone with the morning  
My feet slip through the mud  
I let go of her hand  
My grip slackens on the memory

Rust covers the summer  
When we jumped into the lake  
Drinking orange juice  
From champagne flutes  
Singing to the seagulls

Living while everyone was sleeping  
swimming under the moon’s smile  
Maybe under our feet were giant squids  
Or sharks with cutting teeth  
High on fear  
As we grinned ear to ear

Chess was our dance  
Playing for nothing  
Toying with her pawns  
Winning with large odds  
Defying my confidence

In the morning when we woke  
Light punctured through the windows  
Our skin brined in salt  
Chocolate hidden under our beds  
As we fell into the waves

Paved streets blacken our feet  
Streetlights punctuate the darkness  
The sun is farther now  
Ocean spray showers me in dreams  
As her smile faintly begins to cease ●

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**Seventeen-year-old Olivia Amiri** is a little girl with big advice! Sharing insights and observations on the world around us, her message is clear: kids are still the best teachers to remind grown-ups of the simple joys in life. [livamiri.com](http://livamiri.com)

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