

Urban Life

REVIEW BY RENÉE GREENFIELD AND JENNIFER RABOLD,
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With coffee in hand, laborers congregate on street corners discussing the day's work. Runners tie their laces on their front stoops and prepare for early morning runs. Birds call to each other, and dogs beg their owners for walks. City dwellers and workers often agree that early mornings provide a peaceful entrance into city life. Whether you prefer cities in the early morning, the evening, or some time in between, they provide lively, colorful settings for children's literature.

From picture books and poetry, to novels and nonfiction, the urban backdrop continues to provide authors with rich material, translated in lively ways to their readers. Cities bestow countless opportunities for both inhabitants and visitors to explore and experience. Museums, restaurants, music shops, concert halls, barbershops, theaters, markets, parks, bookstores, groceries, and cafés are the spaces where authors set stories about cities and the people who live there.

Historically, beginning as early as the 1940s, New York City appears more frequently in children's books than other cities. Geared toward young adults, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943), the coming-of-age novel by Betty Smith, chronicled Francie Nolan's adolescence in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Smith's story of Francie was quite similar to her own, including the family stressors of immigration and poverty. In 1955, Kay Thompson introduced *Eloise: A Book for Precocious Grownups*, the first tale about a six-year-old who lives and creates havoc in the Plaza Hotel. From New York, Eloise travels to other cities, including Paris and Moscow, appearing in four additional books. In 1961, George Selden received the Newbury Honor for *The Cricket in Times Square*, inspired after Selden heard a cricket in the Times Square subway station. Chester Cricket, the urban-influenced insect, went on to appear in seven other books. Brooklyn-born Ezra Jack Keats used the city as an integral part of his storytelling. In *Apt. 3* (1971), he wrote about brothers Sam and Ben, who, while exploring their apartment building, made an unexpected discovery of music coming from Apartment 3. There, the harmonica-playing neighbor used music to introduce the boys to the secrets of the city—sounds and emotions they may have otherwise missed.

In this century, Ian Falconer made mischievous *Olivia* famous, and the book was named a Caldecott Honor book in 2000. He then created nine more books that documented her antics in New York. Mo Willems introduced readers to Trixie in *Knuffle Bunny: A*

Cautionary Tale (2004), which was named a Caldecott Honor book in 2005 and went on to win a Carnegie Medal in 2007. In the other books of the Knuffle Bunny trilogy (*Knuffle Bunny Too: A Case of Mistaken Identity*, 2007; *Knuffle Bunny Free Unexpected Diversion*, 2010), Trixie and her family live, work, and go to school in Brooklyn.

New York City, the largest city in the United States, continues to be the most common urban backdrop for children's literature. Readers interested in informational text can be guided in their visits to the city by Leonard Marcus's *Storied City: A Children's Book Walking-Tour Guide to New York City* (2003), organized by neighborhood and borough.

Other cities, although used by authors less frequently, are also part of the children's literature's urban backdrop. Jim Murphy, author of *Chicago—The Great Fire* (1995) and *Philadelphia—An American Plague: The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793* (2003), uses other cities as settings for accessible nonfiction books for young adults. Paul Fleischman's *Seedfolks* (1997) takes place in Cleveland and tells the story of how the creation of a community garden in an old abandoned lot brought a neighborhood together. More recently, in *Blue Jasmine* (2004), Kashmiria Sheth chronicled the adventures of Seema, a young immigrant who moves from India to Iowa City.

Our intent in this review is to introduce our readers to a collection of books for young readers that depict the urban landscape in positive ways. We present books that inform readers about the lives of city dwellers and, most importantly, the opportunities and experiences that abound in cities. Several books are set in New York City and one in Chicago, but most take place in unnamed cities.

Whether in New York or other cities, or places in between, opportunities abound—in museums (see the interview with Heidi Hinish in this issue) and concert halls (see the interview with Benjamin Zander in this issue). The authors of the books that are reviewed here use settings that offer opportunities found in city sites—rooftops, parks, basketball courts, and sidewalks, as well as culturally rich museums and libraries.

At Night

BY JONATHAN BEAN

32 pages. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.
(Ages 4–8)

Awards: *Boston Globe*-Horn Book Award, Cooperative Children's Book Center Choice (CCBC) (University of Wisconsin), Charlotte Zolotow Award/Honor Book, Horn Book Magazine Fanfare List, International Reading Association Children's Notable Book,

Kirkus Reviews Editor's Choice, Publishers Weekly Best Children's Books of the Year

At Night is Jonathan Bean's first book, but children are sure to see more of this talented young author/illustrator's delightful work. In his acceptance speech when he won the *Boston Globe-Horn Book Award*, Bean identified Virginia Burton's classic, *The Little House*, as an inspiration. As a person from a small town who appreciated the proximity to nature, Bean identified with the little house, revealing his misgivings about the city—the abrasive noise, the inhospitable concrete, the incipient danger. But when he moved to New York City to attend art school, he discovered the beauty and joy in the city, as well as the city's well-kept secret green spaces. He added,

Whether it was a community garden next door or a botanical garden in the Bronx, the quiet of an avenue shut down by a blizzard, or owls in Central Park, there were many cracks in the concrete through which grass could grow. (Bean, 2009, para. 7)

At Night is a bedtime book for children who call a city home. The mood is soothing, as the young girl who just can't fall asleep listens to her sleeping family breathing, just as the city itself is breathing. It's the breeze coming through the open window that coaxes the young girl to ascend to the rooftop of her apartment building in the city, with pillows and blankets in arms, to a cozy place that looks like many suburban back yards, tables and chairs and sheets hanging from the clothesline, flowers blooming, and tomatoes fruiting in every corner.

Bean's watercolor illustrations reveal the girl's makeshift bed on the roof from progressively more distant perspectives, connecting her rooftop to the others in the neighborhood, in the city, and in the world, perspectives that bring the girl a sense of peace, finally allowing her to sleep. The illustrations return to the rooftop, where the girl's mother watches her sleep, as the moon watches over them all, safe and sound and home.

The Journey

BY SARAH STEWART, ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID SMALL
40 pages. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.
(Ages 6–10)

Awards: Best Books of the Year 2001 by Publishers Weekly, School Library Journal, Booklist

Sarah Stewart and David Small, Caldecott Award-winning author and illustrator of *The Gardener* (1997), have worked together again to create *The Journey*, the equally charming story of another young girl from the country who experiences the big city.

In this story, an Amish girl named Hannah leaves her hometown for a trip to Chicago. Like the letters the young girl in *The Gardener* writes home, which advance the plot, we learn about Hannah's trip through entries in her diary, the book she calls her "silent friend." The perspective is decidedly different from *At Night*, in which the character feels so at home in the city. Hannah feels unquestionably foreign in city venues, from the skyscrapers and

department stores, to the great libraries and cathedrals. Despite the unfamiliar and overwhelming setting, Hannah is not afraid; she is full of wonder and curiosity, taking in the beauty and the grandeur, the enormity of size, and the richness of color.

Despite the differences in the environment, Hannah finds that she is quite as capable in Chicago as in her hometown: she bravely grabs the bridle of a skittish horse in the park and she correctly answers a question about the oceans in the aquarium. In fact, she finds that not only is *she* the same person inside, but that everyone the world over experiences the same human emotions: the joy in beautiful things and the spiritual uplift in music, the longing for home along with the desire to "keep going—I'm not sure where."

Small's watercolor illustrations take readers back and forth from the city to the countryside, allowing us to see the contrast the way Hannah does, from the top of one of the tallest buildings in the world to Aunt Clara's porch, or from the frilly modern dresses that make her laugh to the simple dress in her favorite color Aunt Clara is sewing for her. The most poignant contrast is not so different from Hannah's experience: on one page, she stands in front of one of Monet's haystack paintings in the art museum; on the next, she sees the real thing in a field she passes on the bus ride home.

Clearly, the city provides opportunities that Hannah has never encountered before, but none greater than the opportunities that her small-town home has afforded her. Rather, it is the opportunity to experience the differences that enlarges her world and her worldview that allows her to know that she can make choices.

Jabberwocky

BY LEWIS CARROLL, ILLUSTRATED BY CHRISTOPHER MYERS
32 pages. Hyperion, 2007.
(Ages 4–12)

Awards: *Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor (Harlem, Blues Journey)*, *Caldecott Honor Book (Harlem)*, *Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Book (Black Cat, Harlem)*

Undoubtedly, up-and-coming illustrator Christopher Myers has been inspired, as have readers, by his acclaimed author father, Walter Dean Myers. After illustrating several of his father's books, including the Caldecott Honor Book *Harlem* and *Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book Blues Journey*, he ventured out on his own with *Black Cat* in 1999, for which he received the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor. Most recently, he "reimagined" and illustrated Lewis Carroll's classic nonsense poem from *Through the Looking Glass*.

Jabberwocky has traditionally been interpreted as the story of the hero slaying the dragon, but Myers imagines the poem in an urban setting, the jabberwock a twenty-foot tall, fourteen-fingered, basketball-playing beast. The hero, like the Boston Celtics's small but mighty Rajon Rondo, manages to outwit the opponent, ducking under his long arms, jumping higher than his enormous hands, slipping around his back to dunk the ball, defeating the beast, and returning with the prize, the basketball.

But the real brilliance in Myers's book is the illustrations—bold blocks of color and abstract figures, superimposed on the subtle image of a playground. The opening and closing rhymes are accompanied by illustrations of other urban pleasures, like girls jump roping double-dutch, children splashing in the water from a fire hydrant, and boys playing jacks on the sidewalk. Despite the presence of the jabberwock, this city is not a threatening place, but an opportunity for challenging oneself to reach new heights.

Harlem

BY WALTER DEAN MYERS, ILLUSTRATED BY CHRISTOPHER MYERS
32 pages. Scholastic, 1997.
(Ages 8–12)

Awards: *Boston Globe-Horn Book Award*, *Caldecott Honor Book*, *Coretta Scott King Honor Book*

Harlem is perhaps one of Walter Dean Myers's most evocative poems. Myers summons those unnamed pioneers who first journeyed to Harlem, by bus, by boat, by car, from the South and from further South, and from across the ocean, believing the "promise / Of a better life, of a place where a man didn't / Have to know his place / Simply because he was / Black." (stanza 2). From these pioneers emerge "warriors" (stanza 10) like Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Sugar Ray, who embodied a people's hopes. And then Myers invokes W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X and the countless others who stood up for the rights of their people. Shango, Jesus, Asante, Mende, and James Baldwin play a part, as do "Jive and Jehovah artists" (stanza 8) and children and "a brother / Too bad and too cool to give his name" (stanza 21).

Myers crafts the most evocative imagery, painting pictures in words, the shapes of buildings and people, the colors of clothing and collard greens. The smells seem to rise from the pages, mangoes, perfume, and fried fish. He calls on the sounds that inspired the music in Harlem: the spiritual, the call and response, the gospel on Sunday night, the tambourine and the clarinet, the horn and the sax, the "lilt, tempo, cadence," (stanza 12), and the jazz and the blues that were sung by Lady Day and expressed by poets Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. The dialogue, the laughter, the parties, and the rhymes all give sound to the place that is Harlem.

The mood of the poem is alternately hopeful and mournful, laced with despair and celebration, reflecting the history of Harlem and of the African-American people. But the journey "that started on the banks of the Niger" (stanza 26) has not ended, according to Myers. The story is passed down, inspiring new generations to remember, to carry on, and to seek strength from those who came before.

The illustrations of Christopher Myers, his son, echo the synthesis of the many lives and places and stories that created Harlem. Ripped and cut construction paper, wallpaper, magazine pages, paper bags, photos, and what looks like part of a leather jacket are joined by Myers's paints and glue to conjure up the jazz club, the church, the basketball court, the fire hydrant spraying on a hot day, the avenues, and the skyscrapers in the distance. The

Apollo makes an appearance, as do the Cotton Club and the Abyssinian Baptist Church.

And the people of Harlem appear in his collages—a toddler peering through the fire escape, an old man playing checkers, young women gazing out of windows and young men carrying a coffin, a girl having her hair braided and a boy shooting hoops on the playground, the minister, the spiritual woman, the musicians, the community organizers, and the couple shyly holding hands on the subway.

Educators often talk about the need to provide access for children in the city to opportunities afforded their suburban counterparts. However, Myers and Myers redefine opportunity in this illustrated poem. The city provides opportunities that suburban children will never know, and Harlem, in particular, provides African-American girls and boys with the unique opportunities that are depicted in this poem. For every reader, *Harlem* offers a history of the African-American experience, a history with its own heroes and leaders, music and culture, traditions and rituals. One must be a part of the culture—or study it—to know the stories and the allusions. *Harlem* is a history, told in poetry and pictures, of a place that is not only surviving, but thriving.

The Arrival

BY SHAUN TAN
128 pages. Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007.
(Ages: 9 and up)

Awards: *Kirkus Best Young Adult Books*, 2007; *Special Interest Group International Reading Association*, *Notable Books for a Global Society*, 2008; *Washington Post Best Books for Young People*, 2007; *Young Adult Library Services Award (YALSA) Best Books for Young Adults*, 2008; *YALSA Great Graphic Novels for Teens*, 2008

Shaun Tan, Perth-born artist, worked for 5 years to finish *The Arrival*, published in 2006. It was worth the wait. The exterior of Tan's exceptional graphic novel resembles a family photo album, and the interior functions similarly—readers will want to pore over the book, linger at times, flip pages backward and forward to contemplate the pictures.

The Arrival's main character, a nondescript young father, leaves his wife and young daughter in search of a better life with more opportunity. On his journey to find a place to live and work he befriends other immigrants and listens to their stories. Along the way, he unwillingly connects with a walking tadpole-like creature. When he arrives at his destination, the young father makes this distant land home, and his family joins him at the end of the story.

This graphic novel is as unique as it is accessible to a wide range of readers. Younger readers will be captivated by the illustrations: a combination of creatures, structures, people, and unknown languages within an imaginary world, created with graphite pencil on cartridge paper. Older readers may pay close attention to the details of this story of immigrants, including their feelings of loneliness, hope, displacement, and belonging. While the images

are all drawn in pencil, the shading varies—from crisp black and white, to more obscure sepia-stained pages. The layout, reminiscent of Raymond Briggs's *The Snowman* (1978), creates a visual screenplay of silent film, where readers absorb and watch the story of immigration unfold.

On his website, Tan credits many sources as inspirations for *The Arrival*, including research on the immigrant experience and his personal experiences and those of his parents, who are both immigrants. Tan purposefully keeps the lands and people within the novel unnamed, in order to showcase immigration as a human experience; while each immigration story is personal, there are many shared experiences. He urges readers to think broadly about the underlying messages in the novel, writing on his website,

One of the great powers of storytelling is that it invites us to walk in other people's shoes for a while, but perhaps even more importantly, it invites us to contemplate our own shoes also. We might do well to think of ourselves as possible strangers in our own strange land. What conclusions we draw from this are unlikely to be easily summarized, all the more reason to think further on the connections between people and places, and what we might mean when we talk about "belonging." (Tan, 2009)

Many readers will identify with the story Tan tells, and others will physically resemble the many faces in the passport-like pictures on the endpapers of the book.

Given the power of the emotions and the connections evoked by this graphic novel, it will be no surprise to readers that at the age of 18, Tan was named among the International Illustrators of the Future. Using only pictures he is able to tell stories of opportunity and affirm the old dictum "silence speaks louder than words."

Genius of Common Sense: Jane Jacobs and the Story of The Death and Life of Great American Cities

BY GLENNA LANG & MARJORY WUNSCH
127 pages. David R. Godine, 2008.
(Ages 9–12)

Award: New York Times Notable Children's Books, 2009

Jane Jacobs's seminal book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), forever changed the way people view cities. Glenna Lang and Marjory Wunsch's carefully researched and detailed-oriented biography, *Genius of Common Sense: Jane Jacobs and the Story of The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, provides an illustrated guide to Jacobs's life and her longstanding impact on cities.

Jacobs moved to New York at 18, leaving her native Scranton, Pennsylvania, to live with her sister and begin a life observing and thinking about the city where she lived. Her independence motivated her to bypass college, move to West Greenwich Village, write for *Architectural Forum*, marry, and have children, but she was always immersed in city life. It was in the West Village where she first led a crusade against urban renewal. While urban planners at the time thought older housing should be torn down and replaced

with high-rise buildings, Jacobs identified these actions as degenerating cities. Instead, she often described the happenings on city streets as "an intricate sidewalk ballet," where people were engaged with one another—dancing, talking, riding bikes—keeping the neighborhood lively and safe. She thought that high-rise buildings pulled people off of the streets and into more isolated worlds. Jacobs knew that in order to keep city life alive in her neighborhood, she would be required to work effectively against powerful and affluent developers and politicians. She protested and won. Without Jacobs's efforts, there would be a highway running through lower Manhattan.

One hundred photographs illustrate Lang and Wunsch's chronicle of Jacobs's life, in a text appropriate for readers in upper elementary and middle school. The book includes a chronology, a detailed biography, and informative notes.

In an interview published in this issue, Heidi Hinish, an educator at the National Gallery of Art, encourages students "to first take the time to observe and describe what they see, and then to ask questions, look from different points of view, discuss thoughts and ideas with family or friends, etc." (p. 53). While Hinish describes museum experiences for young people, it is highly likely that Jacobs would agree with the idea of encouraging people to view cities with a discerning eye, searching for opportunities from a personal, meaningful vantage point.

The characters in these stories show us the possibilities that await us in cities across the country. They seek different goals—cultural edification, recreation, work, a new beginning, and, most frequently, a sense of home. American cities offer such a variety of opportunities because of the diversity of the people who have built and sustained them, bringing their varied traditions and passions, their art and music, their food and clothing, and, most of all, their stories. If, as conductor Benjamin Zander suggests in his interview published in this issue, "[t]he more educated you are, the more references you have, and the more points of contact you have as a human being, the richer your life, and the deeper your experience, and the greater your contribution to the world" (p. 56), then the city is a place where one can learn how to contribute to the world.

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