

BOOK NOTES

Center for Children's & Young Adult Books

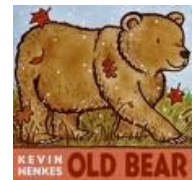
Minnesota State University, Mankato

March 2009

Winter/Spring Time Books

Spring teased us for a while in Minnesota, but today the snow is falling again, reminding us that winter still has a few rounds to go before it disappears in March . . . or April??? The titles we've chosen for this issue of Book Notes also deal with a mix of themes related to winter and spring.

Kevin Henkes' Old Bear dreams about all the seasons during his winter hibernation (HarperCollins). As he falls asleep, snow, mixed with a scattering of orange and red leaves, swirls outside his den. Quickly his dreams transport him to spring, when he was a cub curled inside a crocus in a pastel landscape of flowers, blooming trees, and butterflies. In case readers begin to forget that these images are fantasy, not reality, the summer rains that come next substitute blueberries for raindrops. Bear catches them on his outstretched pink tongue. A fish-clogged river in an autumn landscape gives way to a bewitching winter sky filled with starbursts of many colors. When he stirs, stretches, and emerges into the real world, the verdant spring landscape seems almost as good as the dream world he left. Simple text and large, clear watercolor paintings combine to produce another winning read aloud from Henkes.—KP



Mortimer Mouse is no different than the rest of us longing to see the glimpse of green or other sign of spring after a long winter. Karma Wilson shares the delightful tale of a mouse learning the joys of gardening in Mortimer's First Garden (Simon & Schuster). Mortimer has no idea a seed could be anything more than a good meal until he hears the family he lives with describing how their seeds are going to grow and turn into more seeds. Then he decides to plant his own sunflower seed instead of eating it. He learns that with water, care, and lots of patience his seed can sprout into a green miracle. Days and weeks of pruning and waiting reveal not just a green stem. Mortimer is amazed to see a bright yellow sunflower bursting with hundreds of seeds. Thanking God for his help in growing his first garden, Mortimer then asks for a friend to share in the abundant supply of sunflower seeds. The book reminds everyone who is waiting and thinking spring will never come, that it always does...eventually. —GT

Although most birds head south for the winter, Marco Flamingo/ Marco Flamenco decides to find out about snow by flying north (Raven Tree). Sheila Jarkins provides her gangly hero with winter gear as he makes his way into colder regions. He acquires earmuffs, scarf, sweater, and other heavy clothing before he arrives in a landscape that looks like northern Minnesota. He quickly decides that he loves the snow and engages in all sorts of outdoor activities such as ice skating, snow shoeing, skiing, and ice fishing. His friends back in the sun are stunned to receive a glowing review of winter in postcard from Marco and decide that he's a "rare bird." In



case readers doubt the fantasy aspects of the tale, the final double-page illustrations shows elephants, monkeys, and other animals that would never appear in the snow. A Spanish version of the text appears throughout.—KP

One popular outdoor activity after any heavy, wet snowfall is building a snow person. In Lisa Ernst Campbell's book for beginning readers, Joan decides to make her little brother Ben a



Snow Surprise (Harcourt). In addition to the usual three snow balls of different sizes, Joan adds all kinds of edible treats to attract various animals and birds. After using apples for eyes, dried corn for a mouth, nuts for buttons, and a carrot for the nose, she adds tree branches for arms that can hold dishes of bird seed. Then she races home to have Ben view her handiwork. Her dog Sport, who is left behind to watch the snow person, quickly realizes that the hordes of birds and animals rushing for a treat spell trouble. By the time Joan returns with Ben, her creation has been transformed into a different “snow surprise” for both children. The illustrations add a touch of humor and supply a twist to the story's outcome.—KP

In The Great Paper Caper by Oliver Jeffers, forest animals and a child work to solve an ecological mystery. (Penguin). Day after day branches of trees mysteriously disappear without explanation. After the sleuths eliminate one another as suspects, they divide up tasks to catch the tree thief. Meanwhile, readers will see clearly that the thief is a bear, who lops off branches and fells entire trees. But why? Sheets of paper floating over the snowy landscape and remnants of paper airplanes finally lead to the culprit. Desperate to win a paper airplane competition, the bear has installed a giant paper-making machine in his cabin. His arrest and trial lead to a satisfactory conclusion in which he agrees to replace the trees, and the animals help him recycle his old paper planes into an impressive new one. This picture book is definitely for those older than preschool. The artwork has a surreal and minimalist feeling, with animals and people walking on stick legs and doors built into tree trunks for their homes. Touches such as the yellow crime scene tape, the police station line-up with polar bear and teddy bear as well as the suspect, the interrogation room with the spotlight overhead all require a basic familiarity with television or film crime dramas. A great choice for those who appreciate the offbeat and unconventional.—KP



Peter Brown creates The Curious Garden (Little, Brown) to remind us all that nature can be found and flourish in urban spaces. In a city of smoke and filth Liam never expected to find anything green or to become an influential gardener. The love of being outdoors brings Liam to an abandoned railway. When he looks closely, he finds a new purpose for the tracks. What started off as some scrawny weeds and dying flowers becomes a profusion of color and life. The garden seems to take on Liam's energy and ventures out, spreading green life in unexpected places. An abandoned car becomes multi flowerpots with blossoms growing out of every vent. The tops of high rises become yellow-filled corn fields and twisting mazes. Liam's influence catches on, and soon the whole city is gardening. There is so much more going on in Brown's story than what is told in words as we can see in his creatively detailed illustrations. He transforms the brown, low-spirited city in the first pages of this story into a cheerful community of warm colors. Brown adds an author's note explaining how he is always looking for the nature around him and encouraging readers to find it too. —GT

The Imaginary Garden by Andrew Larsen (Kids Can Press) is a creative story about young Theo and her grandfather Poppa who together create a wonderful garden. The pair enjoys sitting

and talking about the site of Poppa’s beautiful garden. When Poppa moves to an apartment with only a balcony, the two discover there’s no room for a real garden. Only in the mind of a child like Theo could the idea of creating an imaginary garden develop. Together on Poppa’s new balcony the two start drawing designs for the best garden ever...in paint. A stone wall for vines to grow on, the most colorful flowers in creation, and worms for the imaginary birds to eat are all possible when you have no restrictions of climate or money. What really adds to this enchanting story is the artwork by Irene Luxbacher. Her technique of using mixed media collage gives the feeling the garden is coming right out of the page. The creatively designed scenes immerse viewers in a landscape of torn or cut pieces of fabric and paper. The Imaginary Garden’s combination of a charming story with wonderful artistic design reveals the joys of spending time with a grandparent/grandchild. —GT



At first Papa and Mama squirrel don’t share the enthusiasm of their children who greet the winter day with a cry, Hooray for Snow! in a picture book by Kazuo Iwamura (NorthSouth). Mick, Mack, and Molly can’t wait to go outside for some serious sledding, but their parents decide to stay indoors where it is warm. When the three young squirrels don’t have enough muscle power to pull the sled, they enlist a reluctant Papa. Soon he is more enthusiastic than anyone as he flies down the hill and pulls the sled back to the top. Eventually Mama joins the fun too. Appealing illustrations of the furry family against the snowy background remind young listeners of how much fun people of all ages can have in winter.—KP



Cynthia Rylant’s poetic text captures many of the moods associated with Snow (Harcourt). Whether it falls gently overnight or descends in “fat, cheerful flakes,” snow breaks the routine and makes us look at landscapes in fresh ways. Minnesota illustrator Lauren Stringer captures the exuberant joy of children heading home from school early on a “snow day” and the cozy indoor connections of family safe inside while snow piles on window sills. Snow angels. Snow people. Mounds of snow on rooftops and tree branches. We know snow in Minnesota, and Stringer excels in sharing her visions of individual flakes and blanketed landscapes. Put this near the top of the picture book purchase list.—KP



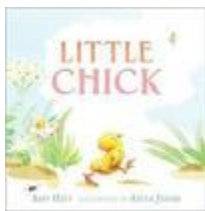
Marion Dane Bauer sets her latest Stepping Stone mystery just before Christmas in The Green Ghost (Random House). Chapters alternate between two stories that intertwine with supernatural connections. In 1938 nine-year-old Lillian longs for a green cloak her farmer father cannot afford. Determined to bring some beauty to their Christmas celebration, Lillian sets out with her little sister Elsa to find a perfect Christmas tree in the forest instead of settling for a scraggly juniper like the one her father usually finds behind the barn. Present-day Kaye and her parents are heading to her grandmother’s house for the holidays. Although Kaye worries that Gran may have decided to substitute an artificial tree for a traditional one, a more immediate concern is the heavy snow that makes driving through the country almost impossible. Bauer reveals her Minnesota background in the vivid descriptions of reduced visibilities, slick roads, and the sickening spinouts that land the family in the ditch. Abandoning their car (not recommended in Minnesota driving safety tips), they reach a farm house inhabited by an old lady named Elsa. Of course, Elsa turns out to be the connection between past and present in a slightly spooky but not scary puzzle.—KP



The world's only mail cow returns in another adventure in Millie in the Snow by Alexander Steffensmeier (Walker). Both Millie and the skiing mailman are burdened with letters and parcels on their pre-Christmas deliveries. When all the packages left in Millie's backpack are addressed to people on the farm, Millie and the mailman part company. Flashback to a delightful double-page spread of the mailman at home creating gifts for all the farm animals plus the farmer herself. When we return to Millie, she is wandering in circles, disoriented in a snowy landscape, even though sharp-eyed readers will recognize clues that the farm is not too far away. By the time Millie slides home, the presents are unwrapped, with all the tags missing. Imagine the mailman's surprise the next day when he discovers that all his gifts have found new uses. The hilarious cartoon illustrations demand repeat viewings, especially when readers try to figure out how the gifts were transformed from the original intent to the final use. Although Millie generates a lot of humor on her own, the supporting cast of farm animals add to the fun.—KP

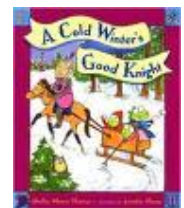


From the author of the beloved series about the small bear named Sam comes a new book designed to encourage children at bedtime. Amy Hest takes listeners on three endearing learning experiences in her stories of a curious small chicken in Little Chick (Candlewick). When you are young, it's hard to understand why things don't work out the way you want. Why won't a carrot grow big enough? Why won't the wind pick up a kite and make it fly when you skip your hardest? Why can't you reach a beautiful star so you can keep it



forever? With the help of her Old Auntie, Little Chick learns how to view things differently in order to reduce her frustrations. The watercolor illustrations of Anita Jeram complement the gentle message of the stories.--GT

Shelley Moore Thomas' beleaguered knight returns in a snowy encounter with his three small dragon friends in A Cold Winter's Good Knight (Penguin). Finding them shivering in their cave after a heavy snowfall, he bundles them into a sled and takes them to the castle. Unfortunately, there is a ball underway. Despite the knight's warnings, the little dragons can't resist getting into trouble. Why shouldn't they direct some fiery breath to increase the flames on the hearth? Swinging from the chandelier results in another disaster. Once the knight explains that they need to use manners, they decide to use "Please" and "Thank you" to interact with the other guests so that everyone can enjoy the evening. Unlike the first "easy reader" books in the series, this volume is in a larger format that can be used with small groups, who will appreciate the humorous touches such as the "snow dragon" outside the cave. Those familiar with the characters will enjoy their latest adventure.—KP



We find out a garden can offer much more than flowers in Quiet in the Garden written and illustrated by Aliko (Greenwillow). The little boy in the story sits out in the garden where he



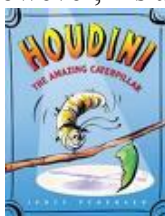
knows that if he waits very quietly, he'll see what's really going on around him. Within the trees, under the bushes, and in the ground are living creatures looking for their next meal. The garden provides for each animal and insect who is hungry. With full-color art Aliko illustrates the beauty of nature. The snail asks the robin why he nibbles on the berries, and the robin informs the snail he was hungry. The story follows this pattern traveling through many different creatures in the garden having each respond, "I was hungry." Not only does the story conclude with a massive feast created by the boy inviting all those he has encountered that day, but he also learns that when they eat together, the garden is not such a quiet place. Quiet in the Garden offers a

unique view that animals as well as flowers contribute to a garden's growth and require care. Alike adds a fun "make your own quiet garden" page with drawings and descriptions of the process. -GT

The lively kindergarten class returns for another series of excursions in The Twelve Days of Springtime by Deborah Lee Rose (Abrams). Warmer weather allows them to venture outside to plant seedlings, study flowers, and take some field trips around town and into the countryside. The girl obsessed with horses gets to move from drawings and sculpture to encounters with a real animal. A shaggy stuffed animal turns up in every scene. So many activities occur in each picture that it's hard to know where to focus. One possibility is to count the objects featured in the cumulative rhyme for that double-page spread, whether 11 stepping stones in a creek or 4 ladybugs in a craft project. There also are numerous unstated stories occurring in the lives of individual children and in the classroom itself. An aquarium with tadpoles and a terrarium with caterpillars both require observation. Messages on flip charts and chalkboard provide clues as to the units of study in a chaotic classroom with plenty of chances for hands-on exploration.—KP



Life inside a classroom terrarium is the setting for Houdini the Amazing Caterpillar by Janet Pedersen (Houghton Mifflin). When Houdini arrives as a small caterpillar, he has a captive audience of kindergarteners watching him make leaves disappear when he eats them. Over time, however, his admirers turn their attention to "performances" by other classroom animals such as a turtle and a spider. Houdini's crawling on branches and chomping leaves has lost its appeal. Then, after studying some classroom wall charts, Houdini develops an idea for "his most daring act ever." Sure enough, after he changes into a chrysalis, his audience watches in anticipation for almost two weeks until he emerges with the glorious wings of a monarch butterfly. The author's note at the end offers more information about the butterfly's life cycle.—KP



Claire Llewellyn's new series of books about plants are easy to understand yet loaded with valuable information (Black Rabbit). In The Life of Plants she explains their basic structures, requirements for growth, and how seasonal changes affect them. The section on how animals, air, and water spread plants around the world is particularly interesting. Plants of the World starts off with a great color-coded world map that identifies habitats. This information will help students grasp why there are so many different plants as it explains each habitat. Diagrams of topics such as photosynthesis and parts of a plant reinforce the descriptive text in the books. Relevant pictures and "get this" fun facts add to the readers' comprehension. Many sections contain a "what's this" question provoking further thought about what readers already know or may want to figure out. Answers can be found at the back, where there is also a glossary, index, and list of some amazing websites which provide extensive information about plants plus related activities and teacher resources. The series offers a great way to introduce elementary students to the world of plants. Other titles include Plants and Humans and Plants and Animals. -GT



Book Reviews written by:

KP—Kathy Piehl, CCYAB Director

GT—Gretchen Turner, CCYAB Graduate Assistant

Books Reviewed in this issue:

Aliki. *Quiet in the Garden*. HarperCollins, 2009. ISBN 978-0-06-155207-6. \$19.50.

Bauer, Marion Dane. *The Green Ghost*. Random House, 2008. ISBN 978-0-375-84083-8. \$11.99.

Brown, Peter. *The Curious Garden*. Little, Brown, 2009. ISBN 978-0-316-01547-9. \$16.99.

Ernst, Lisa Campbell. *Snow Surprise*. Harcourt, 2008. ISBN 978-0-15-206553-9. \$12.95.

Henkes, Kevin. *Old Bear*. HarperCollins, 2008. ISBN 978-0-06-155205-2. \$17.99.

Hest, Amy. *Little Chick*. Candlewick, 2009. ISBN 978-0-7636-2890-1. \$17.99.

Iwamura, Kazuo. *Hooray for Snow!* North-South, 2008. ISBN 978-0-7358-2219-1. \$15.95.

Jarkins, Sheila. *Marco Flamingo*. Raven Tree, 2008. ISBN 978-0-9794462-5-2. \$16.95.

Jeffers, Oliver. *The Great Paper Caper*. Penguin, 2008. ISBN 978-0-399-25097-2. \$17.99.

Larsen, Andrew. *The Imaginary Garden*. Kids Can, 2009. ISBN 978-1-55453-279-7. \$16.95.

Llewellyn, Claire. *The Life of Plants*. Black Rabbit, 2008. ISBN 978-1-59920-033-0. \$27.10.

Llewellyn, Claire. *Plants of the World*. Black Rabbit, 2008. ISBN 978-1-59920-032-3. \$27.10.

Pedersen, Janet. *Houdini: The Amazing Caterpillar*. Houghton Mifflin, 2008. ISBN 978-0-618-89332-4. \$16.00.

Rose, Deborah Lee. *The Twelve Days of Springtime*. Abrams, 2009. ISBN 978-0-8109-8330-4. \$15.95.

Rylant, Cynthia. *Snow*. Harcourt, 2008. ISBN 978-0-15-205303-1. \$17.00.

Steffensmeier, Alexander. *Millie in the Snow*. Walker, 2008. ISBN 978-0-8027-9800-8. \$16.99.

Thomas, Shelley Moore. *A Cold Winter's Good Knight*. Penguin, 2008. ISBN 978-0-525-47964-2. \$15.99.

Wilson, Karma. *Mortimer's First Garden*. Simon & Schuster, 2009. ISBN 978-1-4169-4203-0. \$16.99.

