

THE SNOWY DAY

AND OTHER
STORIES BY

EZRA JACK KEATS



DENVER CENTER FOR THE
PERFORMING ARTS
Education

**EDUCATOR AND
FAMILY RESOURCE**

The Snowy Day and Other Stories by Ezra Jack Keats

ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE BY

JEROME HAIRSTON

BASED ON THE BOOKS BY

EZRA JACK KEATS

The Snowy Day and Other Stories by Ezra Jack Keats stages four Keats titles:

The Snowy Day (1962)

Whistle for Willie (1964)

Goggles! (1969)

and *A Letter to Amy* (1968)

This resource provides you with information to share, questions to answer, and activities to play!

ABOUT EZRA JACK KEATS

Ezra Jack Keats was born in 1916 to Jewish parents who had emigrated from Poland. Benjamin and Augusta Katz named their son Ezra, and he was known as "Jack." Even when he was very young, Ezra loved to draw and paint. He drew all over the kitchen table and on wood he found in the street. When he was eight years old, Ezra was paid 25 cents to paint a sign for a local store. His father thought he might be a sign painter when he grew up, but Ezra was more interested in painting pictures. In junior high, he won a medal for drawing, which he treasured his whole life. In 1937, Ezra found a job painting murals for the Works Progress Administration. When Ezra went into the Army for World War II, his artistic training was put to use designing camouflage patterns for uniforms and equipment. After the war, Ezra changed his last name from "Katz" to "Keats" and began working as a commercial artist and teaching classes in illustration. In 1962, Ezra wrote and illustrated his own book. *The Snowy Day* featuring a young African-American boy named Peter. Ezra based the character of Peter on a series of photos he had cut out of *Life* magazine in the early 1940s. Ezra had noticed that the main characters in the books he illustrated were always white. That didn't seem fair to other children who deserved to see characters in books that looked like them. *The Snowy Day* was awarded the Caldecott Medal in 1963. It was the greatest honor given for picture books at the time. Winning the Caldecott prize for *The Snowy Day* made Ezra famous. All told, he wrote 22 picture books and illustrated more than 85 books for children. Over the years, Ezra traveled around the country to visit schools and teach children about illustration. He believed that a love of reading and art helped him survive growing up, and he wanted to offer younger children the same opportunity. Ezra Jack Keats died in 1983 at the age of 67.

Source: <http://www.ezra-jack-keats.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Ezra-Jack-Keats-Bio-for-Kids.pdf>

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ABOUT KEATS' ART

Amid the sit-ins, marches, and protests of the Civil Rights movement, Ezra Jack Keats played a quieter role, choosing to be an activist on the page rather than in the streets. In 1962, he published *The Snowy Day*, the first full-color picture book to feature a black child as its protagonist. Written and illustrated by Keats, the book won the 1963 Caldecott Medal and went on to become an icon of children's literature.

Source: <https://www.arts.gov/art-works/2014/making-snowy-day>

Inspired by Asian art and haiku poetry, Keats used lush color in his paintings and collages and strove for simplicity in his texts. He was often more intent on capturing a mood than developing a plot. "Each drawing is considered not in itself, but in relationship to the rest of the book," he explained, while keeping in mind "drama, continuity, contrast, and mood." His preferred format was the horizontal double-page spread, which freed him to alternate close-up scenes

with panoramic views. In his illustrations Keats makes dilapidated urban settings beautiful through his mastery of collage as well as his dramatic use of color. By the end of his life in 1983, he had more than over 80 books, most of them for children, 22 of which he also authored.

Source: <http://thejewishmuseum.org/exhibitions/the-snowy-day-and-the-art-of-ezra-jack-keats>

... as [Keats] later related to poetry anthologist Lee Bennett Hopkins, "I wanted to convey the joy of being a little boy alive on a certain kind of day—of being for that moment. The air is cold, you touch the snow, aware of the things to which all children are so open. [Keats'] groundbreaking use of collage in the book, a technique that consisted of affixing pieces of patterned and solid paper to enhance the design of the pages, changed his style and added a sensory quality to his work. Keats' idea opened the way for an exciting new technique in children's picture book illustration.

Source: <https://www.nccil.org/artists/ezra-jack-keats>

ACTIVITIES

In the play, the events of *The Snowy Day* take place in the winter. Here are some winter-inspired activities to try:

- Stick an ice cube in your pocket. How long does it take to melt?
- Pass an ice cube around a circle of friends. How long does it take to melt?
- Share the following clues with someone and see if s/he can guess the word that ends in the letters "i", "c", "e": something that rolls (dice); more than one type of rodent (mice); one piece of pizza (slice); a grain that is basic to many cultures (rice); a second time (twice).
- On different sticky notes, write the names of animals that hibernate – one animal name on one sticky note. Each player in the game places a sticky note on his/her back. For a guessing game: make sure that no one sees his/her sticky note and each person must ask questions of others in order to guess the animal. For a listing game: with paper and pencil, everyone must try and write down the names of all of the animals within the challenge of everyone trying to keep his/hers backs away from everyone else while moving about the room.

In the play, the events from *Whistle for Willie* take place during spring. Here are some spring-inspired activities to try:

- Share these riddles about flowers: I can be over ten feet tall but I'm not a giraffe (sunflower); I grow free but sometimes I am chained (daisy); I can be red, pink, yellow, orange or white, but I'm not a crayon (rose); Why is the letter A like a flower (B comes after it).
- Guess what's for spring breakfast: fried side, heated wheat with cold gold, best nest, white might. Answers: bacon, toast with butter, egg, milk
- Name Five: pet names you or your friends have; places you could take shelter in during a spring rainstorm; adjectives that mean windy; items that could go into a shopping bag. Grow the challenge by limiting answers to words that all start with the same letter.

In the play, the events of *Goggles!* take place in the summer. Here are some summer-inspired activities to try:

- With two other people, stand back-to-back and entwine your arms. Challenge another group of three likewise entwined to an octopus race.
- Hold your body off the ground with your chest facing upward and your knees bent – this is called a crab walk position. It's another great way to have a race with others!
- When out and about under summer skies, look for and gather pennies. Place the collected pennies into a bowl of vinegar. What happens to them? What happens if you remove them, rinse them off in water, and let them dry for an hour?

In the play, the events of *A Letter to Amy* take place in the fall. Here are some fall-inspired activities to try:

- Choose ten letters randomly. Each letter must be the first letter of a word that will start a new sentence. All ten sentences must address the same theme or event relating to fall. The sentences should be written as if as a letter or e-mail.
- Ask friends if they can find the abbreviations for three fall months (Sep., Oct., Nov.) in the following sentences? I like those **purple** flowers. The clock counts the time, tic, **toc**, **tic**, toc. The meeting **ran over**, making me miss my bus.
- Here's how to create a leaf rubbing: gather leaves from the ground (avoid pulling leaves from a tree), place them underneath a piece of paper, then rub a crayon over the paper. Once you have several rubbings in several colors, cut the leaves out and create a garland with them.

The Snowy Day has Peter entertaining himself with different activities in the snow only to wish he was old enough to have a snowball fight with older kids in his neighborhood.

- What is your favorite winter memory?
- What was something you wished you could do when you were younger that you had to wait to do until you were older?
- Use the book, *The Snowy Day*, to explain to someone who did not see the play, how the play brought the illustrations to life on stage. How would you act the story out?

Whistle for Willie introduces Peter's dog, Willie, and follows Peter's determination to learn to whistle.

- The process of Peter practicing and practicing to learn how to whistle is an example of persistence, also called grit. What are things that required your persistence at school, at home, with friends, at play?
- What advice could you give to someone who, frustrated because something they want to do isn't coming easy to them, wants to give up?
- How many animals can you pretend to be by using both your voice and your body? Invite others to join you and, working together to make one animal, how can you move as a singular unit in the manner of that animal? Think of land animals, sea animals, and animals of the air.

Goggles! follows Peter as he meets and outsmarts bullies.

- Have you ever encountered a bully? How did you deal with being bullied?
- Have you ever used an object in different ways in pretend play? What was the most interesting object you used? What was the most imaginative way you used the object?
- Use the book, *Goggles!*, to explain to someone who did not see the play, how and where the play used shadow puppets. What would your shadow puppets look like?

A Letter to Amy finds Peter feeling many emotions around friendship and birthdays.

- Talk with as many people of as many ages as you can about their experiences with writing and receiving letters. After you have heard a few experiences, would you consider writing and receiving e-mails or texts the same as writing and receiving letters? Why or why not?
- In both the book and the play, Peter accidentally makes Amy cry. Have you ever hurt someone's feelings accidentally? How did you know? What did you do to correct the situation? Has someone ever hurt your feelings and then you discovered it was on accident? How did s/he correct the situation?
- What wishes do you have for your future, for your family's future, for the future of your classmates, for your pets, for the planet?