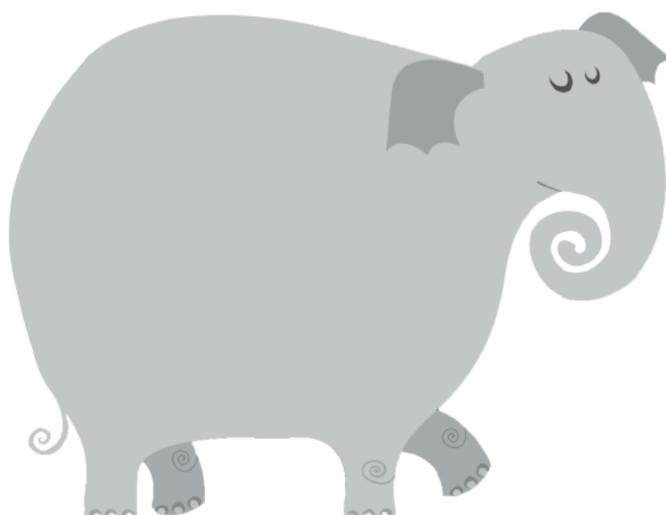




# **CHILDREN'S BOOK-A-DAY ALMANAC**

**ANITA SILVEY**



**ROARING BROOK PRESS**  
New York

# INTRODUCTION

In October of 2010 the Children’s Book-a-Day Almanac website was launched ([childrensbookalmanac.com](http://childrensbookalmanac.com)); each day since then one essay showcasing one of the gems of children’s literature has been published. Day after day I have been able to connect with readers—to lead them to books that they need and to remind them of the books that have made a difference in the lives of children. I have responded to questions and critiques. I have also had children comment on the Almanac, through their parents and teachers, to inform me how they felt about my choices. All critics need to keep in touch with what happens when the rubber meets the road! As I prepared the final pages for the printed book, I kept thinking about how much my daily Almanac readers have made it a better resource.

Although I love the immediacy of cyberspace, I am thrilled to have this book in print. Now readers can easily thumb through and make plans for celebrating their own favorite days in advance. Every day of the calendar year I discuss an appropriate title and then provide information about how it came about, the author, the ideal audience, and how the book has connected in a meaningful way with young people from babies to age fourteen. For 365 days—or with a leap year 366—I provide a reliable guide to the classics and to new books on their way to becoming classics. On March 12 I talk about Madeleine L’Engle’s road from rejection to her award-winning book *A Wrinkle in Time*; on June 11 I relate how Hans and Margret Rey saved *Curious George* and themselves from the Nazis; on July 18 I focus on the beginning of the Spanish Civil War and its impact on Munro Leaf’s *The Story of Ferdinand*.

For each day of the year I also include a sidebar that lists other events and contains children’s books related to these events. Because the sidebar covers books for different age ranges than the essay itself, this material extends the usefulness of the *Children’s Book-a-Day Almanac*. Various indexes round out the book—making it easy to find the right book for the right child at the right time.

When working on these essays, I have always tried to make them as accessible and lively as possible—but keep them inspiring as well. Basically, by using the calendar as an organizing device, the *Children’s Book-a-Day Almanac* shines the spotlight on the best books for young readers. Just as we want to get children the best food for their bodies, they need the best nourishment for their minds. My entire career, now spanning over forty years, has been devoted to a statement by Walter de la Mare: “Only the rarest kind of best in anything can be good enough for the young.” For each day of the year, I provide insight into that “rarest kind of best.”

## JOHNNY TREMAIN

By Esther Forbes

On January 1, 1735, Paul Revere, patriot, silversmith, and engraver, was baptized in Boston's North End. Although made famous by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere," Revere's story has attracted many fine writers over the years, including one of the descendants of Samuel Adams, the organizer of the Sons of Liberty: Esther Forbes.

Although Esther Forbes would become a brilliant writer for both adults and young people, she suffered from a type of dyslexia. She could not spell words and used the dash as her only form of punctuation. These problems did not deter her from writing a biography of Paul Revere, *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In*, that won the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1943. An editor suggested that Forbes try her hand at writing history for young readers. Because American soldiers were going into World War II, Forbes reflected on how in peacetime adolescents are protected but in wartime they are asked to fight and die. Remembering the story of a young boy who delivered a critical message to Paul Revere, she produced the first draft of *Johnny Tremain*.

Normally, publishing a great story by a Pulitzer Prize winner would have been a "no brainer" for an editor—but Grace Hogarth at Houghton could not help but notice Forbes's issues with spelling and punctuation. Hogarth gathered her courage to tell Forbes that although she loved the book, she would have to standardize the spelling! Forbes merely said, "My editors always do that!" So a very messy manuscript got transformed into the greatest work of historical fiction for children in the first part of the twentieth century. According to editors on staff at the time, Forbes drove two aging proofreaders almost out of their minds in the process.

This complex and brilliant novel spans two years in the life of Johnny Tremain, an orphan and silversmith apprentice. While casting a sugar basin for John Hancock, he burns his right hand and must abandon his position. But he finds work as a messenger for the Sons of Liberty, becoming swept up in the American Revolution. Forbes brought an amazing amount of historical detail to life and takes young readers behind the scenes as the colonists decide to rebel against the British. As the *New York Times* said of her, she was "a novelist who wrote like a historian and a historian who wrote like a novelist."

I can think of no better way to begin a new year than rereading *Johnny Tremain*. It reminds all of us just how great fiction for young readers can be.

# JANUARY 1

Happy Birthday Jeanne DuPrau (*The City of Ember*).

It's the birth date of Maria Edgeworth (1767–1849), *Moral Tales for Young People*; J. D. Salinger (1919–2010), *The Catcher in the Rye*; and E. M. Forster (1879–1970), *A Room with a View*, *A Passage to India*.

It's also the birth date of Betsy Ross (1752–1836), credited with crafting the first American flag for the fledgling United States. Read *Betsy Ross* by Alexandra Wallner.

In 1788 *The Times*, London's oldest running newspaper, published its first edition.

On this day in 1863 President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves in the Confederacy.

It's National Soup Month. Read *Soup* by Robert Newton Peck, *Mouse Soup* by Arnold Lobel, *Stone Soup* by Marcia Brown, and *Chicken Soup with Rice* by Maurice Sendak.

It's National Book Blitz Month, an opportunity to promote books we love.

# JANUARY 2

Happy Birthday Jean Little (*From Anna*) and Lynda Barry (*The Good Times Are Killing Me*).

It's the birth date of Crosby Bonsall (1921–1995), *The Case of the Scaredy Cats, Piggie*; and Isaac Asimov (1920–1992), Foundation series.

Happy Birthday Georgia, which became the fourth U.S. state on this day in 1788. Read *Fame and Glory in Freedom, Georgia* by Barbara O'Connor.



In 1959 **Luna 1**, the first spacecraft to reach the vicinity of the moon, was launched by the U.S.S.R. Read *Beautiful Moon: Bella Luna* by Dawn Jeffers, illustrated by Bonnie Leick, and *The Moon Is La Luna* by Jay M. Harris, illustrated by Matthew Cordell.

## THE ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN UNDERPANTS

By Dav Pilkey

Today is set aside to “Run it up the flagpole and see if anyone salutes.” The concept behind the day, and the phrase, is to get people to try out a new idea. But often for children, these sayings take on literal meanings, such as in Jerry Spinelli’s *Who Ran My Underwear Up a Flagpole*.

For me, today, January 2, is a day for a new idea—a day of surrender. I have avoided talking about *Captain Underpants* for over ten years. Male friends have teased me about the book. Male journalists decried the fact that I did not include it in *100 Best Books for Children*. Even when I borrowed the book from my local library, one of the staff said, “I never thought I would see you check this out.”

But while I have been avoiding this book, the books in the Captain Underpants series have sold more than forty million copies; they have made children who think they hate books become readers; and they have made the author a household name. One of the standing jokes in publishing is that if you want to create a bestseller for children you should include underwear in the title. Comedic genius Dav Pilkey knew this a long time before publishers discovered it. Still

in touch with the kind of child that he was—“getting into trouble for pulling pranks, cracking jokes, and making silly comic books”—he invented his famous character in second grade. Fortunately, he didn’t listen to the teacher who told him to straighten up “because you can’t spend the rest of your life making silly books.” As an adult he returned to that character, and the rest is history.

In the first book in the series, *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*, published in 1997, readers meet the two anti-heroes George Beard and Harold Hutchins. The two BFFs find endless ways to create mayhem and end up spending more time with the principal, Mr. Krupp, than their teachers. After buying a 3-D Hypno-Ring, they hypnotize Mr. Krupp, causing him to run around town in his underpants and cape because he believes himself to be Captain Underpants.

The book contains so much silly, gross-out humor and action-filled drawings that young readers finish an entire book without meaning to. If you know a young reader, ages six through ten, who thinks books have to be boring, you might as well surrender. Your solution will be the ever-growing series—“lots of fun, lots of laffs”—that was first created in the mind of a prank-playing second grader. Today I am running Captain Underpants up the flagpole. We’ll see if anyone salutes him.

## DIAMOND WILLOW

By Helen Frost

Today marks Alaska's statehood day, when in 1959 Alaska became the forty-ninth state in the Union. Of the myriad books for children that have been set in Alaska, my favorite, *Diamond Willow* by Helen Frost, appeared in 2008. Frost lived and taught for three years in a small Athabaskan community in interior Alaska. Many years later she found the appropriate story, and poetic form, to pay tribute to those she had encountered there.

In this contemporary story Diamond Willow's father is a science teacher whose ancestors migrated across Canada and the United States for about 160 years before they settled in Old Fork. Her mother is of Athabaskan descent, people who have lived in Alaska for centuries. The spirits of their dead relatives inhabit the birds and animals living around them. Most of the story is narrated from the point of view of twelve-year-old Diamond Willow. She loves her community and particularly the sled dogs that the family uses. Convincing her father and mother that she is old enough to handle them alone, she heads out to her grandparents' home, only to have tragedy strike. Their prize dog Roxy suffers an accident that renders him blind. Naturally, Diamond Willow feels responsible. So when her parents decide to euthanize the dog because he will never run and lead sleds again, the girl takes matters into her own hands. She sets out, on the night of a terrible storm, to beg her grandparents to protect the dog.

Diamond Willow's story, which is written in diamond-shaped poems alternating with prose pieces, is told by the animals themselves. Their comments provide context for some of the events happening to Diamond Willow. On its most basic level, *Diamond Willow* tells the love story between a girl and her dog: she is willing to risk her own life to save this animal. But this is one of the rare books for children that also explores the spiritual realm. In it the love and longing of those now dead intersect with the struggles of the living. Imagine Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* set in Alaska, and you have an idea of the power of this brief text, only 110 pages long.

As with everything Helen Frost writes, poetic form lies at the heart of her structure. Each diamond-shaped poem contains a message, hidden in darker ink. The form of this work was inspired by diamond willow bark, which reveals reddish-brown diamonds that have a dark center, the scar of a missing branch. As Helen writes in the introduction, "The scars, and the diamonds that form around them, give diamond willow its beauty, and gave me the idea for my story."

In this rare look at a small town in interior Alaska, *Diamond Willow* provides a haunting, impossible-to-forget story—that lingers long after the reader closes the book.

## JANUARY 3

Happy Birthday Patricia Lee Gauch (*The Knitting of Elizabeth Amelia*), Tony Chen (*A Child's First Bible Storybook*), J. Otto Seibold (*Olive the Other Reindeer, Mind Your Manners, B.B. Wolf*), and Chris Soentpiet (*So Far from the Sea*).

It's J.R.R. Tolkien Day, in honor of the birthday of J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973), *The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings*.

It's also the birth date of Carolyn Haywood (1898–1990), "*B*" is for *Betsey*.

In 1870 construction began on the **Brooklyn Bridge**. Read *Brooklyn Bridge* by Karen Hesse and *Brooklyn Bridge* by Lynn Curlee.



Happy Birthday Alaska, which became the 49th U.S. state on this day in 1959.

# JANUARY 4

Happy Birthday Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (*Shiloh* trilogy, *Alice* series) and Robert Burleigh (*Hoops*, *One Giant Leap*).

It's the birth date of Jakob Grimm (1785–1863), *Grimm's Fairy Tales*.

Happy Birthday Utah, which became the 49th U.S. state on this day in 1896.

It's World Braille Day. Louis Braille (1809–1852), the creator of braille, a system enabling blind and visually impaired people to write and read, was born on this day. Read *Louis Braille: A Touch of Genius* by C. Michael Mellor, *A Picture Book of Louis Braille* by David A. Adler, illustrated by John and Alexandra Wallner, and *Out of the Darkness* by Russell Freedman, illustrated by Kate Kiesler.

## THE GREAT AND ONLY BARNUM: THE TREMENDOUS, STUPENDOUS LIFE OF SHOWMAN P. T. BARNUM

By Candace Fleming

On January 4, 1838, Charles Sherwood Stratton, probably the most famous small person in history, was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut. He was discovered in 1842 by another resident of the city, P. T. Barnum, and named “General Tom Thumb.” Because the General performed for years for Barnum, the two men are inextricably linked in history. A showman, con man, great humbug, philanthropist, Barnum learned early on that “When entertaining the public, it is best to have an elephant.”

Barnum's larger-than-life personality and his willingness to lie to his customers create a challenge for any biographer. Fortunately one of our most creative writers of narrative nonfiction, Candace Fleming, tackles this complex individual in a book for ten- to fourteen-year-olds, *The Great and Only Barnum: The Tremendous, Stupendous Life of Showman P. T. Barnum*.

All aspects of the book are adapted to be entertaining; even the acknowledgments have been written in the language of the circus. Readers first meet Barnum's joke-loving family who taught him that people love to be “humbled” or fooled. As one of his first acts, Barnum toured Joice Heth as “the world's oldest living woman”—a hoax done at the expense not only of the public, but also of this aged African-American. Fleming's authorial voice is impeccable as she describes Barnum's dubious actions. While she acknowledges the moral issues involved, she still manages to show events from Barnum's perspective. Although he exhibited the unusual or misshapen—bearded women, Siamese twins, a giantess, or General Tom Thumb—Barnum also provided housing, care, food, and employment for people who otherwise would have been shunned in nineteenth-century America.

Besides creating circus acts, Barnum purchased John Scudder's American Museum and built one of the great showplaces of his time, redefining the idea of an American museum. Readers go on a room-by-room tour of Barnum's creation. The American Museum became so popular that Barnum needed to find a way to get people to leave. So he created a sign that said “To the Egress.” Customers eager for the next exhibit hurried on, only to find themselves on the street.

A devout churchgoer and someone who gave generously to Bridgeport, Connecticut, Barnum seems like a contemporary American celebrity—a bit of fraud and a bit of genius, energetic and driven, capable of great cruelty and generosity.

Candace Fleming's superb biography can help us celebrate the birthday of Tom Thumb, the beginnings of the Barnum & Bailey Circus, or just the life of this quintessential American.

## THE RACE TO SAVE THE LORD GOD BIRD

By Phillip Hoose

Today marks a relatively new holiday on the calendar, National Bird Day—to think about the birds we keep as pets and how owning them affects the bird population on earth. Our attitudes toward animals and birds and how we treat them has changed dramatically over time.

No one has ever captured the changing mores about birds better than Phillip Hoose, in his masterpiece *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird*. In this intelligent photo-essay for fifth to eighth graders, Hoose focuses on the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, sometimes called the Lord God Bird, “a majestic and formidable species,” and its struggle for survival. In a book that covers two hundred years of bird history, readers first see those bird lovers of the 1800s, who shot, drew, and preserved their specimens. Then Audubon, another hunter, comes on the stage, but he preserves details of his prey through art. Some years later women’s hat fashions devastate the bird population. Everyone wanted a distinctive plume to wear in her chapeau. Consequently, the Audubon Society was created—to try to convince those with a fashion sense to leave out the birds. Hoose moves with grace and dexterity through American history—the need for timber, the shrinking habitat of the Ivory-bill, and the wanton collectors.

Hoose weaves the Ivory-bill in and out of his tale during this history, as the bird fights for survival while its habitat shrinks. Eventually the Cornell University ornithology crews head out into the swamps, with video cameras and microphones, to try to capture the sound of this bird. They are a different kind of hunter, seeking a scientific record.

By this point, anyone reading the book wants one thing—to actually see and hear one of these woodpeckers. How do you make people love something that no longer can be found? That, of course, has been the problem when it comes to all vanished species. If a child has never seen a passenger pigeon, how can he or she care what they were like? But Hoose manages to make readers care in this book. Through *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird* they can watch others come under the spell of this species and witness these creatures dwindle in number.

Shortly after *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird* appeared in print in 2004, a sighting of the Ivory-bill was reported and made national news. The sighting was never verified; but Phillip Hoose has made all his readers hope that some day, one will be seen again. Great for discussion, brilliant in its execution, *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird* should be read by everyone who loves winged creatures.

## JANUARY 5

Happy Birthday Lynne Cherry (*The Great Kapok Tree*) and Betsy Maestro (*How Do Apples Grow?, Why Do Leaves Change Color?*).

It’s the birth date of King Camp Gillette (1855–1932), the inventor of the safety razor, and Herbert Bayard Swope (1882–1958), the journalist who coined the term “Cold War.”

On this day in 1759 George Washington married Martha Dandridge Custis. Read *George and Martha* by James Marshall.

In 1781 British naval forces led by **Benedict Arnold** burned Richmond, Virginia. Read *The Notorious Benedict Arnold* by Steve Sheinkin.



Construction of the Golden Gate Bridge began in San Francisco Bay in 1933. Read *Pop’s Bridge* by Eve Bunting, illustrated by C. F. Payne.

# JANUARY 6

Happy Birthday Vera Cleaver (*Where the Lilies Bloom*) and Wendelin Van Draanen (*Flipped*).

It's the birth date of Carl Sandburg (1878–1967), *Rootabaga Stories*.

Happy Birthday to the fictional character Sherlock Holmes. Read *The Extraordinary Cases of Sherlock Holmes* by Arthur Conan Doyle.

Happy Birthday New Mexico, which became the 47th U.S. state on this day in 1912.

In 1929 Mother Teresa arrived in Calcutta to begin her work among India's poorest people. Read *Mother Theresa* by Tracey Dils.

In one of the closest presidential elections in U.S. history, George W. Bush was finally declared the winner of the bitterly contested 2000 presidential elections on this day in 2001.

It's Cuddle Up Day. Read *I Love to Cuddle* by Carl Norac, illustrated by Claude K. Dubois, and *Daddy Cuddles* by Anne Gutman and Georg Hallensleben.

## THE STORY OF JOAN OF ARC

By Maurice Boutet de Monvel

On January 6, or close to it, in 1412, a peasant girl destined to become a saint was born in Domrémy-la-Pucelle, France. As a teenager, Joan of Arc experienced visions, heard voices, and set out to save the King of France. She delivered Orléans from a siege during the Hundred Years War and paved the way for Charles VII to be crowned. Burned at the stake by the English, she was canonized in 1920. Joan became one of the first military maids, a symbol for countless women who wanted to take up weapons and fight.

The first brilliant biography for children of the Maid of Orléans was written by another resident of the city, Maurice Boutet de Monvel (1850–1913). A student at Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Boutet de Monvel, an academy painter, needed to augment his income. Hence he began to create children's books and contribute illustrations to *Century* and *Scribner's*, as well as the French edition of *St. Nicholas*, the famous magazine for boys and girls. But his interest in French history led him to write and illustrate his masterpiece, first published in Paris in 1896, *The Story of Joan of Arc*. Normally, I am a whole book critic—text and art have to work equally well for me to love a book. No one can possibly defend Boutet de Monvel's text. He was neither a writer nor a historian—but he was one of the great French artists of his period. The illustrations in this book are best used alone to present Joan of Arc's life.

What incredible images they are. Gerald Gottlieb, in the introduction to the book, argues that the rich detail in the book is reminiscent of early fifteenth-century illuminated manuscripts. They contain muted tones and the flat color found in Japanese prints. As Boutet de Monvel himself said about his art: "It is not color really, it is the impression, the suggestion of color." As the artist depicts Joan, he blends modern elements with the medieval. Even on the title page, she leads French soldiers wearing the uniform of 1896. This artwork displays processions and vast panoramas, stirring scenes of battles and of Joan's bravery.

Only a few first editions of the book exist, and the copy owned by The Morgan Library & Museum was used to create the paperback volume of the book now available. Anyone who loves children's book illustration—and wants a dramatic way to introduce Joan of Arc to children ages six to ten—should pick up a copy of Boutet de Monvel's *The Story of Joan of Arc*.

## ZORA AND ME

By Victoria Bond  
and T. R. Simon

Born on January 7, 1891, Zora Neale Hurston become one of the most renowned black writers of the twentieth century, part of the Harlem Renaissance, and pioneer of collecting regional black folklore. During her lifetime she was often compared to, and sometimes competed against, Richard Wright, but for a period of time her work vanished, while his became a staple of high school and college curricula. In the 1970s Alice Walker became Hurston's champion, and because of the generosity of one living writer to one dead, Hurston and her 1937 classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God* once again became part of the adult literary canon.

How does any author for children take a well-known adult writer, whose books stand outside of the comprehension of a young audience, and make the person come alive? In one of the best debut novels of 2010, two young writers, Victoria Bond and T. R. Simon, set out to make Hurston a real person for young readers ages eleven to fourteen. The two, who had worked together in publishing, discovered they shared a passion for Hurston's work. Simon had studied anthropology, Bond, writing, so they combined their talents to create *Zora and Me*, a novel that explores the childhood of Zora Neale Hurston.

In the book, readers see Zora from the point of view of her best friend, Carrie, as the two grow up at the beginning of the twentieth century in Eatonville, an all-black town in Florida. Zora excels in storytelling; she takes real incidents and either "lies" about them as some of her classmates believe or embroiders them to make a good tale. Zora's father rejects her for being educated or "acting white." When a murder occurs in the town, the girls watch and eavesdrop as town members find a way to solve this crime. What the authors do best is bring two ten-year-old girls to life, in all of their excitement and wonder, without softening the types of racism and prejudice both face. In the end, Carrie realizes that Zora has places to go: "One day her mother's arms and best friend would not be enough to contain her."

Excellent endnotes, an annotated bibliography, and a time line provide added background to Hurston's life. Adults sharing it will see some of the characters and themes of Hurston's work developed in the book. For children, this character-driven work presents two very appealing young girls. The only book not written by Hurston herself to be endorsed by the Zora Neale Hurston Trust, *Zora and Me*, written with love and passion, will create young readers eager to read Hurston's books when they are old enough to do so.

## JANUARY 7

Happy Birthday Kay Choroa (*Shadow Night*), Rosekrans Hoffman (*Pignic*), and Ethel Kessler (*Stan the Hot Dog Man*).

It's the birth date of Eleanor Clymer (1906–2001), *The Trolley Car Family*.

It's also the birth date of **Millard Fillmore** (1800–1874), the 13th President of the United States.



Help! The distress signal "CQD" was established in 1904 only to be replaced two years later by "SOS." Read *The SOS File* by Betsy Byars, Betsy Duffey, and Laurie Myers; and *The Watch that Ends the Night* by Allan Wolf.

It's Old Rock Day. Read *Everybody Needs a Rock* by Byrd Baylor, *If You Find a Rock* by Peggy Christian, and *Rocks In My Pockets* by Marc Harshman and Bonnie Collins.

# JANUARY 8

Happy Birthday Stephen Manes (*Be a Perfect Person in Just Three Days!*), Nancy Bond (*A String in the Harp*), Floyd Cooper (*The Blacker the Berry*), and Marjorie Priceman (*Zin! Zin! Zin! A Violin!*, *How to Make an Apple Pie and See the World*).

Happy Birthday to the Chicago Public Library system, begun with the Blackstone Library, dedicated in 1904. Read *The Library* by Sarah Stewart, illustrated by David Small.

In 1963 Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa was exhibited in the U.S. for the first time, at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Read *The Mona Lisa Caper* by Rick Jacobson and Laura Fernandez.

It's Bubble Bath Day. Read *Squeaky Clean* by Simon Puttock, illustrated by Mary McQuillan.

## THE MIDWIFE'S APPRENTICE

By Karen Cushman

In Greece January 8 has been designated Midwife's Day or Women's Day, to honor midwives. Midwifery, of course, has a long and important history throughout the world. Drawing on her extensive knowledge of medieval times, Karen Cushman chose the practice of helping women deliver babies as the subject for her second novel, *The Midwife's Apprentice*, winner of the Newbery Medal.

The book opens with an intriguing scene: an unwashed, unloved, un nourished young girl climbs into a dung heap to seek shelter for the night. Awoken in the morning by noisy boys calling her "dung beetle," the girl begs for food from a woman who comes by, offering to do any work for it. That woman, Jane Sharp, happens to be the midwife of the area, plying her craft with herbs and drawing on vast experience delivering babies. So Beetle, as she is now called, becomes her apprentice, soaking up the schooling that Jane provides.

Living up to her name, Jane is truly sharp in manner and style, always cursing the young apprentice; Beetle has a softer, gentler manner. One day a villager only wants to hire the young girl—for a case that

Beetle cannot handle. Feeling guilt and remorse, Beetle runs away—but ultimately has the courage to face Jane and ask for another chance.

*The Midwife's Apprentice* is filled with the sights, sounds, and smells of a medieval village. Beetle, who has a single companion, a cat named Purr, makes a great protagonist. She has the liveliness, the spirit, and the determination to make a better place for herself. Ideal for fourth and fifth graders, the book has frequently been taught in classrooms and naturally leads to discussions of medieval villages and life—the fairs and inns and customs.

Many authors long to find an editor who will appreciate their work. In the case of Karen Cushman, she entrusted her first novel, *Catherine, Called Birdy*, to a friend in New York. He lived in the same apartment building as Dorothy Briley, one of the great children's editors of the twentieth century, and he stalked her, always with manuscript in hand. One day he jumped into the elevator with Dorothy and thrust the manuscript at her. Without missing a beat, Dorothy took the package to her apartment. The next morning she brought it in for editor Dinah Stevenson to look over. Fortunately for young readers, Karen found a sympathetic and skilled midwife in Dinah, one who has helped bring all of her books into the world.

## FREDDY THE DETECTIVE

By Walter R. Brooks

On January 9, 1886, Walter R. Brooks was born in Rome, New York. Orphaned at an early age, he was sent to a military academy and then attended the University of Rochester. An interest in homeopathic medicine brought him to New York City, where he worked for the Red Cross. He then turned his hand to writing, at first stories for *The New Yorker* and *Scribners*.

Many of his short stories for adults, which appeared in *Saturday Review* and *Esquire*, featured Ed the Talking Horse—the inspiration for a 1960s television series. But Brooks’s novels for young people centered on a very unlikely protagonist who overeats, sleeps too much, daydreams, and is very lazy. Not the usual characteristics of a heroic figure. But Freddy is a pig, and he starred in twenty-six books that began in 1927 with *Freddy Goes to Florida*. Freddy, however, does possess virtues; he is even something of a Renaissance pig. He writes poetry, paints, edits the *Bean Home News*, and most important, runs a successful detective agency that has been based on the solid principles established by Sherlock Holmes. Freddy is also a balloonist, a magician, a campaign manager, and a pilot. He and the other barnyard characters—Mrs. Wiggins the cow, Jinx the cat, Hank the horse, and Charles the bragging rooster—have a lot of interesting adventures together.

Brooks brought American homespun humor and a profound understanding of children to his books. As he said, “Children are people; they are just smaller and less experienced [than adults]. They are not taken in by the smug playfulness of those who write or talk down to them as if they were dull-witted and slightly deaf.”

Extremely popular for years, the Freddy books began to go out of print in the 1980s, although they were never out of favor with an avid “Friends of Freddy” fan club. In the 1990s, Overlook Press began reprinting these funny, gentle stories, bringing them to a new generation of readers. In *Everything I Need to Know I Learned from a Children’s Book*, writer Adam Hochschild wrote about his fascination with Freddy and the entire series of books: “the moral center of my childhood universe, the place where good and evil, friendship and treachery, honesty and humbug were defined most clearly, was not church, not school, and not the Boy Scouts. It was the Bean Farm. . . . Essentially, [the books] evoke the most subversive politics of all: a child’s instinctive desire for fair play.”

## JANUARY 9

It’s the birth date of Clyde Robert Bulla (1914–2007), *A Lion to Guard Us*.

It’s also the birth date of Richard Milhous Nixon (1913–1994), the 37th President of the United States.

Happy Birthday Connecticut, which became the fifth U.S. state on this day in 1788. Read *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* by Mark Twain.

Before Barnum & Bailey or Ringling Brothers, Philip Astley staged the first modern circus in London, 1768. Read *Henrietta Hornbuckle’s Circus of Life* by Michael de Guzman.

The **United Nations headquarters** officially opened in New York City in 1951.



It’s Positively Penguins Day. Read *Mr. Popper’s Penguins* by Richard and Francis Atwater or *My Season with Penguins* by Sophie Webb.

# JANUARY 10

Happy Birthday Remy Charlip (*Arm in Arm*) and Max Grover (*The Accidental Zucchini*).

It's the birth date of both Charles Ingalls (1836–1902), father of Laura Ingalls Wilder, and of her sister Mary Ingalls. Read any of the Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder.



In 1776 **Thomas Paine** published *Common Sense*. Read *Thomas Paine: Common Sense and Revolutionary Pamphleteering* by Brian McCartin.

John D. Rockefeller incorporated Standard Oil in 1870. Read *Oil Spill!* by Melvin Berger.

It's Peculiar People Day. Read *The Kneebone Boy* by Ellen Potter.

## 10 LITTLE RUBBER DUCKS

By Eric Carle

On January 10, 1992, a cargo of around 29,000 rubber toys—including ducks, beavers, turtles, and frogs—fell overboard from a container ship in the northern Pacific Ocean. Some eventually landed on a remote coast of Alaska. In *Tracking Trash: Flotsam, Jetsam, and the Science of Ocean Motion*, author Loree Griffin Burns explains what actually happened to these objects; she explains the work of Dr. Curtis Ebbesmeyer, who tracked the toys around the world.

But our book of the day, and author/artist of the day, is a bit more whimsical in his approach to the events of January 10, 1992. Eric Carle has always said that he is never happier than when he is painting the collage papers that he uses to build his artwork. In *10 Little Rubber Ducks*, he once again shares his joy with readers as he imagines what the journey of the rubber ducks on that container ship might have been like. He shows the ducks being built, put into boxes, loaded on the ship, and getting dumped into the big wide sea.

Drawing on what he does best—the depiction of fish, birds, and mammals; all creatures great and small—Eric shows each of the ten ducks encounter-

ing different creatures, from a polar bear to a flamingo. A whale sings to the ninth rubber duck. But he saves for the tenth the best fate of all, being adopted by a mother duck and becoming part of a family. I know I feel a lot better about the world after reading this reassuring book. It shows that difficult situations can be survived and have happy endings. If for any reason you need further entertaining, a squeak device for the rubber duck has been built into the last page of the book. He certainly sounds happy.

Few have ever shown the joy and enthusiasm about life on this planet as brilliantly as Eric Carle. After a brief childhood in the United States, he was taken with his German parents back to Hitler's Germany. Brutally disciplined in school, Eric knew personally what it meant to move from joy to difficulty. But much like his rubber ducks, he found a happy ending, a home back in the United States, painting and drawing his collage masterpieces that give both adults and children so much joy.

With Rubber Duckie Day occurring on the thirteenth of this month, you might want to get out yours and read *10 Little Rubber Ducks*. For me the world always seems a kinder, gentler place after I finish any book by Eric Carle.

## MRS. FRISBY AND THE RATS OF NIMH

By Robert C. O'Brien

Today marks the birthday of one of the most reclusive children's book authors of all time. He was not so, however, because of his personality or because he did not want to engage with children. Robert Leslie Conly was born in Brooklyn in 1918; he studied English at the University of Rochester. Working for magazines his entire life, he wrote for *Newsweek* before joining the staff of *National Geographic*.

But in the late 1960s, Conly wrote three books for children. His work arrangement with *National Geographic*, however, forbid him from publishing with any other company. So he did what many authors have done before: he printed his books under a pseudonym—Robert C. O'Brien, based on his mother's name. He also made no appearances on behalf of his books, to protect his true identity. His second book, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, combines talking-animal fantasy with science fiction. When dear Mrs. Frisby, a widowed mouse, learns that her own home may soon be destroyed by a plow, she attempts to move her sick son to safety. As a last resort, she consults the rats that live under the rosebush. These superintelligent laboratory rodents had been fed mind-enhancing drugs. One of them, Nicodemus, narrates how he and the other rats, part of an experiment in the National Institute of Mental Health, learned to read and finally escape to form a brave new rat world. "By teaching us how to read, they taught us how to get away." This story works both as adventure but also as an exploration of what constitutes intelligence and community.

*Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* often lingers in the mind of its readers. British journalist Lucy Mangan read the book when she was nine, and in *Everything I Need to Know I Learned from a Children's Book* wrote, "It rocked my world. Everything I took for granted only existed because it was built or organized by us, because we were here first. But it could have been so different."

When *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* won the Newbery Medal in 1972, O'Brien faced a real dilemma. As part of winning the award, he was expected to appear at the annual ALA conference and give a speech. In the end, he sent his editor Jean Karl with his comments and remained anonymous until his death in 1973. Then his wife and his daughter Jane finished his last book, *Z for Zachariah*; only after he died did his readers learn his true identity.

I always think Robert C. O'Brien should be the patron saint of shy children's book authors and illustrators. Without book tours, media interviews, talking to children, or any form of personal marketing, O'Brien gained his following simply through writing one of the great fantasy/science fiction stories of the modern era.

## JANUARY 11

Happy Birthday Mary Rodgers (*Freaky Friday*) and Ann Tompert (*Grandfather Tang's Story*).

Milk was first delivered in bottles in 1878. Read *The Milk Makers* by Gail Gibbons.

In 1922 insulin was used for the first time to treat diabetes in a human patient. Read *The Truth About Stacey* by Ann M. Martin.

It's Step in a Puddle and Splash Your Friends Day, but only if you live in an ice- and snowless place. Read *Splish, Splash* by Sarah Weeks, *Splash* by Ann Jonas, and *The Problem with Puddles* by Kate Feiffer.

# JANUARY 12

Happy Birthday Nina Laden (*Peek-A Who?*) and Margaret Rostkowski (*After the Dancing Days*).



It's the birth date of Laura Adams Armer (1874–1963), *Waterless Mountain*; Clement Hurd (1908–1988), *Goodnight Moon*; **Jack London** (1876–1916), *White Fang*, *Call of the Wild*; and fairy-tale writer Charles Perrault

(1628–1703).

It's also the birth date of John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), the American artist considered the greatest portrait painter of his era.

A long-distance radio message was sent from the Eiffel Tower for the first time in 1908. Read *Dodsworth in Paris* by Tim Egan.

## THE CALL OF THE WILD

By Jack London

On January 12, 1876, Jack London was born in San Francisco, California. But the event that shaped London's life occurred in 1896 when he was twenty. Three men who were fishing for salmon—Shookum Jim, Dawson Charlie, and George Carmack—found gold in Rabbit Creek, a small tributary of the Klondike River in Alaska. Because of their discovery, tens of thousands came over the Chilcoot Pass, swept up in the mass hysteria of the Klondike Gold Rush. Since sled dogs provided the only reliable transportation in this uninviting climate, dogs were stolen from owners throughout America and worked to death by those hunting for their fortune.

At the age of twenty-one, Jack London also became part of the gold rush, not as a prospector but as a laborer, carrying bags and packages. This experience allowed him to make observations about the men and these dogs, which turned into his great masterpiece, *The Call of the Wild*.

London chose to tell the story from the point of view of a dog, Buck. Weighing 140 pounds, Buck begins his life as a pampered pet. Kidnapped for service in the gold rush and beaten by his master, Buck struggles to survive. Although mistreated by humans,

Buck is saved by a man and becomes devoted to him. In the end, however, Buck becomes part of a wolf pack, determined to live in the wild on his own terms. Although first published as an adult novella in 1903, the book quickly became part of the childhood canon, often read in school.

As reading guru Jim Trelease says in *Everything I Need to Know I Learned from a Children's Book*, "*The Call of the Wild* . . . [was] my home run book. . . . Like one's first big kiss or first home run—they're unforgettable, and we spend the rest of our lives trying to duplicate or surpass them." For Jim, and so many children ages ten to fourteen, this piece of virtual reality has brought the Klondike gold rush to life.

My favorite edition of the book is the Scribner Classic, illustrated by Wendell Minor. His Buck looks exactly like I imagine him to be—although I may be partial. Wendell used a Bernese mountain dog as his model, and I share my life with members of this breed.

But whatever version you decide to pick up, there is still no better way to understand what happened over a hundred years ago in the Yukon than Jack London's brilliant classic *The Call of the Wild*.

## LETTERS FROM A DESPERATE DOG

By Eileen Christelow

The second week of January is designated as National Letter Writing week, celebrating the art of writing and receiving a hand-written letter. Certainly in the age of computers, letter writing on paper has suffered in popularity. Even the protagonist of our book of the day, Emma, uses the keyboard to send off her letter. Possibly Emma can be forgiven for not using pen and paper because she happens to be a dog. In Eileen Christelow's humorous masterpiece, *Letters from a Desperate Dog*, illustrated in the comic-book style that endears the artist to her readers, Christelow demonstrates a keen understanding of canine behavior.

From Emma's point of view, her owner George, an artist, seems completely unreasonable. He gets upset if she sleeps on the couch or explores the trash. He tells her "no" or that she is a "bad dog." So, in despair, Emma writes to the new canine advice column "Ask Queenie!" Fortunately her local public library provides computer access to all. Queenie tells Emma to keep her tail wagging and everything will work out well in the end—certainly brilliant advice for any dog. Unfortunately when Emma tries it, she dips her tail into George's red paint can and the results are disastrous. "I would have been better off taking a nap on the couch," Emma complains.

On Queenie's advice Emma goes out to get work. After she applies for a part in a play, Emma rides away on the bus that takes the performers on tour. Eventually, George sees the errors of his ways because he misses her. But even as all ends well, Emma confides to Queenie, "this probably won't be my last e-mail. You know how unpredictable George can be!"

Eileen Christelow has been enchanting children for years with her Five Little Monkeys series. For *Letters from a Desperate Dog*, she drew from personal experience—watching some exchanges between her husband and their dog, Emma. Emma had been a real challenge as a puppy, and they had even returned her to the Humane Society only to bring her home again. In the book, Eileen certainly supports Emma's point of view—or at least she knows it makes the funnier story.

I have always been grateful that my dogs don't have access to a keyboard; no doubt they'd sound a bit like Emma. For all who love dogs, love humor, and want to see a letter-writing exchange that will keep them laughing, pick up *Letters from a Desperate Dog* and its sequel *The Desperate Dog Writes Again*.

# JANUARY 13

Happy Birthday Michael Bond (Paddington Bear series).

It's the birth date of Horatio Alger (1832–1899), *Ragged Dick*, *Struggling Upward*; and Albert Lamorisse (1922–1970), *The Red Balloon*.

Happy Birthday to Britain's daily paper, *The Times*, first published in 1785 as *The Daily Universal Register*.

In 1910 the first public radio broadcast was a transmission from the **Metropolitan Opera House** of a live performance. Therefore, it's Public Radio Broadcasting Day. Read *Radio Fifth Grade* by Gordon Korman.



Celebrate the bathtub icon on Rubber Ducky Day. Read *It's Useful to Have a Duck* by Isol and *Ducky* by Eve Bunting, illustrated by David Wisniewski.

# JANUARY 14

It's the birth date of Thornton W. Burgess (1874–1965), *Mother West Wind's Neighbors*; Hugh Lofting (1886–1947), *Doctor Dolittle*; and Hendrik Willem van Loon (1882–1944), *The Story of Mankind*.

The Human Be-In took place in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park in 1967, the prelude to "the Summer of Love." Read *The Young Oxford Book of the Human Being* by David Glover.

In 1972 Queen Margrethe II of Denmark ascended the throne, the first queen of Denmark since 1412 and the first Danish monarch not named Frederick or Christian since 1513.

On this day in 1784 Congress ratified the treaty of Paris officially ending the Revolutionary War. Read *Will You Sign Here, John Hancock?* by Jean Fritz.

It's Dress Up Your Pet Day, though we don't know how the outfitted animals really feel about this. Read *Fancy Nancy* by Jane O'Connor.

## SORCERY & CECELIA

By Patricia Wrede and  
Caroline Stevermer

If any book might inspire young readers ages eleven to fourteen to pick up their pens and start composing during National Letter Writing Week, it will be the book of the day, Patricia Wrede and Caroline Stevermer's *Sorcery & Cecelia*.

Although this title is most often found in young adult collections, absolutely nothing in the content makes it outside the range for fifth through seventh grade fantasy fans. Anyone who can devour an eight-hundred-page Harry Potter novel possesses the necessary reading skills. Set in Regency England, the story might have been coauthored by Jane Austen and J. K. Rowling. Told as an epistolary novel between two cousins, Kate and Cecelia, the saga begins in April of 1817, as the girls write about what happens when one goes to London for the season and the other stays in the country. Powerful wizards battle in this world, and Kate, at her first major London event, is mistaken for one of them and narrowly escapes being poisoned. Cecelia dabbles in making charm bags, particularly to help her goose-witted brother, Oliver. But he manages to get himself turned into a tree anyway. As they chatter on about balls and gowns and boys, picnics and mysterious men, both of them get swept up in this war of wizards—and they find love in the process. For Letter Writing Week, *Sorcery & Cecelia* naturally suggests the activity of pairing two writers together to write their own novel in letters.

This novel with delicious language, settings, and plot twists, first appeared in 1988, went out of print, and was then reissued with an attractive jacket in 2003. It began as a letter game played by the two authors. One would write a letter, and then the other responded. Neither knew where the story was headed, and the book reads like a literary tennis match—readers learn what is happening at the same time that the authors do. For anyone who loves English romance and fantasy—even for adults who read Georgette Heyer—this book holds great charm and humor. It often gets adopted for mother/daughter book discussion groups, because it delights all the participants. In this book readers have just as much fun turning the pages as the writers did creating it.

## CAPS FOR SALE

By Esphyr Slobodkina

Today we celebrate National Hat Day. I love wearing hats. What shoes did for Imelda Marcos—hats do for me. Given this propensity, I have always hunted for good books featuring my favorite apparel. Yet the one that still pleases me the most first appeared in 1940. Esphyr Slobodkina's *Caps for Sale* reinforces my fantasy of wearing several hats at a time.

Born in Siberia into a family of considerable artistic talent, Slobodkina fled Russia because of the Revolution, and in 1928 at the age of twenty, arrived in New York. She quickly became involved with a group of painters and sculptors called American Abstract Artists that included Josef Albers, Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock. Much inspired by Henri Rousseau, she began showing her work with Arshile Gorky, Stuart Davis, and Mondrian.

But she needed to supplement her income and sought out Margaret Wise Brown, who at that point worked as an editor for William R. Scott, the independent, experimental publisher that would also release the work of Gertrude Stein for children. Dressed in a swirling Bohemian black cape and beaded skullcap, Slobodkina may have impressed Brown as much by her outfits as she did with the storyboards she delivered. Certainly Slobodkina's fine sense of style was preserved in her nattily dressed peddler featured in *Caps for Sale*. Brown offered her a contract, and eventually the two created several books together, including *The Little Fireman*.

Finally, when Slobodkina got to write and illustrate her own book, she turned to a story passed on to her by her nephew: *Caps for Sale: A Tale of a Peddler, Some Monkeys and Their Monkey Business*. A peddler, with all of his wares stacked on his head, advertises his caps for sale. When he takes a nap, some monkeys steal the hats, put them on their heads, and climb into trees. When he asks for the hats back, the monkeys reply, "Tsz, tsz, tsz." The repetitive refrain and the well-paced text make the book absolutely perfect for group sharing. For over seventy years children have loved acting out the part of the mischievous animals in this spirited tale of monkeys and their monkey business.

I have never been able to resist the caps in the story. It makes me want to pile up my own hats and wear several at a time. Maybe I will do so for National Hat Day.

# JANUARY 15

Happy Birthday Ernest J. Gaines (*The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*).

It's the birth date of Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968). Read *Martin's Big Words* by Doreen Rappaport, illustrated by Bryan Collier.

Elizabeth I was crowned Queen of England in Westminster Abbey, London, in 1559. Read *Good Queen Bess* by Diane Stanley.

James Naismith published the rules of basketball in 1892. Read *My Basketball Book* by Gail Gibbons.

A lethal mess! In 1919 a large molasses tank in Boston, Massachusetts, burst and a wave rushed through the streets, killing 21 people and injuring 150 others. Read *The Great Molasses Flood* by Deborah Kops.

# JANUARY 16

Happy Birthday Robert Lipsyte (*Center Field*), Kate McMullan (*I Stink!*), Andrew Glass (*Mountain Men*), Marla Frazee (*All the World*), and Rebecca Stead (*When You Reach Me*).

The 18th Amendment to the Constitution, forbidding the manufacture and sale of alcohol in the United States, was ratified in 1919. Read *Bootleg: Murder, Moonshine, and the Lawless Years of Prohibition* by Karen Blumenthal.

The first edition of *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* (Book One of Don Quixote) by Miguel de Cervantes was published in Madrid in 1605.

It's Appreciate a Dragon Day. Identify your favorite dragon in children's literature. Read *My Father's Dragon* by Ruth Stiles Gannett.

On National Nothing Day, don't celebrate, observe, or honor anything. Unless you want to. Read *Nothing* by Jon Agee and *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume.

## BLACK DUCK

By Janet Taylor Lisle

On January 16, 1919, the ratification of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution was certified. The 18th Amendment forbids the manufacture and sale of alcohol in the United States. In many areas of the country, people felt justified breaking this particular law. In *Black Duck*, published in 2006, Janet Taylor Lisle spins a fascinating tale for fifth through eighth graders that revolves around rum-running and Prohibition. Lisle sets the book along the Rhode Island coast near Newport, a place of small beaches and landing spots. In the Narraganset Bay, small vessels made contact with alcohol-carrying boats from Canada, Europe, and the West Indies, moored outside of U.S. territorial limits. Then these boats brought the liquor to the coast, where it was unloaded in the middle of the night and often stored in cellars. Key to the story is the notorious *Black Duck*, a vessel that continually outruns the Coast Guard.

The protagonist of this contemporary story, David Peterson, has just finished eighth grade. He becomes intrigued by this part of Rhode Island's past and sets out to record the story of Ruben Hart, now an old man, who as a boy had become involved with rum-running. Slowly Ruben opens up, about his own involvement and that of his best friend Jeddy. By the late 1920s everyone in the town—including the constables—was getting involved one way or another in this illicit trade. But so much money was being made that gangsters from first Boston and then New York begin to take over the territory. When Ruben and Jeddy find

a dead man on the beach, and Ruben takes his pipe and tobacco pouch, they get swept into the alcohol trade. They change from innocent boys to willing accomplices of criminals. In this time period, it is difficult to tell the good guys from the bad ones. Ruben gets kidnapped several times, and fortunately survives the last mission of the *Black Duck*, when three members of the crew are killed.

This mystery/adventure is so exciting, readers barely notice they are learning a good bit of local and national history about the Rhode Island coastal community and the Prohibition era. If you want to explain the 18th Amendment or just entertain young readers, pick up *Black Duck*.

## MARTIN'S BIG WORDS: THE LIFE OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

By Doreen Rappaport

Illustrated by Bryan Collier

When we come to the third Monday in January, I am often reminded that I did not celebrate Martin Luther King Day as a child. But I did have an opportunity to witness the incredible life and amazing accomplishments of Dr. King. I still remember exactly what I was doing when I heard the news of his assassination.

For those who did not watch the unfolding drama of Dr. King's life, how does an author convey his amazing charisma? How do you show the way one human being can become larger than life and move into the conscience of those who watched him live? Particularly, how can you do this for young readers, ages four to ten, who want to know why we are celebrating Martin Luther King Day?

In 2001 veteran author Doreen Rappaport and then-novice illustrator Bryan Collier published *Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, one of the best picture books of the decade. Everything in this book was executed with care—all of it contributes to a feeling of the grandeur of the subject.

To begin, there are no words on the front jacket. Bryan Collier has used all of the space for his warm, animated painting of Dr. King, larger than life, ready to come off the page. The endpapers, which look like stained-glass windows, welcome readers into the story. As Bryan Collier wrote, "When I close my eyes and think about Dr. King's life, the main image that comes to me over and over again is the stained-glass windows in a church." The story, narrated only in double-page spreads, relates a few incidents from Dr. King's life, but all seem vitally important. Collier uses collage to build each scene. Rappaport alternates between segments of King's life and important phrases of his speeches. These phrases have been set in large type conveying the feeling that these words are indeed "big."

The author seamlessly moves from King's childhood, where he sees signs that say "White Only," through his early professional years. The book presents the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Civil Rights Movement, and the awarding of the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize to Dr. King. Although, inevitably, the narrative takes readers to the day in Memphis, Tennessee, when Dr. King was shot, the last line proclaims, "His big words are alive for us today."

Both author and illustrator have rendered a complex set of circumstances understandable for children. They convey the power and charisma of Dr. King. And they have introduced to young readers some of the words of one of our most eloquent leaders. Remarkable achievements for a forty-page picture book.

On Martin Luther King Day I am grateful not only for the life of Dr. King but also for this brilliantly executed book.

# JANUARY 17

Happy Birthday Janet Stevens (*Tops & Bottoms*).

It's the birth date of John Bellairs (1938–1991), *The House With a Clock in Its Walls*; Robert Cormier (1925–2000), *The Chocolate War*; and A. B. Frost (1851–1928), *Stuff and Nonsense*.

It's the birth date of both Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) and Al Capone (1899–1947). Read *Ben and Me* by Robert Lawson and *Al Capone Does My Shirts* by Gennifer Choldenko.

# JANUARY 18

Happy Birthday Catherine Anholt (*Chimp and Z*), Raymond Briggs (*The Snowman*), and Alan Schroeder (*Ragtime Tumpie*).

It's the birth date of A. A. Milne (1882–1956), *The House at Pooh Corner*.

It's the birth date of lexicographer Peter Roget (1779–1869), *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*. It's also Thesaurus Day.



In 1903 **President Theodore Roosevelt** sent a radio message to King Edward VII, the first transatlantic radio transmission originating in the United States. Read *The Radio* by Gayle Worland.

On this day in 1943 sliced bread was banned in the United States as part of the World War II conservation effort. But because of public outcry the ban was lifted just two months later.

Jazz goes mainstream! In 1944 the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City hosted a jazz concert for the first time. Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, Lionel Hampton, Artie Shaw, Roy Eldridge, and Jack Teagarden played. Read *If I Only Had a Horn* by Roxane Orgil.

them to life.

I'm glad a Winnie-the-Pooh Day exists; the world is a better place because of this book. It has made children and families laugh, recite poetry, and even sing together for decades.

## WINNIE-THE-POOH

By A. A. Milne

Illustrated by Ernest H. Shepard

Today has been designated Winnie-the-Pooh Day. On October 14, 1926, a British playwright, who also liked to dabble in poetry and prose for children, published a book named after a stuffed toy bear: “Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin.”

Milne's son Christopher Robin had been, with the help of his mother, making up stories about his toys. Eventually Alan Milne joined in, writing an occasional poem and scene about Pooh and Christopher's other toys—Piglet, Eeyore, Owl, Kanga and Roo, and Tigger, the tiger who liked to bounce. Milne spun these tales out, adding his own blend of whimsy and creative imagination to the material that Christopher had already provided. In the wonderful Hundred Acre Wood, these animals and Christopher Robin build a trap for a Heffalump, plan an “exposition” to the North Pole, and engage in a variety of exciting activities.

Then, one Saturday morning, the artist Ernest Shepard, who did not have an appointment, called on Milne at home to show a portfolio of his sketches. Milne loved these drawings, and consequently Shepard provided drawings for Milne's poetry volume, *When We Were Very Young*, and also *Winnie-the-Pooh*.

Today at New York Public Library's Children's Center at 42nd Street, the old and now battered toys of Christopher Robin Milne have found a permanent home. Preserved in cases for the delight of other children, they stand stiff and lifeless in place. Like all toys, they needed the care and imaginative power of their owner—and in this case, his father—to bring

## THE MAN WHO WAS POE

By Avi

On January 19, 1809, Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts. At some time or another during childhood or adolescence, almost every child in America falls under his spell. I remember the first time my mother read me “The Raven;” later I became obsessed with his dark mysteries and macabre short stories. Poe lived only for a brief forty years, but he was the first well-known American writer who attempted to live on proceeds from his works as an author—resulting in a difficult, erratic financial life. Things haven’t changed much in two hundred years!

In 1989 Avi wrote a multilayered, haunting tribute to this literary master, *The Man Who Was Poe*. When working on the book, Avi resided in Providence, Rhode Island, and focused the novel on the brief period of time Poe also lived there, November 1848, while he was courting Mrs. Sarah Helen Whitman. From this period comes the daguerreotype of Poe most frequently reproduced, and at one point in Avi’s book, Poe goes to the studio to have this picture taken.

The story opens with Edmund and his twin, Sis, living alone in a tenement room without food. Their caretaker, their aunt, has been gone for two days. Ignoring his aunt’s explicit instruction, Edmund leaves to find something for them to eat. When he returns, he faces his worst possible nightmare—his sister has vanished.

Running into a man who calls himself Dupin (Edgar Allan Poe), Edmund enlists his aid to find his aunt and sister. In fog-shrouded streets of Providence, with villainous creatures who haunt the docks, a tale of mystery and deception ensues. It is, in fact, just the type of tale Poe himself might have spun out of his fevered brain, involving trysts in a cemetery, ghosts, and a bank robbery.

It is unclear, as can often be the case in postmodern novels, whether Poe himself is simply writing this story, or if events are happening and Poe is trying to make a story out of them. Either way, readers learn about Poe’s life, the death of his beloved wife, Virginia (Sis), and his attempt to find a new wife and stabilize himself in Providence. Often taught to fifth through seventh graders, the book definitely gives young readers the background they need if, and when, they become Poe addicts. Historical fiction, mystery, and horror, *The Man Who Was Poe* dishes them all out in equal measure.

Happy Birthday Edgar Allan Poe. As a child, I thought that the phrase “Quoth the Raven, ‘Nevermore,’” was one of the coolest lines written in the English language. I still do.

## JANUARY 19

Happy Birthday Nina Bawden (*Granny the Pag*) and Pat Mora (*Book Fiesta*).

In 1840 **Captain Charles Wilkes** completed circumnavigating Antarctica, claiming what became known as Wilkes Land for the United States. Read *Antarctica: Journeys to the South Pole* by Walter Dean Myers.



It’s National Popcorn Day. Read *The Popcorn Book* by Tomie dePaola; *Popcorn* by Alex Moran, illustrated by Betsy Everitt; and *The Ghost of Popcorn Hill* by Betty Ren Wright, illustrated by Karen Ritz.

It’s also Tin Can Day. Read *The Tin Forest* by Helen Ward and Wayne Anderson, and *Gregory, The Terrible Eater* by Mitchell Sharmat.

# JANUARY 20

Happy Birthday Tedd Arnold (*Hi! Fly Guy*) and Mary Anderson (*The Rise and Fall of a Teenage Wacko*).

It's the birth date of Joy Adamson (1910–1980), *Born Free*; and Helen Hoover (1910–1984), *A Place in the Woods*.

In 1885 L. A. Thompson patented the roller coaster. Read *Roller Coaster* by Marla Frazee.

The first official basketball game was played in 1892 at the YMCA in Springfield, Massachusetts. Read *Basketball (Or Something Like It)* by Nora Raleigh Baskin.

It's Inauguration Day. On this day in 2009, Barack Obama was inaugurated as the 44th president of the United States, making him the first African-American president. Read *Barack Obama: Son of Promise, Child of Hope* by Nikki Grimes, illustrated by Bryan Collier.

## 365 PENGUINS

By Jean-Luc Fromental  
and Joëlle Jolivet

Today marks Penguin Awareness Day. And who doesn't appreciate penguins? They look so wonderful in their tuxedos, so well turned out and charming. But, then, I have never lived with any. If I did, possibly I'd feel differently—I'd be more circumspect about them, like the family in our book of the day, *365 Penguins* by Jean-Luc Fromental and Joëlle Jolivet.

In this oversize book—with a 1950s retro style and a palette of black, orange, and blue—a young boy narrates a strange saga. On New Year's Day the doorbell rings, “Ding dong!” and a package arrives. It contains a penguin, with the note: “I'm number 1. Feed me when I'm hungry.” The young narrator's father, mother, and sister, Amy, try to determine who sent the package, and then the next day, “Ding dong!” another penguin arrives. A resilient group, the family sets out to master the situation—naming the penguins and feeding them. By the end of January, 31 penguins live in their home. Rather well behaved, the birds watch television as an orderly group—except for a couple who help themselves to food. By the end of February (31+28 penguins), the family needs to figure out how to organize them. So father and Amy start stacking penguins. By the time they have three-digit penguins, they admit the problems have escalated—cost of

feeding per day, cleaning the penguins, and housing them. To solve the issue of living space, the family builds file cabinets and keeps their charges in order by number. When a blue-footed penguin, Chilly, appears, the drawings provide young readers with opportunities to locate him in masses of penguins. The whole idea, of course, is preposterous, but in this story the family never flinches. They just keep doing the math, making decisions, and trying to keep penguins in order.

Finally, the mystery of the penguins is solved: Uncle Victor, the ecologist, has sent them from the South Pole, where their habitat is being threatened. Now he will now take them all to the North Pole to start a colony (the science in the book is not quite as good as the math). So he leaves just Chilly, and a very relieved family. That is until the next day, “Ding dong!” when polar bear number one arrives.

For group or family participation, *365 Penguins* offers all kinds of opportunities. The bold drawings can be seen across a room. Outside of Jon Scieszka's *Math Curse*, books that teach math have rarely been so much fun. The frequent “Ding dong!” lends itself to responsive reading. Winner of a Boston Globe–Horn Book Honor Award, *365 Penguins* definitely strikes the funny bone of children and adults alike.

On Penguin Awareness Day, I am relieved that I don't have to organize 365 penguins. I'll take writing about 365 great childrens books instead!

## SCAREDY SQUIRREL

By Mélanie Watt

Today has been designated Squirrel Appreciation Day. Like many city dwellers, I don't appreciate squirrels. My dogs basically believe that all squirrels deserve to be driven up trees. The squirrels in my backyard retaliate by making fun of these lumbering, large creatures.

I have liked these bushy-tailed creatures more since I read Mélanie Watt's *Scaredy Squirrel*. As a young author, Mélanie was told to put down on paper what she knew. In her case, she had been plagued by fears since childhood. Hence, she created an alter ego, a small squirrel who lives in a tree and is too afraid to set out from his home.

Even the endpapers of *Scaredy Squirrel* warn readers to clean their hands with antibacterial soap before opening the book. Scaredy Squirrel has so many things that make him afraid—green Martians, killer bees, and even sharks. He spends time drawing out elaborate exit plans in case of a crisis and maintains a well-stocked emergency kit. Every day he does the same things, at the same time. Of course, a crisis happens, and suddenly all his plans fail to work. When he's forced to jump from the tree, he discovers that he is a flying squirrel and the pages fold out to show him in flight. Now he can add a little adventure to his days—although he still keeps to a schedule.

On the surface the book allows everyone to laugh at the antics of a small squirrel, trying to keep tragedy at bay. But, of course, human beings are all subject to rational and irrational fears, and in its gentle way *Scaredy Squirrel* allows children and adult readers to examine their own worst fears. In her author's notes, Canadian author Mélanie Watt lets people know that she shares a lot of traits with Scaredy Squirrel—she herself is afraid of sharks.

The book naturally lends itself to activities with children. They can draw pictures of what they fear, map out an exit strategy from school or home, or plan an emergency kit for their own needs. Since its publication, children ages three to eight have absolutely loved this title. The book has won awards chosen by children, such as the Red Clover Award selected by the children of Vermont and the Monarch Award by young readers in Illinois. It has several superb sequels, including *Scaredy Squirrel at Night* and *Scaredy Squirrel Has a Birthday Party*.

Even if you don't want to appreciate squirrels today, you will definitely enjoy reading *Scaredy Squirrel*. As I look out in my backyard, I can see one of those squirrels taunting my dogs. Maybe we have a different species in New England than Mélanie observes in Canada.

# JANUARY 21

Happy Birthday Carol Beach York (*Good Charlotte*).

The first American novel, *The Power of Sympathy* by William Hill Brown, was printed in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1789.

In 1977 President Jimmy Carter pardoned nearly all American Vietnam War draft evaders, some of whom had emigrated to Canada. Read *Summer's End* by Audrey Coulombis.

It's National Hugging Day. Read *Hug* by Jez Alborough, *Hug Time* by Patrick McDonald, *Giant Hug* by Sandra Horning, and *Hugging the Rock* by Susan Taylor Brown.

# JANUARY 22

Happy Birthday Brian Wildsmith (*ABC, Saint Francis*) and Rafe Martin (*The Rough-Face Girl*).

It's the birth date of Blair Lent (1930–2009), *Tikki Tikki Tembo*; Arkady Gaidar (1904–1941), *Timur and His Gang*; and the poet George Gordon Byron also known as Lord Byron (1788–1824).

The Central Intelligence Group, forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency, was created on this day in 1946. Read *The Real Spy's Guide to Becoming a Spy* by Peter Earnest, illustrated by Suzanne Harper, in association with The International Spy Museum, Washington, D.C.

It's also National Blonde Brownie Day. Blondies are basically brownies without the chocolate. Read *The Triple Chocolate Brownie Genius* by Deborah Sherman.

## HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CAT

By Jean Craighead George

Illustrated by Paul Meisel

Today has been designated Ask Your Cat Questions Day. I know a lot of cat owners, and pet owners, who admit that they talk to their animals all the time, as if the pets could answer. “How are you feeling today, Lancelot?” I just said to my dog before sitting down to write. Therefore, it may be unnecessary to designate a day that encourages people to talk to or question their pets.

However, what if you really wanted to communicate with a cat—beyond meaningless questions such as, “Why did you bring the dead vole into the house?”—is there a way to become a cat whisperer? In 2000, Jean Craighead George, a woman who knew how to communicate with all things wild, published *How to Talk to Your Cat*, with illustrations by Paul Meisel. Jean grew up in a family of naturalists. The Craighheads were always doing exciting things: tracking grizzly bears, banding bald eagles, or paddling kayaks down Western white waters. As Robert Kennedy Jr. said in *Everything I Need to Know I Learned from a Children's Book*: “I thought the Craighheads

might be the only family in America having more fun than the Kennedys.”

When Jean began to write her books in 1959 (*My Side of the Mountain*), she engaged in a type of research far outside the norm in children's books. For *Julie of the Wolves*, she stayed with a wolf pack in Alaska and allowed a wolf to greet her—he put her face in his mouth. Talk about going the extra mile to get an accurate book! But such dedication was always typical for Jean Craighead George.

Jean begins *How to Talk to Your Cat* with an exploration of the typical cat personality: they are loners who don't like company, even other cats, and are generally self-sufficient. Then she traces the origins of *Felis Catus*, the domestic house cat. “If you speak to your cat first, it probably won't speak back. Cats initiate conversation.” Certainly, one of the funniest things about this book is the juxtaposition of real photos of Jean next to Paul Meisel's illustrations of cats. Readers see Jean saying hello by rubbing the cat's head with her own head. But the book is also filled with illustrations of cat postures, tails, and facial expressions along with great advice. If you want to read uninterrupted, put a brown paper bag on the floor for the animal to investigate; Jean says you will be free to enjoy your book for a long time.

I'm just grateful that for over fifty years, Jean Craighead George explained the animal kingdom to children, writing fascinating books and sharing her wisdom.