

Story Monsters Ink

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The Literary Resource for Teachers, Librarians, and Parents



JASON THARP

ENCOURAGES KIDS TO BE THE UNICORN

**SHARON LANGLEY
AND AMY NATHAN**

TELL A STORY WE'LL NEVER FORGET

ROB HARRELL

WRITES AN INSPIRING STORY
OF MIDDLE SCHOOL SURVIVAL

ANNA PIGNATARO

PENS A HEARTWARMING
STORY OF KINDNESS
AND EMPATHY

ONE TO WATCH:
ELIZA PRYOR

ONE TO READ:
JUSTINE AVERY

MARTHA and ANN DRISCOLL

SHARE THEIR LOVE OF LEARNING WITH LITTLE READERS

MICHAEL J. ARMSTRONG

DEBUTS HIS BEST BOOK EVER

NATHAN HALE

BRINGS HISTORY TO LIFE IN
GRAPHIC NOVEL SERIES

TEACHING TOOLBOX

THE SEED OF A STORY

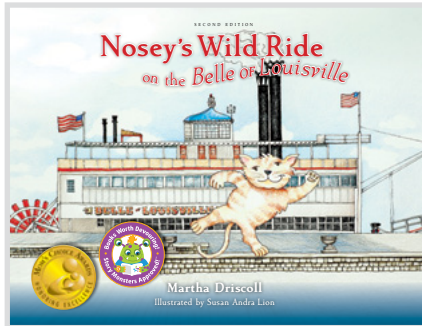
JUDY NEWMAN

SPRING BREAK



in this issue ...

FEATURES



04 MARTHA AND ANN DRISCOLL

Share Their Love of Learning with Little Readers

08 JASON THARP

Encourages Kids to Be the Unicorn

12 SHARON LANGLEY AND AMY NATHAN

Tell a Story We'll Never Forget

16 ROB HARRELL

Writes an Inspiring Story of Middle School Survival

20 ANNA PIGNATARO

Pens a Heartwarming Story of Kindness and Empathy

24 NATHAN HALE

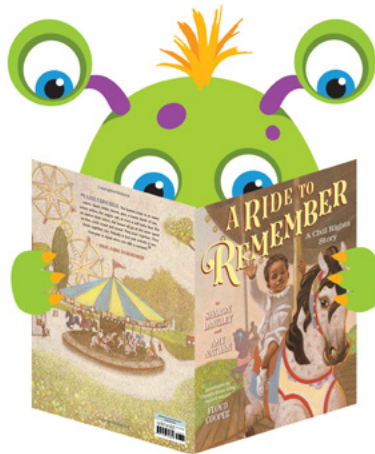
Brings History to Life in Graphic Novel Series

28 One to Watch: ELIZA PRYOR

32 One to Read: JUSTINE AVERY

60 MICHAEL J. ARMSTRONG

Debuts His Best Book Ever



COLUMNS

36 JUDY NEWMAN

Spring Break

40 TEACHING TOOLBOX

The Seed of a Story

50 MY FAVORITE TEACHER

Mrs. Legler

52 MONSTERS AT THE MOVIES

Emma

59 LIV ON LIFE

March for a Cause

RESOURCES

44 SPRING READING LIST

54 BOOK REVIEWS

WANT TO READ EVEN MORE?

Check out our [Book Briefs](#) page at [storymonsters.com](#) to keep up with the latest news, interviews, and happenings at Story Monsters!

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Michael J. Armstrong

Gives Little Readers the Best Book Ever

by Julianne Black DiBlasi

Ever have that ONE day that needs to be PERFECT? I'm not talking about a milestone birthday, or even a wedding—I'm talking about the absolute most important day ever: the last day of summer vacation! We can plan, cram, coupon, Groupon, frequent-flier mile, and out-of-the-office-reply every moment of our vacations, but how do we add the FUN? How do we make it the BEST?

I came across an amazing pre-order announcement for a book that gives us all the answers—well, at least the answers according to William and Anna. Complete with “to-do” lists and diagrams, William and Anna show the world how an EPIC last vacation day is done in *Best Day Ever* by Michael J. Armstrong. And, of course, I simply can't wait for the release date in May to get the answers. I had to track down Michael at home and bother him for details. I'm just like that.

Q: Hi Michael! It's so awesome that we get a chance to talk with you before the book hits shelves! *Best Day Ever* will be released by Sterling Children's Books in May! Can you tell us a little about the book?

A: Thanks for having me! And I'd love nothing more than to talk about *Best Day Ever*—just ask anyone who has the misfortune of knowing me. So, it's the last day of summer vacation and ever-so-ambitious William has one goal left on his list: have the most fun ever. And being the type-A kid that he is, William attacks his “problem” with meticulous precision. Unfortunately, his next-door neighbor, Anna, keeps interrupting him with her outlandish ideas. William dismisses her each time. But as he struggles to accomplish his goal with time running out, William begins to wonder if maybe Anna knows

something he doesn't. Basically, *Best Day Ever* is about letting go of control and finding joy in the chaos. To a lesser extent, it's also about being open to new ideas—especially ones that are outside our comfort zones.

And while it's William's story, I think Anna is the star of the book. I completely fell in love with her character, and I hope I get the chance to write more Anna and Will stories. In fact, I have already written one and expect to write more—even if it's just for my family to read—but who knows if they will get published.

Q: This is your very first published title, is that correct? My favorite question to ask new authors is about that moment you first held a copy in your hands—can you give us a little bit on where you were and what went through your mind when you got your advanced copies?

A: It is my first, but I haven't received my advance copies yet. Is that bad? Why am I suddenly sweating? Do you know something that I don't know?!

Anyway, I am dying to get my mitts on them. Since my manuscript was acquired a little over two years ago, I've gone through four different editors. Each time I wondered if *Best Day Ever* might get dropped or put on a shelf (and not in a good way). It's been a bit of an emotional roller coaster ride. So, holding an actual hard copy will probably be the first time it feels real to me. Then my wife and I will probably play a game of, "I'm not crying, you're crying!" as my daughter laughs and films us on her iPad.

Q: I love the story you tell on your website about the connection between which books you liked to read to your daughter and which books she asked you to read ... can you let our story monsters in on that revelation and share how it influenced your writing?

A: Of course. When my daughter picked out books for us to read at bedtime, she always seemed to gravitate toward the ones that we enjoyed as well. And it makes sense since kids tend to be finely tuned into their parents' emotions. They like to see us laugh and experience joy, just as they don't like to see us get upset (obviously, I have no experience with teenagers yet). Therefore, I think it stands to reason that when they see us enjoy a book, it makes them want to read all the more. And, of course, more books = more better.



So, my wife and I specifically sought out authors and titles that we would enjoy together with our daughter. Fortunately, there are a lot of authors who do this extremely well, like Drew Daywalt, Ashley Spires, Ryan T. Higgins, and Jon Klassen, to name a few.

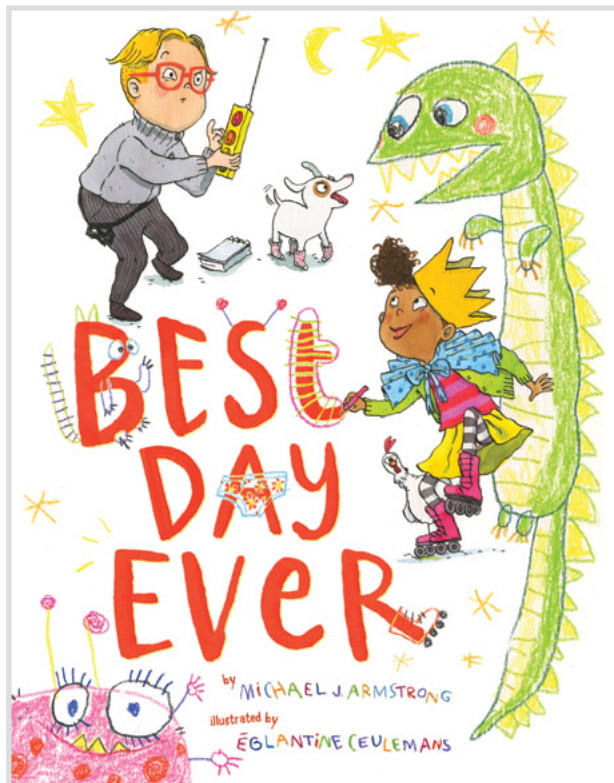
When I started writing picture books about five years ago, that became my primary goal. Now when I'm working on something and am unsure about a line or phrase, I imagine that moment when a parent is reading it for the third, 10th, or 50th (I should be so lucky) time. Does it hold up, or is it just annoying now? It's been a helpful exercise for me.

Anyway, I hope that in at least some small way I succeeded in making *Best Day Ever* a book that parents and kids will enjoy together.

Q: I imagine you included your daughter on the trial-and-error of *Best Day Ever's* storyline? What was her response to the finished book?

A: You are right. In fact, she is always the first person to hear a new manuscript. And the older she gets, the more involved she wants to become in the process, and the more helpful she actually is.

Speaking of which, she had a lot of input on my second Anna and Will manuscript which will hopefully get picked up by my publisher (they have until late summer to exercise their option). Unlike me, she loves to draw. So, for Christmas, she gave me a hand-illustrated copy of the manuscript. She worked on it for nearly



three months. If our house ever catches fire, that's the possession I will grab first. She might have even inspired a third Anna and Will book: *Best Gift Ever*.

And yes, she's VERY excited about getting a hard copy of the book. She keeps asking me if she can have the first copy, and if I'll sign it for her. But the funny thing is that she wants to come to a book signing and be the first person in line (I haven't the heart to tell her that there probably won't be any line). Always keeps me smiling, that kid.

Q: The concept behind *Best Day Ever* is such a timeless reminder for all of us. The idea that trying to measure, list, quantify, and track something like fun happens to us as adults, yet the real essence of the fun lies in the unplanned, silly, messy, and (if I can borrow from Anna) the tiny bit dangerous adventures we can't micromanage. Was there a specific event or situation that brought this order vs. play conundrum to mind for you to begin writing about it or was it always a concept you've been inspired by?

A: As a parent, this was actually a concept that I struggled with personally. When my daughter was born, I gave up my career to become a stay-at-home

dad. My mindset at the time was that I should approach parenting like a job. I was always trying to find things to do that I thought were developmentally important. I did research, I made lists, and I planned out our days. I would overschedule and pull her away from her creative play—even though I knew it was good for her—to go do something “important” I had planned. To make matters worse, I would get very stressed out about it. I simply wasn't enjoying the ride. I was like William.

One day I remember watching her play in the backyard. She had this stick—actually it was a dowel rod she swiped from my workshop—and she was talking and laughing and spinning and dancing and having the time of her life with this simple little piece of wood. That's when I realized the error of my ways. Nothing I had planned for that day would've made her as happy—or could be more important—than what she was imagining with that stick.

It's one of the great things about having kids. If you watch them closely, they will show you how to find the best parts of life.

By the way, she still swipes my dowel rods. We built a playhouse a few summers ago, and that's the first place I look if I ever need one.

Q: William's Summer Goals list is just epic and perfectly pins down his character's personality while your illustrator Églantine Ceulemans completely seals the deal with the illustrations. How much input did you have with the illustrator on how you wanted William's character to look and how much does William look like the little boy you were envisioning while writing the story?

A: With a dialogue-only book, sometimes it's necessary to have a lot of illustration notes to tell the story. But I had heard from peers that art notes were often frowned upon, so I did my best to limit them to instructions that were essential to drive the story forward.

That said, I offered absolutely no input on what the characters should look like or any descriptive features. In fact, and I might be an outlier in this way, I never really see my characters' faces. I just see their personalities. So, I really didn't have anything to offer in the first place. And I'm glad I didn't, because Églantine absolutely nailed it. I'm EXTREMELY lucky she agreed to illustrate this book.

Q: Just a quick peek at the “look inside” feature from *Best Day Ever*’s Amazon listing was enough to completely sell me on the story and be completely certain that it will end up by my daughter’s bedside table for many, many reads and rereads in our future. Knowing this, I have to ask: What can we expect from you next and how fast can we get it?

A: That’s very kind of you to say. As I mentioned earlier, my next Anna and Will book is in my publisher’s hands right now. It’s more of a stand-alone book than a sequel, but I’m very excited about it. My wife and my critique partners all think it is better

“It’s one of the great things about having kids. If you watch them closely, they will show you how to find the best parts of life.”

than *Best Day Ever* and who am I to argue? The theme is confirmation bias, and it plays out as Anna drags Will into a search for a missing penguin that she is convinced is hiding in her house. I REALLY hope it sees the light of day. And who knows, maybe the stars will align and Églantine will illustrate again.

I’m also working on several other picture book manuscripts, and I’ve got a chapter book character that will not stop pestering me to write her story. Now I just need a few more hours in the day, and a few more days in the week. Do you know anyone who can help me with that?

You can learn more about Michael J. Armstrong and *Best Day Ever* at michaeljarmstrongbooks.com. ●

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