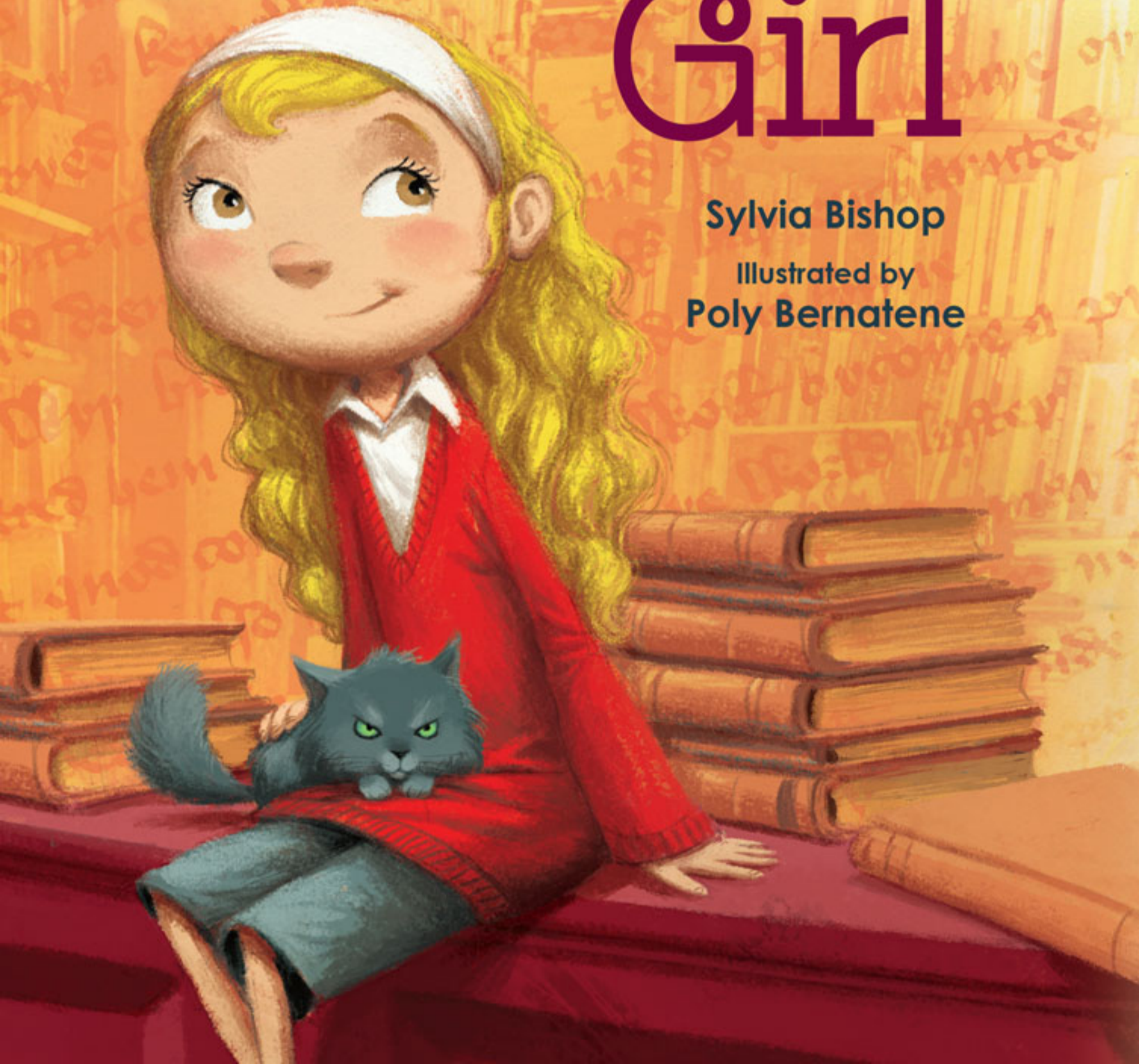


The Bookshop Girl

Sylvia Bishop

Illustrated by
Poly Bernatene



The
Bookshop
Girl

For my nephew Theo: Welcome!

—S. B.



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ATLANTA

Before We Begin



You have in your hands the story of Property Jones. I hope that your copy smells of something nice—like crisp, new paper, or that churchy secondhand-book smell, or some lemonade that someone spilled on it once.

There's a lot of story to tell, so we should get started. But the trouble with a name like "Property Jones" is that people are very bothered by it, and before you can begin the story they want to know whether Property is a girl's name or a boy's name and whether Property can really be a name at all and what Jones has to do with it. So I will quickly explain.

Property Jones was left in a bookshop when she was five years old. Her parents walked out and left her there—just like that. She was found by Michael Jones, who was ten at the time and who dutifully put her in the lost property cupboard.

When Netty saw this, she sighed in a sensible sort of way. Netty was Michael's mother and owned the bookshop and was an altogether sensible sort of person.

"People aren't property, Michael," she explained. "You can't put a girl in a cupboard."

But he obviously could because he had, and Property was too little and too confused to come out of the cupboard or to tell anyone anything useful like her name. Netty called the police and put up posters and so on. But nobody ever came for Property.

In the end, she just stayed. She came out of the cupboard, but she never did tell them her name. These days, I don't think she even remembers it. They tried to come up with a new one for her, but Property was the only thing that stuck.

The three of them lived together in the bookshop, which is an odd thing to do, but they didn't have anywhere else to go. And besides, they liked it there. Anyway, that is the tale of how Property Jones came by the name Property and how she became a Jones. Now, take the next page between your finger and thumb...and turn it. We can start.



Chapter One

An Object of Wonder



Property was eleven years old when our story begins. She had been living with the Joneses for six years. She loved them very much, and she was almost entirely happy there. But she was never *completely* happy because she was keeping a secret from them, and it was a whopper:

Property Jones couldn't read.

Every evening, Netty and Michael would take two copies of the same book and read them side by side, turning the pages at the same time and laughing and sighing at all the same parts. When it had become clear that Property was staying, Netty had given her a third copy each night without a word.

She was trying to be kind. It never occurred to Netty that the five-year-old newcomer might not be able to read. And it was a long time before it occurred to Property that

the others weren't just admiring the books and enjoying the weight and smell of them and the way the pages rustled. So at first, she just copied what they were doing and didn't know that anything was wrong.

Once she realized that she had misunderstood, she was too scared to say anything in case they threw her out. Of course, when she was older, she realized that this was silly, but by then she had pretended to read for so long that it seemed very dishonest, and she was ashamed to tell them. And as she got older and older, this went on longer and longer, and it got more and more awkward, and now she had pretended to be able to read for six whole years.

And that is why, when Netty read something in the paper that made her raise her eyebrows in surprise and then passed it to Michael, who fell out of his chair in surprise before passing it to Property, Property didn't know what it said. She searched for a reaction somewhere in between eyebrow-raising and falling-off-a-chair, and said, "Oh!" This seemed to satisfy them.

"It's a miracle," said Michael from underneath the counter.

"Not a miracle, Michael," said Netty. "Just—wonderful."

Michael explained that this was exactly what he meant, and that the word “miracle” comes from the Latin “miraculum” which means “object of wonder.” This was quite clever, but the others weren’t particularly impressed. First, Michael always knew that kind of thing. Second, he was still sitting foolishly under the counter.

“The real miraculum,” said Netty, “is that I ever run a shop with you two for help. Out from under the counter, Michael. It’s two minutes to nine.”

So Michael came out, still beaming about the mysterious Object of Wonder in the newspaper, and they all took up their places. They always worked the same way. Netty sat at the counter to serve the customers. She used it as a desk as well, to do all the difficult things like finances and ordering stock. Michael took care of the books, lovingly arranging them on the shelves and recommending his favorites to people, whether or not they wanted him to. There weren’t that many books in the shop, and a lot of them were yellow or wrinkly with age, but Michael loved them anyway.

Property served tea and cake to anyone who wanted to sit in an armchair and read awhile, and she kept the shop smart and tidy. Or she tried to. It didn’t help that everything in the shop was falling apart.

Netty was at the counter, Michael was hovering by the dictionaries, and Property had put the kettle on. The White Hart opened at nine o'clock sharp. (If you are thinking, *But the White Hart is the wrong sort of name for a bookshop*, then you are quite right, but also quite impatient. I was going to explain. The bookshop used to be the White Hart pub, and it had a very beautiful picture of a white stag hanging outside. When Netty bought the pub and filled it with books, she couldn't see any good reason to change the name when there was such a nice sign already there.)

It was a slow day. Whenever the shop was quiet, Netty and Michael would talk about the Object of Wonder, and Property would try to figure out what it was.

"Of course," said Netty, wrapping her hands tightly around her mug of tea, "it will never be us. The chance is so slim."

"Of course," agreed Michael. "We shouldn't even think about it." But then he put out a batch of thriller books upside down, so either he thought they looked better that way or he was still thinking about it. (Property could tell that they were thrillers easily; it was just a matter of paying attention. They had dark, moody covers, and they were the right sort of fatness with thinnish paper.

Whenever Netty and Michael read books that looked like that, their breathing was very tense.)

Michael finally noticed what he was doing and turned all the books the right way up. Then he said, “It would be amazing though. I’ve heard it’s huge! We’d have every book in the world.” And his face lit up at this beautiful thought.

“And no trouble paying the gas bill,” said Netty, looking sadly at her hot cup of tea. The White Hart was always a *little* bit too cold.

Property leaned closer to her own mug of tea, feeling the warmth on her face. She was used to playing detective, but this was a tough case. What could hold every book in the world and heat up their shop? Was there some sort of infinity shelf fitted with its own radiator system? She got a bit lost imagining what this would look like and accidentally leaned right into the tea and scalded her chin. A woman browsing the cooking section gave her a very strange look. Property quickly put the tea down and hurried off to look busy with a vacuum.

As she was vacuuming, she eavesdropped some more.

“Have you entered us yet?” Michael was saying.

“Of course,” said Netty. “I did it right away.”