
AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

Susan Edwards Richmond 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: What inspired you to write *Bird Count*?

A: I’ve been participating in the National Audubon Society’s Christmas Bird Count in the Town of Acton for more than 15 years. It’s an amazing citizen science project, and I’d never seen it addressed before in a picture book. Writing *Bird Count* seemed like a wonderful opportunity to introduce children to the excitement of bird watching, while learning about a hemisphere-wide event they might join. In the last year, a couple of other children’s books have come out on the subject, including Heidi Stemple’s *Counting Birds*—a testament to the increasing interest in citizen science!

Q: Although you’ve written several adult poetry collections, *Bird Count* is your debut children’s picture book. How is writing *Bird Count* different from writing poetry for adults? How is it similar?

A: Reading picture books to my own children, I fell in love with the genre all over again, and noticed how my favorite picture books shared many characteristics with adult poetry. Both relied on imagery and on spare, lyrical language, where every word must justify its place in the work. I think one big difference between the two genres, besides age appropriateness, is that in adult poetry, the poet is responsible for the entire image the reader sees, whereas in picture book writing, creating that image is a collaboration between author and illustrator. I found this process very exciting as I

worked alongside Stephanie Fizer Coleman in developing *Bird Count*.

Q: How has your teaching background inspired your writing?

A: My teaching includes not only preschool, but also high school and college levels, and many years developing science and nature curricula for all ages. These experiences have made me appreciate the role of educators as mentors and guides for young people and the importance of hands-on teaching models. The picture books I’m writing now are stories that immerse children in images of nature, while showing them that they can be agents of change in their own environments. Teaching preschool on a farm and wildlife sanctuary has opened my eyes to all the ways that children engage with nature.

Q: You participate in a yearly bird count. How did you first get involved?

A: I used to occasionally sign up for birding trips with my town’s community education department. Our instructor, Andy Magee, is one of the organizers of the Concord Circle of the Christmas Bird Count. One year, he was short of volunteers for the Count, and, knowing my interest in birds, he asked me if I wanted to try it. He assigned me to the team led by Al Sgroi, the inspiration for Big Al. I was hooked. I’ve only missed

one year since, when I broke my arm and couldn't hold the binoculars!

Q: Are you the inspiration for the main character, Ava? How are her experiences similar to your own?

A: Although I researched many counts throughout the country, I wanted to ground my book in an actual count. So the territory that Ava covers mirrors mine in terms of the kinds of habitats and species we see. I also threw in a couple of place names that locals might recognize! I did go birdwatching when I was young, but I never had the experience of participating in something like a count, so maybe Ava is more like a reimagined version of a younger self.

Q: What research did you do in preparation for writing this book?

A: I researched counts around the United States and in other countries in the Western Hemisphere. The book went through many drafts as I worked with my editor, Vicky Holifield, to develop the strongest story. At one point, I had even considered a wider geographical scope for the book. I still think it might be fun to have Ava experience a count somewhere else—although probably not Antarctica!

Q: Your Author's Note mentions that the Christmas Bird Count is "one of the longest running Citizen Science Surveys in the world." What are the benefits of people participating in citizen science projects?

A: Oh, there are so many benefits! From a purely scientific standpoint, citizen science allows researchers to gather far more data than they possibly could in a study limited by funding and person-power. But equally important, I think, is that involving people in surveying and monitoring the communities where they live gives them a stake in the outcome. It shows them what they have and what they risk losing, and how to become better custodians. And from an even larger perspective, citizen science projects unite people from diverse places and backgrounds in a common endeavor.

Q: Why do you believe it's important for your readers to join their own "count circles?"

A: People tend to care more about things when they connect to them personally, and that includes children. A citizen science event, such as the Christmas Bird

Count, makes science come alive and helps participants learn about their place in an ecosystem. But readers don't have to join a count circle to appreciate nature. I hope that *Bird Count* inspires children to notice the beauty and variety of their wild neighbors—the birds and other animals and plants in their environment. When they think of "home," I hope they always think of their fellow creatures as well.

Q: Stephanie Fizer Coleman shares your love of birds and enjoyed drawing them even before illustrating this book. How did you react when you first saw her art?

A: As soon as my editor, Vicky, gave me Stephanie Fizer Coleman's name I looked on her website and saw her 100 Birds project. I was over the moon! The illustrations were everything I could have hoped for—accurate coloration and proportion with a whimsical touch. Her birds are so inviting, each seems to have its own personality.

Q: What did you like to read as a child?

A: I've always loved stories about animals. I can remember going into my local library and scooping all the Beatrix Potter books off the shelf to bring home. P.D. Eastman's *Go, Dog, Go* was another favorite, as were Robert Lopshire's *Put Me in the Zoo* and Robert McCloskey's *Make Way for Ducklings* and *Blueberries for Sal*. From an early age, I also read nonfiction animal books. I owned Marguerite Henry's *Album of Horses* and *The Treasury of Dogs* by Arthur Frederick Jones and John Rendel, and used my allowance to buy Golden Nature Guides at the local drugstore, many of which I still have today!

Q: If you hadn't become a writer, what would you be doing?

A: For me, being a writer has encompassed a wide range of careers—from technical writing to teaching and curriculum development to poetry and writing for children. But if I had followed a completely different path, I like to think I would have been a wildlife biologist, particularly one who studies animal behavior. I love being out in nature, and never tire of watching and learning about animals in their natural environment.

Q: What do you hope readers take away from *Bird Count*?

A: First of all, I hope they have fun reading the story, and enjoy the “treasure hunt” quality of finding Stephanie’s marvelous birds on each spread! Then I hope they are inspired to take that “treasure hunt” excitement outdoors to look for real birds in their environment. Because that’s one reason why I love birdwatching so much—birds are everywhere and you never know when or where you might find a new species to add to your list! All it really takes is, as Ava says, “your eyes and ears,” enthusiasm, and a little patience. And if the book encourages a few citizen scientists—and maybe eventually some trained ones—along the way, I’ll be thrilled!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Edwards Richmond teaches preschool on a farm and wildlife sanctuary in eastern Massachusetts. She earned her MA in Creative Writing from the University of California, Davis, and is the author of five collections of nature-based poetry for adults. She is happiest exploring natural habitats with her husband and two daughters, and learns the native birds wherever she travels.

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