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# ILLUSTRATOR SPOTLIGHT

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## Stephanie Fizer Coleman on *Bird Count*



Young Ava and her mother prepare to participate as “citizen scientists” in the Christmas Bird Count. She is excited when Big Al, the leader of their team, asks her to record the tally this year. Using her most important tools—her eyes and ears—and the birding ID techniques she’s learned, Ava eagerly identifies and counts the birds they observe on their assigned route around the town. At the end of the day, they meet up with the other teams in the area for a Christmas Bird Count party, where they combine their totals and share stories about their observations.

**Q:** *How did you first get involved in illustration and design? Did you envision yourself becoming a children’s book illustrator?*

**A:** I got my BA in History and didn’t even start drawing until my mid-20s, so I call myself an accidental illustrator. My art career began with selling art prints and cards on Etsy and over the space of a decade grew to encompass art licensing and children’s books as well. Even before I started illustrating children’s books, I knew I wanted a creative career.

**Q:** *Who, or what, is your artistic inspiration?*

**A:** Nature, obviously, but I’m also inspired by the introverted, bookish kid I was, and I often think of her when I’m creating art for children’s books. It’s beautiful to be illustrating the sort of books I would have loved as a kid.

**Q:** *How do you feel illustrations contribute to a picture book?*

**A:** Well, you can’t have a picture book without pictures, right? But really, I think illustrations not only bring the words to life but they add an extra layer of interest for the reader, extra bits to explore and discover.

**Q:** *Before illustrating Bird Count, you had participated in a “100 Birds” project. Can you tell us a little more about that project and what inspired you?*

**A:** The 100 Day Project is a massive annual project (it starts in April and ends in July) that challenges people to do a creative thing of their choice every day for 100 days. I choose to draw 100 Birds because the subject matter was interesting to me and simple enough that I could play around with my style but not feel too intimidated by the daily nature of the project.

**Q:** *How did your 100 Birds project influence your illustrations in Bird Count?*

**A:** All of my work right now is influenced by the project because the 100 Birds projects helped me solidify my style and become a more confident illustrator.

**Q:** *What is your illustration process? What medium do you use? Does your illustration process change depending on the project?*

**A:** I usually work in Photoshop but all of my projects begin with pencil and paper. I try to give each project breathing room in the beginning because I know my process will be a little bit different for each book. Sometimes I create the art entirely in Photoshop, sometimes I’ll use both Photoshop and Procreate, and

sometimes I'll hand draw or paint elements and scan them into the computer to use in Photoshop.

For *Bird Count*, I started by doing sketch studies of all the birds the reader would be spotting throughout the book. At the same time, I was perusing references of snowy rural scenes while making notes and scribbles about the setting.

Next, I worked up a series of thumbnail sketches, small sketches with bare bones elements, to get a sense of the book's flow and to see if my ideas would work.

Finally, I sketched all the various birds, characters, and settings in a sketchbook then scanned everything into Photoshop where I did a final version of the sketches to send off to our wonderful art director, Nicki.

**Q: Did you do any research to illustrate the birds for Bird Count?**

**A:** Most of the birds in the book are local to me, so they were all familiar friends. Even so, I still like to draw from reference photos at first so I can be sure the markings are correct and the bird designs are easy to identify.

**Q: Did you collaborate with Bird Count author Susan Edwards Richmond on the design of the story, or did you immediately have an idea of how the art should look?**

**A:** Susan and I didn't even really chat until after the art was complete, but the art director had some rough ideas for layout since we needed to include the list of birds on each page. Beyond that I was free as a bird to create the art and I was immediately looking forward to illustrating some snowy, rural scenes.

**Q: Do you have a favorite bird to illustrate?**

**A:** Chickadees! They're such friendly little birds and their petite, round shapes make them extra fun to draw.

**Q: Your bio says you grew up surrounded by nature. Have you ever participated in a bird count or something similar?**

**A:** I haven't yet, but after illustrating this book, I'm planning on it!

**Q: What do you hope readers take away from your illustrations in this story?**

**A:** I hope readers are inspired to pay attention to the little gifts nature gives us every day.

**Q: What's next for you?**

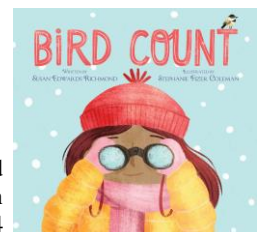
**A:** Right now I'm working on another bird-centric book with Peachtree along with several other picture books so I'm having the best time!

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## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Stephanie Fizer Coleman is an illustrator and freelance designer. She has created the art for many children's books and loves drawing animals. For her 100 Days project in 2018, she drew one hundred birds, one day at a time.

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Written by Susan Edwards Richmond  
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 HC: 978-1-56145-954-4