

Reviewed by Anna Calhoun

Before Morning

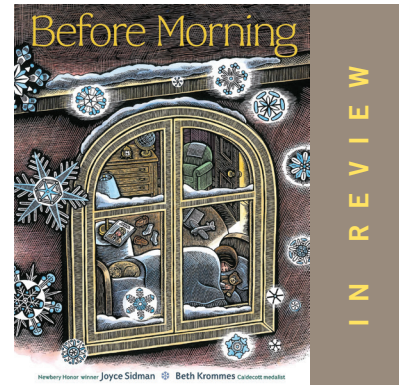
Written by Joyce Sidman/Illustrated by Beth Krommes
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Books for Young Readers,
2016

Your classroom library probably needs a copy of Joyce Sidman's *Before Morning*, particularly if you teach in the North. Though teachers and students will identify with hoping for a snow day, the yearning for slow, lighthearted time for togetherness is surely universal.

The narrator of *Before Morning* begs for the adventure and wonder of a day off, an urge that every reader has felt. As Sidman's epilogue clarifies, "This book is written in the form of an *invocation*—a poem that invites something to happen, often asking for help or support." This ancient practice of speaking the imagined into reality may take the form of prayer or planning, but when set to a poem it becomes beautiful.

Comprised of four 3-stanza verses, the clear meter of this text is irresistible for use in a music classroom. Lesson ideas abound: Compose a tune and sing it to a class, perhaps with a job for the listeners like adding whispering wind sounds between phrases. Teachers could tie it in with a movement activity inspired by how snow and ice change the way everything moves. The book could be a springboard to discuss feelings about family, snow days, and winter nights. A careful regard for the illustrations reveals the child's mother is a pilot, returned home by the weather to enjoy the gift of a day off with her family.

This book fairly begs to support a winter program. Any one of Orff and Keetman's *Music for Children* volumes includes pieces that could easily accompany or complement this text at various skill levels, depending on the students. *Before Morning's* content does not reference any holiday, which makes it appropriate for all school settings and relevant throughout the winter months. This is helpful in the tricky post-holiday months of January and February, when snow



days are even more likely than at the end of the calendar year.

Wishes for snow days can be misinterpreted as laziness or avoidance of lessons or difficult classes. But *Before Morning* eloquently longs for a slow, delightful day spent with those we too often miss. As teachers, many of us feel required to spend ever more time buried in grading, planning, or other forms of preparation—to the benefit of our students, but also necessarily decreasing the time spent with family, friends, and with ourselves. For me, this book answers our culture's—and my own—struggle to recognize the validity and importance of self-care, reminding us that these sweet, slow moments together are precious.

Some may recognize illustrator Beth Krommes's lovely work from 2008's *The House in the Night*. In *Before Morning*, her stunning scratchboard illustrations perfectly evoke the imagination and wonder of the beautiful text. There are more details to discover with each look, true to Krommes's Caldecott-winning style. The book could provide a strong example for a scratchboard artwork lesson.

As a child of the Midwest, this book transported me to the many nights I went to bed watching cottony flakes knit together a thick blanket over the world, and the days spent enjoying the lighthearted challenge and silliness of simply traveling through the newly-slick landscape. How magical to see every familiar sight made mysterious and new! How joyfully humbling to become childishy unsteady in the

simple act of walking. What camaraderie we feel when meeting the eyes of a fellow traveler who is fighting the same wind, or delighting in the same snowfall. How triumphant the feeling of successfully arriving at our destination, heedless of the wind and weather.

Before Morning has much to teach us, but most importantly Sidman and Krommes use their narrative and artwork to place the reader directly in the position and perspective of the child at the center of the story. Ultimately, it is

this profoundly respectful choice that makes the book a must-read. ■

ANNA CALHOUN is an elementary music teacher at Roll Hill Academy in the Cincinnati Public School District in Cincinnati, Ohio. She has taught high school vocal music, ukulele, high school and elementary general music, and leads a Cincinnati Choral Academy in conjunction with the Cincinnati Youth Choir. Anna has completed two levels of Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education, is a member of AOSA, and serves as a member-at-large of the Greater Cincinnati Chapter of the Orff-Schulwerk Association.

