

2012 BGHB Books in My Home

by Megan Lambert

Serving on the 2012 Boston Globe–Horn Book Award committee was a true pleasure. For months, I delighted in reading and rereading new books, hearing from the other committee members about their favorites, and developing a short list of titles I knew I’d want to discuss with them. But I was especially excited to share books with my children to see how they reacted. Caroline (age 6), Stevie (7), Emilia (9), Natayja (14), and Rory (15) were an eager audience and mini–critique group for titles our committee was considering.

The majority of what my kids and I read together were picture books. I tried not to let my feelings about particular books slip ahead of time, but I couldn’t contain my enthusiasm when I brought out the book that would eventually win the BGHB picture book award, Mac Barnett and Jon Klassen’s *Extra Yarn*, to read with Emilia, Stevie, and Caroline: “I love this book. I love, love, love this book.”

They loved it, too—and they were especially enchanted by the appearance on one spread of a familiar-looking bear and rabbit among the lineup of animals wearing hand-knitted sweaters. “Those are the guys from that funny hat book!” Caroline exclaimed. Emilia and Stevie were delighted by their sister’s insight and clamored for me to reread one of their favorites, Klassen’s *I Want My Hat Back*. When we got to the end, Caroline said about *Extra Yarn*, “So that book must’ve happened *before* the hat book did because the bunny isn’t dead there.” If only Annabelle had knitted the bunny a hat! Perhaps it could have avoided its sad fate.

Caroline’s ability to bring one picture



Megan Lambert was one of three judges on the 2012 BGHB Award committee. She is an instructor at Simmons College’s Center for the Study of Children’s Literature. For nearly ten years she also worked in the education department of the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art.



From *I Want My Hat Back*.



From *Extra Yarn*.

book into dialogue with another left me wonderstruck again while reading Julie Fogliano and Erin E. Stead’s BGHB picture book honor book *And Then It’s Spring*. I told Caroline that the book made me think of Ruth Krauss and Crockett Johnson’s *The Carrot Seed*, but my daughter, unconvinced, shook her head.

“No, that’s not the carrot seed boy,” she said, taking my comparison to mean that I thought this was the same child in both books, just as she’d seen the same bear and bunny in *I Want My Hat Back* and *Extra Yarn*. “But I know who that boy is!”

“Who?” I asked.

“That’s Amos McGee when he was little. See how he loves all those animals so much?”

I hadn’t told Caroline that Erin Stead was the illustrator of both *And Then It’s Spring* and *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*, but she saw the books’ artistic kinship anyway. Though the animals in the peaceable kingdom that accompany Stead and Fogliano’s character through

his hopeful wait for spring aren’t the same as those zoo creatures that surround Amos McGee’s sickbed, I could see the connection Caroline was making. And she didn’t stop there.

“And, look, Mom-Mom,” she continued, “he’s wearing a blue jacket just like Amos does at the zoo. And see the boy’s little house? Amos has a little house, too! It’s him! I just know it’s him!”

I didn’t have the heart to correct Caroline by reminding her that Amos wears green, or to point out that the



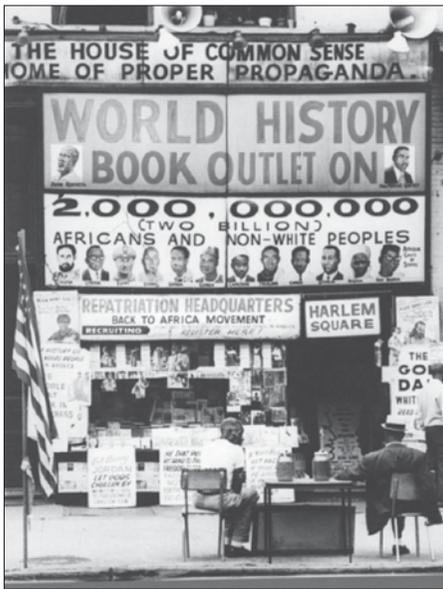
Above, from *And Then It’s Spring*. Below, from *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*.

Left: *I Want My Hat Back*. © 2011 by Jon Klassen. Right: *Extra Yarn*. Illustration © 2012 by Jon Klassen.

Above: *And Then It’s Spring*. Illustration © 2012 by Erin E. Stead. Below: *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*. Illustration © 2010 by Erin Stead.

boy's little house in *Spring* is red while Amos's little house in the city is blue. Besides, I don't think such details really matter. Caroline was recognizing the books' shared color palette, as well as their shared artistic style, and she was just plain delighted about getting to know her friend Amos a little better by seeing him as a child.

As I recount the ways in which these intertextual connections enriched Caroline's experiences with picture books, I am also mindful of how reading experiences that feel entirely new can afford a different kind of pleasure. While reading Elizabeth Wein's masterfully plotted BGHB fiction honor book *Code Name Verity*, I was initially stymied by the first section of the book. When I reached part two, however, everything suddenly came into focus. I eagerly flipped



From *No Crystal Stair*.

back and forth between parallel scenes, marveling at the structure and power of Wein's accomplishment.

"I've never read anything like this," I told fifteen-year-old Rory, as I enthusiastically passed it along to him. He'd said the same thing to me after reading the eventual BGHB fiction winner, Vaunda Micheaux Nelson's *No Crystal Stair: A Documentary Novel of the Life and Work of Lewis Michaux, Harlem Bookseller*, expanding to say (as only a kid voted "Most Likely to Start a Revolution" by his middle school classmates can), "It's refreshing to see Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X depicted like this. And I wish that bookstore was still around."

I wish Lewis Michaux's bookstore were still around, too, but since it's not, I am so glad that his great-niece's book is here to document its history, albeit in a fictionalized form. *No Crystal Stair's* poetic language and innovative documentary presentation, embellished with R. Gregory Christie's loosely rendered, expressive illustrations, afford a unique reading experience that foregrounds the crucial role that books can play in people's lives.

I must admit that on first read I was less enamored of J. Patrick Lewis and Gary Kelley's BGHB picture book honor book *And the Soldiers Sang*, an unflinching depiction of the WWI Christmas Truce. This isn't a book that celebrates the triumph of humanity in its darkest hour; instead, it reveals the tragic inability of one brief moment in time to change the fates of the soldiers



From *And the Soldiers Sang*.

or the course of a war. Indeed, I was so repelled by the misery and horrors depicted in the art that I initially balked at considering this book for recognition. *And the Soldiers Sang* left me cold, and I set it aside.

I've written before about trying to strike a balance between educating my children about the hard truths of human history and protecting them from content they aren't developmentally ready to grapple with ("*Dave the Potter* and *Stevie the Reader*," July/August 2011 *Horn Book*), and *And the Soldiers Sang* is a book I haven't yet chosen to read with my younger children. But reading together other bedtime books that push the boundaries of the form brought me back to revisit *And the Soldiers Sang*. And in doing so, I came to appreciate its ingenious use of panel illustrations to evoke the claustrophobic misery of the trenches; the expansive,

yet doomed, hope of the soldiers; and the palpable tragedy of their truce's failure to bring lasting peace. Thinking about the book's superb, innovative design enabled me to see its overall achievement as a searing, lyrical, and devastating antiwar statement that never stoops to didacticism or ideological pedantry.

As much as I dislike didacticism in fiction, I am even leier of it in nonfiction for children. Fiction can wear agenda and ideology on its sleeve, under the guise of invention, but nonfiction does so under the banner of truth, so the stakes seem higher. The three BGHB nonfiction selections—honor books *The Elephant Scientist* by Caitlin O'Connell and Donna M. Jackson; and *Georgia in Hawaii* by Amy Novesky, illustrated by Yuyi Morales; and the nonfiction winner *Chuck Close: Face Book* by Chuck Close—while

And the Soldiers Sang. Illustration © 2011 by Gary Kelley.

No Crystal Stair. Photo © Bettmann/CORBIS.



From *The Elephant Scientist*.

The Elephant Scientist. Photo © 2011 by Caitlin O'Connell and Timothy Rodwell.

certainly educational, align themselves squarely with the child reader, thus avoiding didacticism and enhancing enjoyment.

Caroline, whose love of animals rivals Amos McGee's, was especially enamored of *The Elephant Scientist*. Instead of identifying with O'Connell's own biography as an animal-loving child who grew up to be a biologist, though, Caroline aligned herself with the baby elephants. She was particularly intrigued by the ways mother elephants protect their young. After reading the book, we were watching a documentary about orphaned baby elephants. One scene showed the babies wearing blankets across their backs. Compassionate Caroline recalled the images from *The Elephant Scientist* and said with sadness, "That's good for them because they can't snuggle under their moms."

My eldest daughter, Natayja, still willingly accepts hugs and affection, but at fourteen she rarely joins me and her younger siblings for bedtime reading, preferring instead to read by herself. When I sat down with *Georgia in Hawaii*, however, I called her in to join us. Natayja, who loves making art,

acquiesced, but instead of homing in on the story itself, she became fixated on the pineapple that O'Keeffe refused to paint. ("Mmmmmm. Pineapple! Can you get some at the store?") I resisted the urge to force a discussion about Georgia's artistic integrity and her sticking it to the pineapple Man. After all, if I am leery about didactic impulses in books, I shouldn't force my own reading of a book on my kids, right?

Similarly, when I read BGHB nonfiction award winner *Chuck Close* with my children, I fought the urge to explicitly address his dyslexia and learning challenges in our conversation even though one of my own daughters, Emilia, has similar struggles. Ultimately, my kids (including Emilia) were most interested in the superbly designed mix-and-match self-portrait section showcasing the diverse media Close uses. "That's oils, too!" Caroline remarked as she compared different panels. "And those are fingerprints!" This discovery led to a request that we break out some inkpads and paper to make our own artwork, and a messy, artsy time ensued.

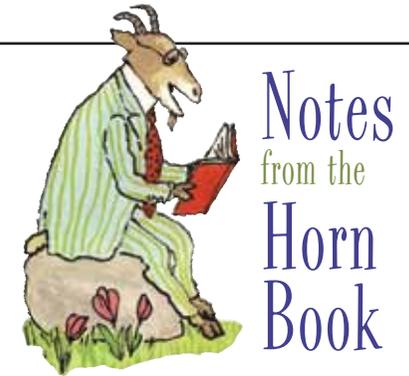
Rory didn't participate in this art-

making. As the eldest of my crew of kids, he's often occupied with other things while his siblings and I are up to our elbows in art supplies, picture books, or other activities. But I've found that one of the best ways I have to stay connected with my son as he grows up and away from me is to pass books over to him and later ask what he thought about them. I'd expected a big reaction over our committee's other BGHB fiction honor title, Mal Peet's *Life: An Exploded Diagram*, since it's right up his alley as a sprawling work of historical fiction with ambitious narrative techniques. "Ror, I haven't felt this way about a book since I read *The Book Thief*," I told him one night, recalling a title that had reduced us both to tears and that had provoked many discussions about love, family, war, and peace. I eagerly awaited his thoughts on Peet's book, a novel that left me awestruck by its writing on a sentence level and also by its depth and breadth as a whole.

"So?" I asked him one night. "What do you think?"

"I haven't finished it yet," he admitted. "But I like it so far."

Oh, well—not every book experience I share with my kids can be the stuff of what Mem Fox calls "reading magic." But, in the spirit of Fogliano and Stead's little boy in *And Then It's Spring*, I'm holding on to hope that when Rory does finish reading *Life*, we'll get to have a good talk about it. And, as a BGHB judge, I hope that the books our committee has selected will provoke others to have such talks, too. ■



NEWS ABOUT GOOD BOOKS
FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS

In every issue

- Roger's 5-question interview
- The best new books for children and young adults
- Comments from our editors
- Links and ideas for further reading
- Great information to share with teachers, parents, or anyone else who cares about great books

and it's free!



www.hbook.com

Copyright of Horn Book Magazine is the property of Media Source, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.