

## Escape To The Marshmallow And Hedgehog-inhabited World Of Children's Books

by Kaimi Rose Lum

The headline in my inbox made my heart sink—bold letters flagging an article about a case before the Supreme Court that could change the way the U.S. is governed. More scary news, and from a reputable, Pulitzer-Prize winning journal. I knew it was important reading; I knew I would be a more responsible and informed citizen for opening that link. But at my elbow was Rowboat Watkins' new picture book. So I opened "Most Marshmallows" instead.

It took me a few moments to register what I was seeing. It was the same kind of cognitive jolt I'd get when looking at a photograph in the New York Times or on the nightly news of something awful I'd never believed could happen in our country. But here my eyes and mind and heart were adjusting in the opposite direction—to happiness. To giggly wonder. To a sense that all must be well with the world, if an imagination like Rowboat Watkins' is at work in it.

The book, recently added to our children's collection, is about the daily life, and dreams, of marshmallows. Marshmallows? Yes, marshmallows. Mini-marshmallows, delicately anthropomorphized with pencil-drawn faces and hair, ride in baby carriages, go to school, refuse to eat their vegetables at dinner time, and sometimes aspire to great things. It sounds silly, it is silly—but the illustrations are so surprising and fun that they make genius out of silliness.

Watkins constructs the scenes on each page from cardboard, paper, paint, fabric, acorn tops, cake sprinkles and "whatever else was necessary," he notes in the copyright paragraph. The result is a series of delicious, bright, many-textured collages through which the marshmallows' world is realized. Like the best children's books, each picture can be relished for its details, all perfectly relevant: Of course marshmallows waiting for the school bus would be wearing tiny backpacks, some of them left unzipped, with tiny papers falling out. And when the marshmallows are at school learning "to be squishy," of course the charts on the classroom wall would be of slugs and jellyfish and other

malleable life forms. Which gets you believing marshmallows are life forms. Which is the genius of "Most Marshmallows."

It's the rare book that offers you such an escape. "Hello Lighthouse," the 2019 Caldecott Medal winner by Sophie Blackall, had the same effect on me, stories within the story appearing on each rich, delicately rendered page. Blackall

reveals the inner life and workings of the lighthouse by illustrating it in cross section and taking you through the seasons with the keeper and his growing family. There are older books that do the trick, too, like

"Miss Jaster's Garden" by N.M. Bodecker. It's the story of a hedgehog who's transfigured in an unexpected way, and it's set in the leafy, sweetly water-colored world of an English garden by the sea. Bodecker's panoramas of the garden are both sweeping and intimate—you can always find the small brown hedgehog somewhere in it.

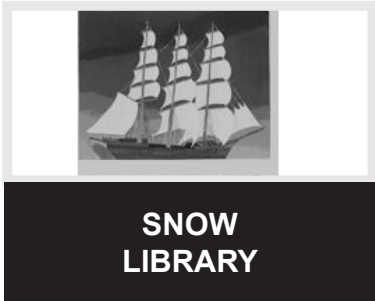
I am writing, you understand, as an adult appraising literature created for children. Children are the arbiters here. You know that a picture book has missed the mark when your child forbids you from bringing it into the room, and you know it's a success when they ask to read it again and again, or when they stop you from turning a page because they're so absorbed in what they're looking at. (Marshmallows in rocket-ships and camouflaged hedgehogs are guaranteed to hold up story time.)

But I suppose you know there's something really, really special about a book when it moves you to reconsider your disappointment in the human race. In the cynical, troubled world we live in, you might find it comforting to know that somewhere there's a children's book illustrator gluing wee parachutes together out of paper and string for a story where mini-marshmallows finally break the mold and take to the skies.

Or you could take it as evidence that the world has gone off its rocker.

You decide. And don't forget to check out a children's picture book in the meantime.

Kaimi Rose Lum is assistant director at Snow Library in Orleans.



## Transcribing History

by Caroline Imparato

One of the many exciting projects that have been relaunched this year at the Atwood Museum is the long-awaited Oral History Project.

Beginning back in 1954, the early members of the Chatham Historical Society were thinking of innovative ways to preserve history. The group decided to begin recording various people from Chatham to have an oral history of the town. This way, generations to come would be able to learn about life "back then."

Currently, in the Chatham Historical Society Collection, there are about 55 recordings of teachers, lobstermen, oyster farmers, shipwrecked brides, local church representatives, artists, local politicians, sea captains, and plenty of other Chatham characters. Overall, there is roughly 71 hours or 4,300 minutes of recorded conversation and interviews.

These recordings are packed to the gills with information about not only the fun, local Chatham, but also Chatham economics, architecture, coastal erosion, politics, state government, the evolution of the Life Saving Service to the Coast Guard, the education system, and more. All of this is recorded by people who lived through the ups and downs and changing tides of history.

One particularly interesting recording is of Ulah Deer in 1954. In this recording Ulah talks about her adventures of being a shipwrecked bride. She tells of how she married a sea captain in 1890. After they were married, Ulah decided to travel with her husband aboard his vessel. Very shortly after their journey began, their ship ran into trouble. Let us say the story involves lifeboats, possible mutiny, a Spanish bark, and a cat. The bride herself tells the story!

Not only is it fun to hear from these "old-timers," as they are sometimes referred to, it is also enjoyable to

hear from past Chatham Historical Society members and volunteers who are doing the interviewing. These are people like Sally Erath, Josephine Buck Ivanoff, Ken Matteson, and Ned Meaney, to name a few.

The Atwood Museum is now in the middle of the project to convert all of these old recordings to digital files and transcribe the content to digital and paper documents. The goal is to make these oral histories available to everyone online on the museum

website. That way, anybody needing research, family history, or if you're just curious about what life was like back then, you can have access to these wonderful pieces of oral tradition and history.

The breakdown of the project includes:

Step 1 - Collect all tapes of old recordings.

Step 2 - Make sure all tapes and recordings are properly accessioned (incorporated into our database) and cataloged.

Step 3 - Send out tapes to be digitized to transferrable files.

Step 4 - Transcribe recordings so that there is a "script" of oral histories to go with recording. This involves the use of speech recognition software (a talk to text program).

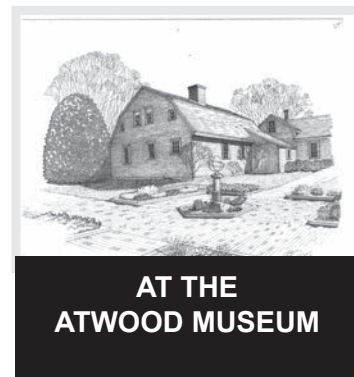
Step 5 - Organize and upload recordings and corresponding transcriptions online.

Step 6 - Make accessible to the public.

This project is being funded by a generous and anonymous donor. The Atwood would not have been able to pursue this endeavor without this financial support. The museum thanks these supporters.

So keep your eye out for more information about the Atwood Museum Oral History Project. History has a voice, so get ready to hear it!

Caroline Imparato is administrator at the Atwood Museum, home of the Chatham Historical Society.



AT THE ATWOOD MUSEUM



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