



# In the **Spotlight**

Grades  
PK-3

by | Sharron L. McElmeel

*A Sick Day for Amos McGee* by Philip C. Stead.  
Illustrated by Erin E. Stead. Roaring Brook Press, 2010.

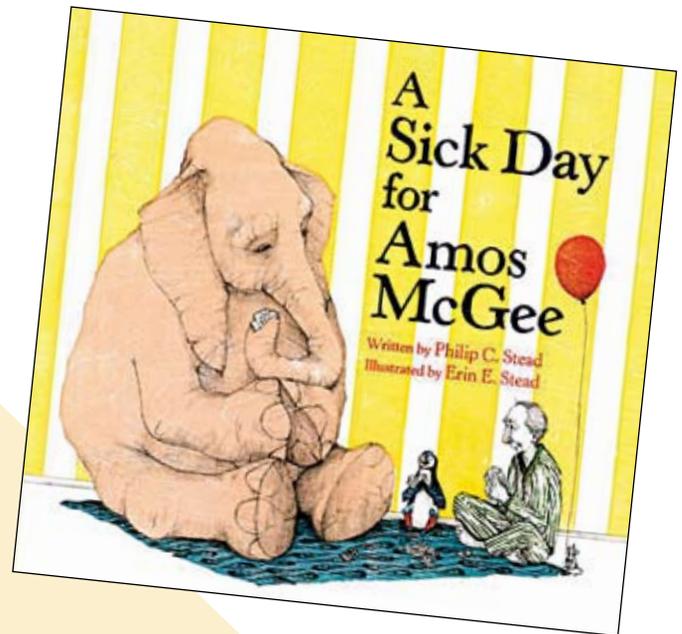
## A Gentle Story of Friendship

This tranquil story of friendship, with gentle expressive illustrations, was by many accounts destined to become a classic. As the 2011 recipient of the prestigious Caldecott Award, the book will surely fulfill those predictions. Young readers will relish the quiet friendships enjoyed by the elderly Amos McGee and his charges as he goes about his work at the zoo.

Each day, Amos arrives at the zoo on bus number five. During his workday, he makes time to share special moments with five dear friends. He plays chess with the elephant, who is shown contemplating his moves. Amos and the tortoise engage in a daily race, which the tortoise always wins. The penguin and Amos sit side-by-side. Amos makes sure his rhinoceros pal has a handkerchief for his runny nose. And since the owl is afraid of the dark, Amos reads him a story before leaving for the day.

But friendship goes both ways at the zoo, as is evidenced on the fateful day when Amos stays home with a cold. On that day, his friends eagerly anticipate his arrival. The elephant polishes the chess pieces. The tortoise stretches his body readying for the usual race. The penguin sits patiently, and rhinoceros continues to suffer from his allergies. The owl is ready for a story, perched upon a tall stack of story books. But Amos does not come.

And so, his friends set out to visit *him*. In several wordless double-page illustrations, readers travel with the friends on the bus and arrive at Amos's home. Clearly delighted by their arrival, Amos and the elephant settle into a game of chess.



This time it is Amos who seems to be contemplating his moves. Instead of racing, the tortoise and Amos play hide-and-seek. Tortoise hides in his shell; Amos under his blanket. The penguin sits quietly, warming his friend's feet, and the rhinoceros makes sure Amos has a handkerchief when he sneezes. The friends end the day with a pot of tea, poured by the owl and served by the tortoise, who perches a tray on his back to deliver honey and teacups to the table where the friends have gathered. And when night comes, it is time to set the alarm clock and say goodnight. Amos's friends, knowing he is "afraid of the dark—read a story aloud before turning out the light."

Philip Stead's text is comforting and quieting, but it is Erin Stead's softly color-washed woodblocks that highlight the cozy friendship that bonds Amos and the animals to each other. Subtly humorous, Stead's illustrations spotlight the care that each character has for one another. Black and white illustrations are splashed with muted yellow, deep green, peacock blue, and a few bits of red. Stead has included details for the reader to

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discover: a red balloon that floats throughout the story, a small mouse that shows up in unpredictable spots, and a bunny reading the newspaper on the bus (not to mention the bunny slippers worn by Amos at home that are slipped under his bed when he is sick). The final illustration shows all the animals snuggled in and around Amos's bed, sleeping soundly awaiting the new day.

### More Reading: This Reminds Me Of . . .

One of the most useful methods for helping students make literary connections and heighten book awareness is to generate a discussion of other books that are reminiscent of the current book at hand. Each reader may have a different idea of how to connect *A Sick Day for Amos McGee* to another book, so begin an ongoing, collaborative book list. Model the idea of connecting to other books by suggesting some of your own.

- *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown: In the final pages of *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*, Amos tells his friends one-by-one, “Goodnight to the elephant, goodnight to the tortoise . . .” just as “Goodnight” is told to the moon, cow, light, and so forth in Brown’s book. Other elements found in both books: clocks, owl, bears, a bunny, a mouse, the moon, and a red balloon.
- *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox: A young boy lives next to a retirement home and shares a friendship with the elderly residents. Seeking to help one special friend find her memory, Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge brings a multitude of items to share with Miss Nancy. This book has the same gentle warmth of friendship as that of *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*.
- *Call Me Marianne* by Jennifer Bryant: A zoo and a friendship between an older woman (the poet Marianne Moore) and a boy is somewhat reminiscent of the gentle friendship between Amos and the animals in *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*.

### Poetry

April is poetry month and the rhythmic text of the Steads’ book will make a reasonable bridge to the celebration of poetry, especially if Brown’s *Goodnight Moon* and Bryant’s biographical sketch of Marianne Moore are incorporated. Visit the

National Poetry Month site at [www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org) and use the links to access many ideas for celebrating poetry.

### More Creative Extensions

Great friends are there for each other in times of need. Engage students in a discussion about the individual friendships portrayed in *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*, as well as the animals’ group effort to comfort Amos during his convalescence. Ask your students what makes their own friendships special. Do they like to play games or read stories with a particular pal? Is there someone who is especially great to run around with or to race? Or do they have a friend who is an excellent listener, and who can just sit quietly and make them feel calm, peaceful, and loved? After sharing several anecdotes and talking about special friendships, explore a creative extension activity.

- Have children create an acrostic poem for a special friend that highlights his or her wonderful characteristics.
- Provide students with drawing materials and paper. Instruct them to fold the paper in half. Give them five minutes to sketch a self-portrait on the top half of the paper. Then, pair students up at random. (Do not allow them to choose their own partners; this activity is designed to encourage students to get to know each other better.) Have the partners swap portraits. Give them ten minutes to interview each other (five minutes each), and then have them write two things on the bottom half of their partner’s portrait that they didn’t previously know about him or her. Use the remaining time for partners to introduce each other to the class.
- As a class, list several traits of a devoted friend, including any you listed that you felt were portrayed in *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*. Divide students into groups of three or four, and secretly assign each group one of the traits you listed. Instruct groups to come up with a silent scenario in which they act out their assigned trait. (E.g., two students might mime bullying a third student, and the fourth student steps in to put a stop to the behavior.) Give the groups ten or fifteen minutes to practice, and then have them perform their silent scenes for the class. What positive trait was being portrayed?

### Exploring the Randolph A. Caldecott Award

Each year the American Library Association (ALA) selects “the most distinguished American picture book for children.” A committee that examines and reads books published throughout a given year discusses and collectively selects the award winner. The committee also decides on the number of honor books to be named. In January of 2011 Erin Stead received the Caldecott award for *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*.

- A conversation about the current Caldecott Award-winner and honor books can foster a great discussion of “best books” and illustrations with young readers. Share the award and honor books for a particular year with students and encourage them to talk about and select the book that they would give the top award to. Lists of the award and honor books for the current year and past years can be found at [www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org). Use the “Awards and Grants” link.
- Establish criteria for an award that will be given by your school/group. While the Caldecott Award is restricted to the books published during the preceding year, a new award may use

other criteria. For example, you might allow students to consider the books published in a five-year period, or books written and/or illustrated by authors or illustrators in a specific state. Establish your parameters; identify books that fall into that category; and then read, discuss, and vote on the book, author, or illustrator to receive the award. Publicize the award in your school or community newspaper.



**Sharron L. McElmeel** is the director of *McBookwords*, a literacy organization, and an instructor of children’s and young adult literature at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. Her latest book is *Picture That! From Mendel to Normandy: Picture Books and Ideas, Curriculum and Connections— for Tweens and Teens*. (*Libraries Unlimited*, 2009). Visit her website at [www.mcelmeel.com](http://www.mcelmeel.com).

### About the Author and Illustrator: Philip and Erin Stead

Philip Christian Stead is both an author and illustrator. His first book was *Creamed Tuna Fish and Peas on Toast*. In *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*, Philip wrote the gentle text, and his wife, Erin, made her debut as an illustrator.

Philip Stead typically works on his own book projects, but this book was written specifically with his wife’s artistic talent in mind. On January 10, 2011, the day that Erin was notified that she had been awarded the Caldecott medal, Philip told the *Detroit Free Press* that he tried to write characters into the book “that would be perfect for her to illustrate.”

When Philip began writing *A Sick Day for Amos McGee*, he and Erin lived in Brooklyn, New York, and inspiration for the animal characters came from the Central Park Zoo. But the couple grew up in Michigan, and three years ago, a three-week vacation among their old haunts inspired a permanent move. The Steads now live and work in a renovated two-story barn in Ann Arbor, right across from a train station.

Informal comments and the Steads’ own selection of best books can be found on their blogs; Erin’s at [blog.erinstead.com](http://blog.erinstead.com) and Philip’s at [philipstead.blogspot.com](http://philipstead.blogspot.com). On normal days, Philip’s blog is devoted to counting down the days until the release of his Spring 2011 book from Roaring Brook Press, *Jonathan and the Big Blue Boat*. Erin’s next book, another joint project with Philip, will feature a big brown bear.