



BLL Book Reviews - March 2022

**Brewster Ladies Library
1822 Main Street
Brewster, MA 02631**

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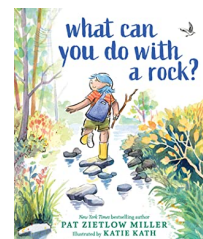
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**What can you do with a rock? (sourcebooks, 2021) Picture Book (for 4-8 year-olds)
by Pat Zietlow Miller and illustrated by Katie Kath**

reviewed by: Nori Morganstein, Youth Services Librarian/Assistant Director



In what can sometimes feel like the land of rocks and sand (aka: Cape Cod), the book spoke to me. As a big fan of the Kindness Rock Project and a children's librarian who does at least one rock painting program a year, I find myself looking for good rocks to paint on a regular basis. While the book does at one point, briefly mention painting rocks, it's mostly about a million and one other ideas that never occurred to me. I can see kids putting this book down, and wanting to go for a hike or an immediate trip to the beach to scout for the perfect rocks. There's a very physical nature to this book. The main character moves a lot. She hikes, swims, explores, drops, clatters, and organizes. The illustrator demonstrates motion in a fun, cartoon-like way. You can almost hear the noise the rock makes as it skips on the water, or as it hits the wind chime.

Then, there's also a scholarly aspect. The main character learns, studies, and experiments too. Rocks are organized in containers and scattered across pages by color and shape. She goes to a museum and gathers more information about rocks. And after talking about various art projects, like painting fish on them, she goes to the beach to presumably collect more rocks, but also to make friends and share her experiences. There's also a social nature to rocks. Who knew?

There's extra information about rocks at the very end, for kids who want to learn more. And the end pages of the book are made up of beautiful illustrations of various types of rocks and their respective names (i.e.: obsidian, garnet, amethyst, etc.). Basically, the book is full of information and pictures of rocks! The story is charming and the illustrations are fun. It will make you want to go on an adventure and find some new rocks of your own.

Read Until You Understand: The Profound Wisdom of Black Life and Literature

by Farah Jasmine Griffin

reviewed by Doug Wilcock

In 1965 the Moynihan Report, formally titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, explored the causes of Black poverty and depicted a pathological Black culture. In an interview soon thereafter in *Black Scholar*, James Baldwin interpreted the Black family not as pathological, but as sitting at the vanguard of social change. He saw the Black family not as a cause of Black poverty and racial inequity but as a bulwark against it. In *Read Until You Understand*, Farah Jasmine Griffin explores the Black family with an intense focus on her own, showing how that family was indeed the bulwark that Baldwin describes. Griffin gives us a compelling story, not only about her family but about the complex community that surrounded them as she grew up in South Philadelphia. It is a story of loving, and being loved, of belonging, and of “being fierce about the work of saving each other.”

Griffin is chair of the African American and African Diaspora department at Columbia and a Professor of English and Comparative Literature. She finds deep meaning from close reading of text, and from writing. After her father died, she felt a compulsion to read and write. This compulsion “addressed my loneliness and seemed to release something close to euphoria in my head.” And write she does. In a chapter entitled “The Question of Mercy,” Griffin finds that “in mercy lay the possibility of redemption and renewal.” She brings this theme forward with the Phillis Wheatley poem, *On Being Brought from Africa to America*, suggesting that while the masters thought they were acting mercifully to their slaves, what the slaves deserve is not mercy but justice. “If mercy is granted to those who deserve punishment for their deeds against others, then in many ways the United States, particularly its white citizens, have been among the greatest recipients of mercy.” Turning to Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*, Griffin suggests that the protagonist Florens is not in search of mercy but instead claims her violent and vengeful self, an act for which she has no remorse. Griffin concludes: “Perhaps it is better to strike a blow for freedom than to rely on mercy.”

A long legacy of resistance to slavery can be found in Black literature. For Farah Griffin, the introduction to resistance literature came in an undergraduate course where she was blown away (her phrase) by David Walker’s 1829 *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* and to Henry Highland Garnet’s “An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America,” finding the rhetoric of Malcolm X flowing through these earlier documents. This exploration of the roots of resistance led Griffin to Frances E. Watkins Harper, an exploration that she described as “one of the most intellectually transformative experiences of my undergraduate career” and, in my opinion, one of the most compelling sections of the book. The resistance thread leads to a chance meeting with Toni Cade Bambara, whose writing advances the idea of resistance, giving rise to contemporary resistance as the reaction to the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, among others.

Griffin writes with intensity and beauty. She describes outdoors as the real terror in life, suggesting that goodness, the good, was the opposite of putting someone outdoors. Love she equates with care, care being life-giving and life-affirming. She draws on Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* that love is thick and dark. Despite her father’s death, Griffin never feared being “outdoors,” never feared being a “thrown away child.”

Griffin draws on Black literature to ground the story of her life and community. When she describes “our restaurant” as part of Black economic self-determination, a family enterprise made possible because it was family, a source of pride and self-definition, she can understand the impulse toward autonomy that she finds in Zora Neale Hurston’s Eatonville or Toni Morrison’s Ruby in *Paradise*. She does not romanticize but suggests instead that “when whites are no longer the primary focus, one can see the contours of conflict, debate, and difference within the Black community. The music gives voice to it all.” (continued on the next page)

After the death of her father, Farah drew close to her mother. While her mother told Farah that, as her mother, “my job is to take care of you; your job is to do well in school.” Farah became attentive to her mother’s every breath, and desirous of her happiness. She loved to hear the buzzing of her mother’s sewing machine in the wee hours of the morning, recognizing that the care her mother gave to her work brought a blissful solitude and satisfaction. For Farah, writing and reading brought a similar blissful high that engulfed her, much as the sewing did for her mother. This book beautifully meshes life with literature. Drawing on an extensive literature, Griffin pulls out details that illustrate and illuminate incidents from her own life, creating a rich tableau for the reader to enjoy. Perhaps no better summary can be given than her first sentence of the acknowledgments in which she says that “this book is an offering to the people and place, Philadelphia, that made me, and to the writers, music makers, and visual artists who helped me have a better understanding of and appreciation for both.”

Inferno

by Dan Brown

reviewed by Don Boink

Inferno is certainly one of Dan Brown’s best books. The copyright date is 2014 and although many things have changed since then, the subject matter is timely. While today’s biggest concerns include climate change and the pandemic, *Inferno* is based on Malthus’ worry about over population of the earth.

A brilliant geneticist named Zobrist is struck by the rate of population growth and the mathematics that demonstrated Malthus’ conclusion that civilization was doomed to be starved out of existence. Zobrist put his mind to the problem and found one solution that could avoid that ending. Zobrist thought of the history of the plague years when as many as a third of the population perished.

Robert Langford, the brilliant Harvard Professor, finds himself in a hospital with a head injury and no idea how he got there. He embarks on a bewildering series of adventures that take him around the world trying to unravel the mystery. Part of the riddle involves the famous poem by Dante Alighieri’s *The Inferno*. Following clues from various lines in the poem, Langford eventually arrives in Istanbul at the Hagia Sophia.

His traveling companion, the beautiful Dr. Sierra Brooks, is more than a physician. She is involved in a vast conspiracy related to Zobrist and his plan to solve the population problem, a plague that will decimate the world population.

It is a race against time to locate the threatening epidemic source. As time runs out the chase intensifies. In the final scenes the mystery is solved with a dramatic twist. Brown’s stories are not only interesting they are replete with history, literary comment and geographic descriptions.

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The BLL Book Reviews

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Thanks to JoAnn Phillips for her skill in editing these reviews.

Madam: The Biography of Polly Adler Icon of the Jazz Age
by Debby Applegate
reviewed by Jim Mills

Pearl Adler was born in Yanow, Belarus, then part of Russia. For many decades Jews had been persecuted and offered limited opportunities in Czarist Russia. In 1913 Pearl's parents sent the young teenager to the United States by herself. Landing in New York, Pearl stayed with relatives in Connecticut for a short time, but dissatisfied with life there, left for the Big Apple to seek her fortune. Since she came to America the year before all hell broke loose in Europe with the start of World War 1 and the resulting formation of the Soviet Union, the rest of her family would not make it to America until the following decade and even later.

In the big city she tried out various employment opportunities but was gradually drawn into the sex trade. Changing her name to Polly, she became a Madam opening her own house of ill repute by 1920. By mid-decade she had become a fixture of Manhattan social life, mixing with all levels of Jazz Age society. With prohibition starting in 1920, criminal activity became more prominent in big city life insinuating its influence into nightclubs, alcohol distribution and bordellos. As a Madam, Polly had to juggle the varying influences and threats of police, politicians, and organized crime along with her meeting the needs of customers and her employees. Corruption was rampant in the political world and in policing activity. Polly had to pay off the law and also to provide favors for prominent politicians and other celebrities. Two celebrities close to Polly in the 1920s and 30s were the author Robert Benchley and the actor Wallace Beery. With the election of Jimmy Walker in the 1920s, government control over illicit activities in New York became even looser.

The press would feature stories on a weekly basis of organized crime executions as various crime families jostled for supremacy. Polly had to deal with major crime figures such as "Legs" Diamond and "Dutch" Schultz. She would never know when a Mafia figure would show up at her establishment and threaten or beat up her girls and trash the place. The police could show up at anytime and cart her or her girls off to the station or demand protection money to avoid arrest. After a while, Polly developed a warning system where she could anticipate trouble and evacuate the premises for a while. During the 20s and 30s she frequently had to relocate her center of operations to various places in Manhattan. Despite all of these obstacles, Polly ran a high class service for clients from the upper crust of New York society as well as many visiting celebrities. She provided the best in culinary and drinking amenities. By mid-decade Polly had risen to the top of her profession.

By the early 1930s the situation had changed in New York. In 1933 prohibition had ended and reformers were coming into power with Fiorello LaGuardia as Mayor and Tom Dewey as District Attorney. They pursued organized crime, with an invigorated determination. Serious efforts were also made to close down Manhattan's bordellos. Polly's profession remained a dangerous one. By the 1940s with America in WW 2, the pressure had let up a bit. New customers in the form of GIs arrived in the city. By the end of the war Polly decided to move to Los Angeles and went into semi-retirement. In 1951 she was able to publish her memoir known as *A House is Not a Home* after being turned down by numerous squeamish publishers. In the 1960's after Polly had died her memoir was made into a movie of the same name, starring Shelly Winters as Polly.

Madam provides a fascinating description of life in New York in the 1920s and 30s with the interplay of politicians, celebrities and criminals jostling for power and influence. Many well known individuals such as Walter Winchell, Tallulah Bankhead, Duke Ellington, Paul Whiteman, the Marx Brothers and even Franklin Roosevelt interfaced with Polly during her long reign as Manhattan's premier Madam. This description of New York life shows how much goes on in a big city that does not come to the surface of public knowledge. Life during this period has been characterized in many crime films of the 1930s such as *Public Enemy* and parodies in the 1950s such as the musical *Guys and Dolls*. I believe that most readers will find *Madam* to be a fascinating description of life, at all levels, in New York during the early 20th century.

Conquering the Pacific: An Unknown Mariner and the Final Great Voyage of the Age of Discovery

by Andres Resendez

reviewed by Jim Mills

In 1519 Ferdinand Magellan began the voyage of discovery for which he is best known. Navigating the strait named after him at the southern tip of South America he became the first European to pass from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. After many months at sea, he reached the Philippine Islands in the western Pacific where he was to perish in a local dispute. It is well known that the surviving crew then returned westward to their starting point in Spain, being the first to circumnavigate the world. It is less known that the crew first tried to return to Spain by heading back eastward recrossing the Pacific. Being in the age of sail, the prevalence of westbound currents and winds defeated this attempt, forcing a return voyage through the Indian and Atlantic Oceans and making that first circumnavigation. For decades afterward Spanish mariners made repeated unsuccessful attempts to complete a round trip Pacific voyage.

Conquering the Pacific tells the story of the first successful eastbound return trip made in the Pacific. In 1565, a fleet of four ships left the Mexican Pacific port of Navidad and crossed the Pacific, en-route to the Philippines and the spice islands. Along the way, the smallest of the ships in the group, the San Lucas, became separated from the other three. Despite numerous attempts, the lone ship was not able to rejoin the fleet. Reaching their destination, the ship's captain and pilot decided to attempt making the return trip to Mexico. The San Lucas, with a displacement of only 60 tons, and a crew of only 20 and a shortage on food and water, completed the circumnavigation of the Pacific returning to Mexico in less than four months. To accomplish this, the ship had to go very far into the North Pacific passing near Japan and just south of the Aleutian Islands. The crew dressed for the tropics had to endure arctic weather conditions. Mariners were just learning that each ocean had large circulation patterns called gyres: the Pacific and Atlantic had two, one each above and below the equator and the Indian Ocean had a single gyre. These circulation patterns governed the paths of all commercial shipping before the age of steam.

Maritime activity, during this period, did not have the goal of exploration for its own sake, but was driven by the pursuit of riches for individuals and for the states that they represented. In particular the competition between Spain and Portugal for wealth and plunder dominated this age of exploration. In 1494 Pope Alexander VI, in the Treaty of Tordesillas, divided the world between Spain and Portugal along a line 370 leagues (about 3 miles/ league) west of the Cape Verde Islands in the Atlantic. Where that line extended on the other side of the Earth would define each nation's areas of interest. The story of San Lucas' historic exploit features many personalities of the time and including the king of Spain, King Phillip II (who provided the name of the island group destination), many of the conquistadores in Mexico, and the ships' crew, captains and pilots. The story centers on one particular individual, Lope Martin, the pilot of the San Lucas, considered to be one of the best in the business. Martin, of mixed race descent, was never accorded the praise and recognition that he deserved for his accomplishments. The trail of Martin's life ends with the pilot attempting to survive on a deserted Pacific atoll following a series of mutinies aboard his ship. Any story of maritime life in the 16th century is filled with greed and tragedy. Most of the crews on these early voyages would not return and life was continually difficult, with each individual motivated by the promise of riches. For a very few this promise paid off but most were to end their lives far from home under atrocious conditions. Reading of these early exploits, in the comfort of our twenty-first century homes, it is easy to develop a sense of superiority since we have the benefit of knowledge that these individuals were pursuing. A good historian and author, such as Andres Resendez, can place us in the shoes of his protagonists and demonstrate to us that many of them were intelligent, resourceful and knowledgeable, making the best of the situations in which they found themselves.

Scientist: E. O. Wilson: A Life in Nature

by Richard Rhodes

reviewed by Jim Mills

The renown Harvard entomologist, Edward Osborne (E.O.) Wilson was born in Alabama in 1929. From as early as he could remembered, he was fascinated by insects. During his childhood, Wilson's family moved at least a dozen times and the common thread of these years for Edward was the enchanting world of insects. In Mobile in the early 1940s Wilson, then in his early teens, was the first to identify fire ants in the U. S., creatures destined to become a ubiquitous pests throughout the South. Despite losing his sight in one eye from a fishing accident, he was to vigorously pursue his insectivorous avocation.

In 1950 Wilson received his Master's Degree in biology from the University of Alabama and was offered a position at Harvard University. As his first task Wilson was sent on a field trip to the South Pacific. New Guinea was replete with every sort of flying or crawling insects and Wilson was in his glory despite the swarms of biting flying insects and the endless hot humid climate. It was a major ordeal hiking through the dense jungle to sample the unique remote insect environments. Initially Wilson was interested in social insects, particularly ants. His observations led to the discovery that these insects communicated by leaving scent trails. Wilson was able to decode their scent-based language and understand the functioning of insect societies.

Another theory that Wilson promoted was the basis for species' survival. For most species' evolutionary success, individual survival determines species' survival. However for social insects, such as stinging bees and soldier ants, individual insects act with little concern for their own survival. From an evolutionary perspective the survival of the group or colony and its egg laying queen are the important elements in species' survival. Individual losses can be readily replaced.

Wilson and one of the discoverers of the DNA structure, James Watson, arrived at Harvard at the same time. Watson felt that the biological science had evolved into his field of micro-biology and had a great disdain for the field biology that Wilson practiced. For years these two figures battled over this divide in pursuit of nature studies. Eventually, as both aspects of these nature studies survived, the two buried the hatchet and became friends. Later in his career, Wilson expanded his studies beyond insects to the larger vertebrates, particularly mammals. These studies emphasized genetic factors, honed by evolution, on behavior. Wilson pioneered the field known as sociobiology, defined as the systematic study of the biological basis of social behavior. When these studies included human behavior, Wilson became the object of attack from activists accusing the biologist of racism. With the validation of many of Wilson's studies these accusations gradually disappeared.

Wilson, throughout his career, has always exhibited a great sense of humor and he was much in demand by the media as a spokesman for science. Speaking at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Wilson displayed his wit. "The questioned I'm asked most often about ants is, 'What do I do about the ants in my kitchen?' And my answer is always the same. 'Watch your step. Be careful of little lives. Feed them crumbs of coffeecake. They also like bits of tuna and whipped cream. Get a magnifying glass, Watch them closely. And you will be as close as any person may ever come to seeing social life as it might evolve on another planet.'"

In later years, Wilson became a spokesman warning about the massive loss of plant and animal species in recent decades. In 1980, Harvard magazine asked seven university professors, including Wilson, to comment on the most pressing issues facing the world in the upcoming decade. Wilson's response differed from the others. "Permit me to rephrase the question as follows: What event likely to occur in the 1980s will our descendants most regret, even those living a thousand years from now? My opinion is not conventional, although I wish it were. The worst thing that can happen - will happen - is not energy depletion, economic collapse, limited nuclear war, or conquest by a totalitarian government. As terrible as those catastrophes would be for us, they can be repaired within a few generations. The one process going on in the 1980s that will take millions of years is the loss of genetic and species diversity by the destruction of natural habitats. This is the folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us." Now, forty years later, we can readily see the wisdom of Wilson's observations. (continued on the next page)

The author, Richard Rhodes, has been thoughtfully writing the history of science and technology for decades. Two works on nuclear technology stand out: *Dark Sun* (hydrogen bomb development) and *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*. An earlier biographic work is *John James Audubon*. As far as I have been able to see any book by Richard Rhodes is an informative one, and very well worth reading. Also, any book written by Wilson is well worth the time spent, opening a new world of experience and understanding. Regrettably, a few days after I picked up *Scientist* from CLAMS, E. O. Wilson, a scientific giant of our times, passed away at the age of 92.

E. O. Wilson



Betrayal: The Final Act of the Trump Show

by Jonathan Karl

reviewed by Jim Mills

Oh no, not another Donald Trump book! The former president's questionable and newsworthy behavior has been fodder for writers for decades. The last year of Trump's presidency provided a plethora of such events now chronicled in Jonathan Karl's latest book, *Betrayal*.

In early 2020 Trump faced the first real crisis of his presidency with the Covid-19 pandemic. His greatest concerns were for the economic and political effects of any stringent governmental steps to curb the progress of the pandemic rather than its health effects. He downplayed the impact of the pandemic. This position put him in opposition to most of his medical advisors. In joint TV appearances from the White House he would try to exert pressure to limit any views that he felt conflicted with his policies. With very lax Covid protocols in place, the White House eventually became a hotbed of the Corona Virus and Trump, himself, was hospitalized with the disease.

The year 2020 was a presidential election year and that factor drove Trump's behavior. Trump's efforts to prompt the Ukrainian government to investigate the activities of Joe Biden's son led to Trump's first impeachment the previous December and Senate acquittal early in 2020. Throughout the year Trump continued to push various government agencies to provide negative information on Biden, whom Trump considered his likely November opponent. Virtually all of the pre-election polls showed Joe Biden leading with a substantial margin. Biden won the popular vote by over 7 million in November. However, the widespread use of absentee ballots due to the pandemic, delayed the final award of the electoral vote count to Biden for another three days after the Tuesday balloting. Trump, who had a lead on Tuesday night in many states due to Republican preference for election day voting, claimed that the election was being stolen from him as the later Democratic absentee vote was counted. He never veered from this position and refused to acknowledge Biden's win or to congratulate him. This Trump position became the position of the Republican party at large. Trump did not participate in the Biden inaugural leaving Washington that morning, the first outgoing president since 1869 to not greet his successor. (continued on the next page)

During the period between the election and Biden’s inaugural on January 20th, Trump spent most of his time trying to overturn the election results. This included efforts to persuade election officials and Republican officeholders in states that Biden had won such as Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Arizona and Georgia to change the results. Part of this effort was contained in a recorded phone call that he placed to Georgia election officials requesting the addition of over 11,000 votes to his total, so that he could carry the state. Countless legal challenges did not reveal either election errors or fraud and the Biden win withstood the assault.

After the states verified their electoral vote counts in December, Trump turned his attention to the ceremonial presentation of the vote count before Congress on January 6th where his vice-president, Mike Pence, would acknowledge the Biden win. That morning Trump hosted a mammoth rally of his supporters outside the White House. There he whipped up the emotions of the crowd with his false claims of election fraud and the assertion that he had really won the election by a landslide. He urged his followers to march on the Capitol and falsely stated that he would go there along with them. The resulting riot and assault on the Capitol interrupted the vote count procedure and drove the assembled Senators and Congressmen along with Mike Pence to flee for their lives as the Trump supporters penetrated both the Senate and House chambers and the office of the Speaker of the House. During this time Trump’s family and many prominent Republicans urged Trump to call off the mob. Trump did nothing and continued to watch the TV coverage with apparent exultation. It took nearly three hours for police and National Guard forces to retake control of the Capitol. In the early hours of the morning the election victory of Joseph Biden was finally verified by the U. S. Congress.

After all of this all that Trump could say to his supporters/insurrectionists was: “I know your pain, I know your hurt. We had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election , and everyone knows it. Especially the other side. But you have to go home now. We have to have peace. We have to have law and order ,.... So go home. We love you. You are very special.” *You are very special!*

The events of that day and the days leading up to it are currently being investigated by the House of Representatives. The connections of individuals, including numerous politicians and the President of the United States, to the calamitous events of that day are being examined. Currently over 700 of the rioters have been charged with crimes. It remains to be seen just how far this criminal and traitorous behavior extends into our body politic. Jonathan Karl, the chief Washington correspondent for ABC News, has provided a detailed description of Trump’s activities over his last year in office and has chronicled just how far he has diverged from the behavior of past presidents. The judgement of history awaits revelations still to come on the conduct of our 45th president.

**Jonathan Karl
Interviewing Trump**

