

WellesleyWeston

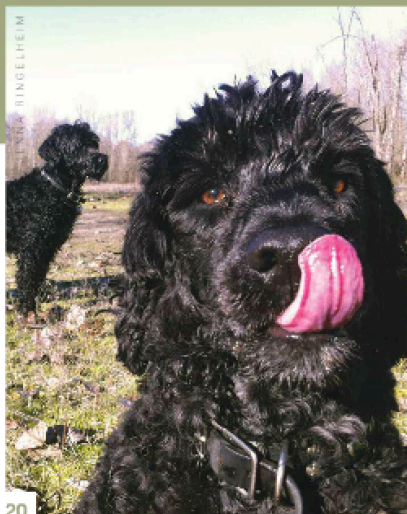
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2016



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This page gives our readers the opportunity to express themselves creatively with writing, art, and photography. In this issue, Steve Maas humorously highlights Weston's "true rulers."

A Message of Humanity for Young Readers

PATTY LENZ BOVIE **writer**

wellesley college

English professor and local children's book author Susan Lynn Meyer has always loved books. As a child she dreamed of being a writer one day, devouring novels such as *The Changeling* by Zilpha Keatley Snyder, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis, and *Black Hearts in Battersea* by Joan Aiken. "I loved being immersed in the worlds of these characters and thought writing would be a great career, but I needed to be practical too," Meyer said.

After graduating from Johns Hopkins University, she went on to earn her master's degree in English Literature at UCLA and her Ph.D. from Yale University. She began teaching English at Wellesley College where she wrote literary criticism, including her book *Imperialism at Home*, about the prevalence and impact of racial metaphors in Victorian literature. Penguin Random House published her first children's novel, *Black Radishes*, in 2010. It is based on her father's experience as a Jewish boy in Nazi-occupied France during World War II. *Black Radishes* won a Sydney Taylor honor award and was named a Massachusetts Book Award Must-Read finalist, and a Bank Street College of Education Best Children's Book, among other honors.

The sequel, *Skating with the Statue of Liberty* (also published by Penguin Random House) just came out in April and has already been preselected as a Junior Library Guild book. *Skating* follows 12-year-old Gustave as he arrives in America in 1942 and experiences life as a French immigrant in New York City. He befriends September Rose, an African-American girl in his school class, and witnesses racism in America for the first time, mirroring his own



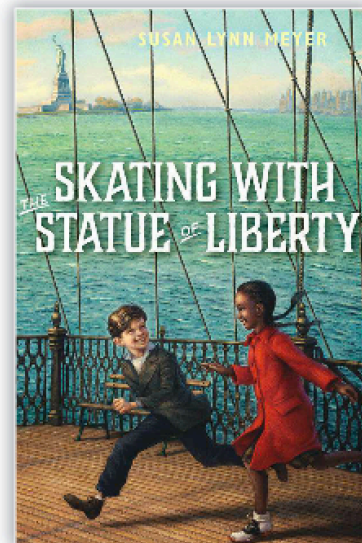
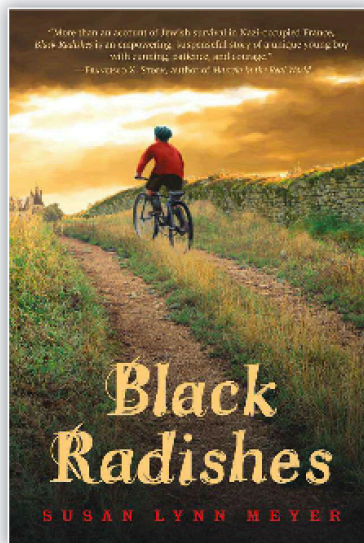
HANNAH WINKLER

Susan Lynn Meyer

books “fight for what is right”

experience with anti-Semitism. Explains Meyer: “While America has saved Gustave’s life, he’s had these idealized expectations of the United States—a place where everyone is created equal—but he gradually realizes that it’s not the perfect place he always thought it was.” However, Gustave’s war-time experiences and his strong Jewish identity help him see the positive and fight for what is right as he finds his way in this new world.

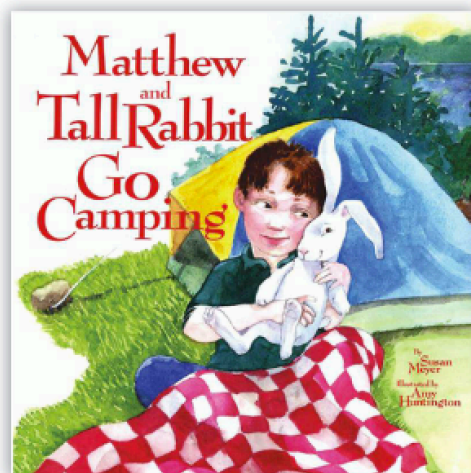
As a frequent writer of historical fiction, Meyer loves doing research. She uses multiple sources for inspiration, including personal memoirs, which deftly paint a picture of a certain time. “Memoirs provide details about everyday life that don’t often get into the history books,” she says. As a professor at Wellesley College, Meyer also has access to academic libraries, which offer even more resources than public libraries. For *Black Radishes*, she watched footage of a German propaganda newsreel set in France during the 1940s that showed what the girls were wearing and what the streets looked like. For *Skating with the Statue of Liberty*, she read a memoir of an 80-year-old man who described an automat with a golden dragon head spigot that dispensed hot coffee. By reading a memoir by Madeleine L’Engle describing life in New York in the early 1940s, “I



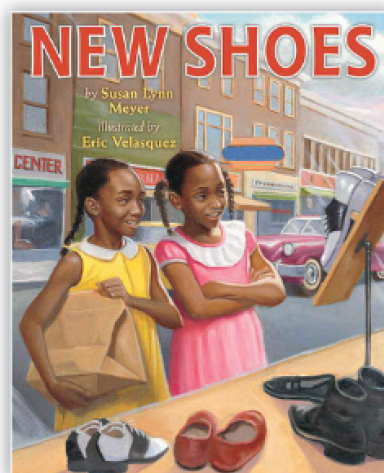
COURTESY OF PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE

found out that a cup of coffee cost 5 cents and a cup of hot chocolate cost 10 cents,” Meyer says. These types of details help Meyer create a rich, historically accurate world into which the young readers can transport themselves. From finding out what a train car from the 1940s looked like to learning that there was segregated seating in some movie theaters even in New York city, Meyer is adamant about getting her facts right.

One of six children, Meyer grew up in Baltimore. As a child, she was confused for a while and thought that whites were the minority population in the country because they were in the minority in the city where she grew up. For a while she was a scholarship student at



COURTESY OF DOWN EAST BOOKS



COURTESY OF HOLIDAY HOUSE BOOKS

a Quaker school with progressive pacifist and anti-racist curriculum that helped shape her beliefs today. Plus she was a daughter of parents who brought their children to civil rights and peace rallies in the 1960s and '70s. “A lot of my beliefs came from understanding what my father had gone through as a Jew in Nazi-occupied France and seeing the connections between anti-Semitism and racism,” she says.

books “captivating stories about children”

Meyer weaves the Double V movement—which stood for Victory and liberty at home and abroad and was the precursor to the civil rights movement of the 1960s—into her plot, and her character September Rose idolizes Josephine Baker, a real life African-American singer and dancer of the era.

Meyer also has published two picture books. *Matthew and Tall Rabbit Go Camping* (Down East Books), is a delightful story of a boy who is nervous about sleeping in a tent and brings his stuffed animal along to keep him company. *New Shoes* (Holiday House Books) follows Ella Mae as she goes to buy a new pair of saddle shoes with her mother in the 1950s, but isn’t allowed to try them on because of her race. Together with her friend, Ella Mae finds an inventive way to resist Jim Crow laws and helps other black people in her community buy new shoes without suffering humiliation. This book won 10 different honors, including the NCTE Charlotte Huck Honor Book for Outstanding Fiction for Children, and it was one of only five children’s books nominated for a 2016 47th NAACP Image Award. “It’s been very meaningful for me to get such recognition,” Meyer said. “Racial tensions in our country are so high. It’s a writer’s job to get inside their characters’ heads and imagine what it’s like to be them. But it has to be supported by

research.” To ensure credibility, she had several black readers review *New Shoes* before it went to print to get their reactions. According to Meyer, her earlier view of Ella Mae’s mother was “wrong.” One black reader explained that based on her ancestors’ experience Ella Mae’s mother would not have expressed anger to her daughter about not being able to try on shoes—instead she would have put a positive spin on it—trying to protect her daughter from the pain of racism. Meyer altered the book accordingly.

While Meyer teaches full time at Wellesley College and has a family at home, she still manages to squeeze in time to write, as well as visit schools, participate in writing panels, and critique peer manuscripts. She works best in the morning or after a long walk when she can clear her head before sitting down to pen her beautiful, lyrical words. “I enjoy spending time with my husband and daughter, kayaking, ice skating, walking through the New England woods, waiting for rare books to arrive for me through interlibrary loan, and searching every fall for a perfect, just-dipped caramel apple,” she says.

Despite her professional success, Meyer remains very humble—just happy to be “doing what she loves.” Her books are captivating stories about children who are advocating for the things we all want in our lives: fairness, freedom, and friendship. To find out more about Susan Meyer, visit her website at www.susanlynnmeyer.com. **WV**



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