

Only Margaret: A Story About Margaret Wise Brown

Words by Candice Ransom ~ Illustrated by Nan Lawson

Curriculum Guide



Book Details:

Reading Age: 5 to 9

Hardcover: 52 pages

Publisher: Eerdmans Books for
Young Readers

ISBN: 978-0-8028-5508-4

Readability:

Lexile: 680L

ATOS: 3.9

Accelerated Reader Points: 0.5

Grade Level: 2 to 3

Common Core Standards Correlations: K - 4

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.1 - With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.7 - Use illustrations and details in a story to describe characters, setting, or events.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.1 - Ask and answer such questions as *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.7 - Explain how specific aspects of a text's illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.4 - Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including those that allude to significant characters found in mythology (e.g. Herculean).

Synopsis:

When Halley's comet arrived in 1910, so did an extraordinary person: Margaret Wise Brown. Margaret had a boundless imagination and a gift for spinning stories. Most grown-ups thought children's books were frivolous and silly, but Margaret didn't agree. Could writing stories for children be important work—an incredible way to share truth, beauty, and wonder?

Other people might call Margaret strange, and sometimes her own worries and doubts felt overwhelming. But only Margaret and her original ideas could lead to *Goodnight Moon*, *The Runaway Bunny*, and other classics beloved by children around the world.

Author Candice Ransom worked on this story—researching, writing, revising, traveling to museums, lectures and one of Margaret's homes—for 15 years. She believed in the importance of children knowing Margaret Wise Brown. After a total of 19 years—from initial idea to publication—Candice's story about her favorite writer for young children has finally been told.

This whimsically illustrated biography shares how an independent, fun-loving woman became a trailblazing pioneer of the picture-book form.

About the Author:

Candice Ransom has published more than 160 books for children, including the classic *The Big Green Pocket-book*, *Bones in the White House: Thomas Jefferson's Mammoth*, *Go Go, Tractors!*, and *Tooth Fairy's Night*. She lives in Virginia with her husband and two cats.

Website: candiceransom.com

About the Illustrator:

Nan Lawson is a self-taught artist. Her books include *The Confidence Code for Girls*, *The Extraordinary Life of Rosa Parks*, and *Sit with Me*. She has worked for Netflix, Audible, Amblin Entertainment, and Warner Brothers. She lives in California.

Website: nanlawson.com

Before Reading:

- Introduce *Only Margaret: A Story About Margaret Wise Brown* by reading the title, subtitle, and the names of the author and illustrator. Review the role of authors and illustrators.
- Take your students on a “picture walk” of the front cover. Ask students if they think this is fiction or nonfiction? What clues in the title and illustration help them decide?
- Ask students if they can tell when this story takes place? Is it in the past or right now?
- Look at the back cover. What does the illustration show? Which item might be the most important? Ask students why.

After Reading:

- Look at the endpapers and title pages. Ask students what those designs might mean.
- Turn to the Author’s Note and the Timeline at the back. Ask students where they can find those pictures in the book.
- Look at the Partial List of Books by Margaret Wise Brown. Ask students if they have read any of those books.
- Turn to the Copyright Page. Can students find the framed pictures in the story?
- Ask students to count the rabbits in the story. There are more than you think! (11)



Photo Credit: Consuelo Kanaga

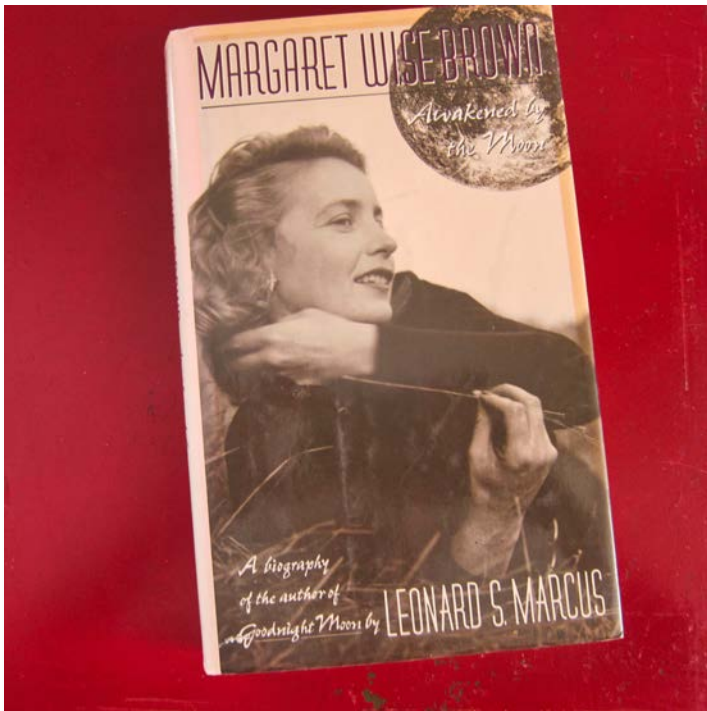
Vocabulary:

Students might be unfamiliar with some of the vocabulary in the book. Review some or all of the words below. Let students look up words in the dictionary. Discuss the meanings of the words. Ask students to write each word.

Brooklyn | comet | fireworks | hazy | magical | genie | college | taxi | Poughkeepsie | physics | engineer | commas | simmering | typewriter | sparkle | spiders | scrolled | raccoon | poems | bumblebee | vanished | seventeen | concerts | billows | Ireland | roadster | terrier | Florida | Vinalhaven | lobster | teemed | mysterious | cottage | language | Maine | extraordinary

Themes:

American History | Children’s Book Authors | Book Making | Language Arts | Poetry | Creativity | Perseverance | Responsibility | Teamwork | Independence | Inspiration



Margaret Wise Brown and Me

Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon by Leonard Marcus
Published by Beacon Press, 1992

This is the book I bought brand-new in 1992, and kept by my bed for eight years. I read it every night and never grew tired of reading about Margaret's life. I wished I had lived in the 1930s and 40s when she did, in New York City, writing my own books.

Photo by Candice Ransom

Millions of children have read or had read to them Margaret Wise Brown's books. I only knew one of her books as a child, a Golden Book called *Home for a Bunny*. Later, I skimmed *The Runaway Bunny* and *Goodnight Moon*. In 1992, I bought *Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon* by Leonard Marcus. I read the biography in bed propped against pillows, slowly, savoring the life of this remarkable writer.

I was entranced by the story of the young woman who lived and worked in New York City during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. She wore fur coats and drove a convertible with the top down at night, her Kerry Blue terrier beside her. She understood children even though she was an adult. And she wrote! Books, stories, and poetry poured from her pencil like songs from a lark.

Margaret came to the field of children's books by accident, as part of a teaching program at Bank Street College. I had wanted to be a children's book writer since I was fifteen. With no money for college, I went to work after high school, figuring I'd learn how to become a writer on my own. During my lunch hour at my job, I secretly wrote stories and sent them to magazines. Eventually, I had books published.

Awakened by the Moon stayed on my nightstand for eight years. I reread the book again and again, finding new things about Margaret. She lived in three places during most of her career: a quaint old house hidden in New York City, an apartment in New York City, and an isolated quarryman's cottage on Vinalhaven Island, Maine, where she spent her summers.

Margaret loved company, but it wasn't easy for visitors to reach her summer cottage or to live as Margaret did. They had to row to the island house, wash their faces in a basin under the apple tree, fish drinks from the dock as there was no plumbing or electricity in her house.

Margaret died in 1952, the year I was born. She was forty-two. I first read Marcus's biography in 1992, the year I was forty-two. I stayed under Margaret's spell ten years before I decided to write about her. I was afraid, but I also had no choice. I'd been studying Margaret's many books, which were fresh, surprising, and imaginative. One night I heard a voice in my ear. I believe it was Margaret Wise Brown. She whispered, *Tell my story*. She would not take no for an answer.

In 2002, I went to Hollins University, the college Margaret attended, to begin researching my book. In 2005, I became a Hollins student myself, enrolled in the graduate children's literature program. I wrote my story and read it at a conference held at Hollins. When I finished reading, I glanced up at the far corner of the dark auditorium and caught a glimpse of something shimmering, just for an instant. I believed it was Margaret's spirit, maybe telling me she was pleased I had told her story. I never saw any sign of her again.

I worked on Margaret's story for a total of fifteen years. Four years later, the book was finally published as ***Only Margaret: A Story About Margaret Wise Brown***. After nineteen years—from initial idea (Margaret's voice) to the hardcover book in my hand, I'm shimmering, too.

Questions for Students:

- Have you ever been so interested a subject (dinosaurs! NASCAR! Manga!), that you had to find out more? Did you read books on the subject, or look it up on the Internet?
- Have you ever written a report or made a booklet or an art project based on a subject you love? Not as an assignment, but for your own interest and pleasure?
- Have you ever watched a program or read a book about a person you admired so much, you wished you *were* that person? Could you write about what that experience might be like?

Researching *Only Margaret*: A Story About Margaret Wise Brown

This is the vintage tea cart in my home office. It has a lot of stuff on it! Books, papers, notebooks. All of it represents my research for *Only Margaret*. The two big binders on the bottom are filled with photocopied articles, essays, letters, and photographs. A folder on the bottom contains the many, many drafts I wrote over the years (also my rejection letters). Look close and you'll see an aqua striped notebook. That is the notebook I took with me to Vinalhaven, where, in 2016, I wrote the final draft of my story. Those books? All written by Margaret Wise Brown. Plus I have more!



When I begin research a new nonfiction writing project, I do *not* start with the Internet. I start with books and read as much as I can about the subject, in this case, the life and works of Margaret Wise Brown. Through my eight years of reading Leonard Marcus's biography, I felt I knew this person, but I needed to know more. *A lot* more.

I gathered articles, photographs, essays, letters—anything about Margaret. It wasn't enough to obtain a photocopy of the December 2, 1946 *Life* magazine article about Margaret. I bought an old copy of the magazine to see Margaret's story, along with advertisements and news of that week. That helped me better understand the world in 1946. The magazine cost \$36.

Next, I went to Hollins University, Margaret's alma mater. The Hollins archives has at least ten huge boxes of Margaret's papers, letters, manuscripts, poems and songs. When I held a typescript of *The House of a Hundred Windows*, with Margaret's penciled changes and her editor's suggestions for changes, my hand shook. Margaret's actual work!



In the 800 cataloged items, I found a receipt dated July, 10, 1952, the day I was born. While I was making my way into this world, Margaret was at the general store on Vinalhaven Island, Maine. She bought pillowcases, tea towels, and a packet of needles for the cottage that she named Only House. I felt even closer to her.

I also read as many of her books as I could find. I bought many of them, brand-new as well as older copies.

The view from my desk on Vinalhaven Island.

I wrote to people who had connections to Margaret. For fifteen years, I never stopped researching. New articles appeared each year. I used 50 sources for my book.

Travel is part of research. I visited the archives at Hollins eight times. I went to the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Massachusetts, twice to view original illustrations from Margaret's books. I attended lectures in Washington, D.C. and New York City.

In 2016, I was asked to be part of the Margaret Wise Brown festival on Vinalhaven Island. During that week, I visited Only House, saw the boat she used, and listened to people who had known her. Being on the island was magic. I smelled the same ocean breezes, walked in the same piney woods, watched the same sunrises as Margaret. I wrote a new version of my story while I was there and it became *Only Margaret*. Some things you can't get from the Internet.

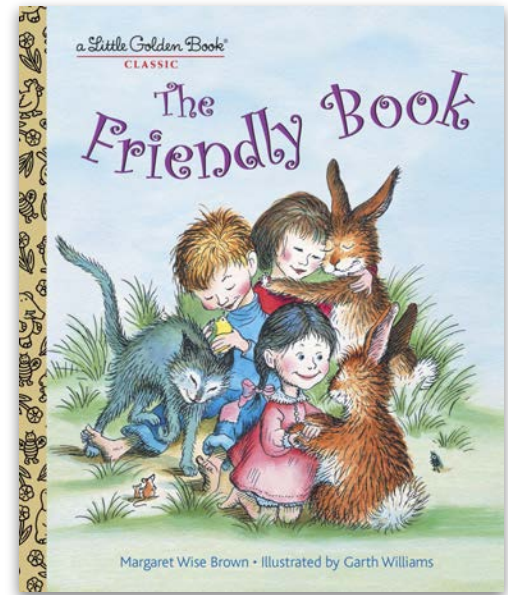
Questions for Students:

- How do you begin to research? Do you Google your subject? Or do you use library books?
- How do you organize your research? Do you print articles and put them in a binder or do you keep everything in documents on the computer?
- How do you keep track of your sources? Do you know where you read something? When I begin a new research project, I start a bibliography first and add each new source as I go along. When the book is finished, my bibliography is ready.

Writing Connections:

Using Margaret Wise Brown's Books in the Classroom As Writing Prompts

Many of Margaret's books use a list as the basic structure. Using one or all four of her books, let students create poems (that can be collected in their own books) as story starters.



Goodnight Moon

By Margaret Wise Brown, illustrations by Clement Hurd
Published in 1946

***Goodnight Moon* List Poem**

Margaret Wise Brown kept a notebook by her bed to jot down ideas. One morning in 1945, she woke up and wrote her most famous book, ***Goodnight Moon***. She called it “Goodnight Room.” The last lines were, “Goodnight cucumber. Goodnight fly.” Then she telephoned her editor and read the new story to her. Her editor loved it. Later Margaret made some changes. The title became ***Goodnight Moon***. She got rid of the cucumber and the fly. The new ending became “Goodnight stars. Goodnight air. Goodnight noises everywhere.”

The story is structured as a list of objects in the main character's bedroom, from kittens to socks to a bowl of mush, things the bunny wishes goodnight.

Ask students to list objects in their room. Give them a choice of titles: “Hello Room,” “Good Morning, Room,” or “Goodnight Room.”

Next, give students the template: Hello ____ (or Good Morning ____ or Goodnight ____), then ask them to fill in the template with their list of objects, following the pattern in ***Goodnight Moon*** (they do not have to rhyme!).

The Friendly Book

By Margaret Wise Brown, illustrations by Garth Williams

Published in 1954

***The Friendly Book* “Like” Poem**

This book is a group of short poems, each beginning with the phrase “I like—.” Each poem ends with a repetition of the first line. In between are facts and descriptions. For example, the poem “I Like Cars” lists cars by color, type, and places where you find cars.

Ask students to write list of physical things they like: cats, snakes, planes. Ask them to choose one. Give them the opening and ending lines: “I like ____.” Then ask them to write a short “like” poem based. Encourage them to write more than one!

Example: cats

I like cats.
Little cats.
Big cats.
Cats in hats.
Cats on beds.
Cats must be fed!
I like cats.

The Important Book

By Margaret Wise Brown, illustrations by Leonard Weisgard

Published in 1949

***The Important Book* “Thought” Poem**

The Important Book is a collection of poems that make the reader think about simple things, such as a spoon, a shoe, an apple, and not-so-simple things like rain, wind, and snow. The first line describes what is *most* important about the subject. The last line repeats the first, with the word “but” added.

Give your students—or ask them to create—a list of objects. They can include intangible topics like clouds or the air. Have them choose one. Next, ask them to write traits of the subject. Have them decide which of those attributes is the most important.

Next, give students the first line of their poem, modeled after the first line in *The Important Book*: “The important thing about ____ is ____.” The last line is nearly the same: “But the important thing about ____ is ____.”

Example: pencil

The important thing about a pencil is that it writes.
A pencil is long and skinny.
It has an eraser on one end.
It can draw. It can print my name.
I can make it wiggle.
But the important thing about a pencil is that it writes.

The Dream Book

By Margaret Wise Brown, illustrations by Richard Floethe
Published in 1950

***The Dream Book* “Dream” Poem**

The Dream Book is also structured as a list of animals and children and what they might dream about at night. The squirrel dreams of nuts and a lima bean. The bee dreams of honey. A girl dreams of horses. The horse dreams of running.

As students to write a list of animals and/or objects. What would that animal or item dream about at night? Write each “dream” as a sentence on a separate line. Poem done!

Discussion Questions:

- Do all poems have to rhyme? Is it still a poem when it doesn’t? How is it different from a story?
- In two of these types of list poems, the first and last lines are the same. Does repeating the first line at the end tell the reader the poem is finished? *The Important Book* list poem adds “But” at the beginning of the final line. How does that word affect the entire poem?



Illustration from *The Noisy Book* by Leonard Weisgard

Interdisciplinary Connections:

Geography:

- Read through the text of *Only Margaret*. Ask students to name the places Margaret traveled.
- Have students point out the states (and one foreign country) on a map. Can they find Vinalhaven Island?
- When Margaret bought her new convertible, she drove slowly from Florida northward to New York to experience spring over and over. Ask students to mark the route Margaret might have taken. What states would she have driven through to reach New York City?

Art Connections:

Margaret wrote books that were meant to have pictures. She worked closely with her illustrators. She even “discovered” some illustrators, fine artists who had not worked in children’s books before: Clement Hurd, Leonard Weisgard, Esphyr Slobodkina. Margaret appreciated art. At Only House she painted seascapes and other scenes from her windows. In New York, she tore pieces of colored paper to arrange in patterns. She kept a sketchbook.

For Younger Students:

- Draw a large square on blank paper with cross pieces, or download a window template, and make copies. Ask students to draw a scene outside the “window” and color it.

For Older Students:

- Provide students with colored construction paper or cardstock, plus a sheet of white paper. Ask students to tear the colored paper into small pieces. Let them arrange the colored bits on the white paper into a pattern or create a picture, maybe even copy an illustration from *Only Margaret*. Margaret knew that working with her hands, making abstract designs, was another form of inspiration. Making art is soothing, it clears the mind, and allows the flow of ideas.

Writing Connections:

Margaret loved animals: rabbits, dogs, cats, birds. She sometimes had a cat and always had a dog, usually a large poodle or a Kerry Blue terrier. Her dogs were notoriously bad and friends dreaded her bringing her poorly-behaved dog on a visit. Yet who hasn’t had a naughty pet?

- Let students write about their own “bad” pets. The stories can be funny! Suggest they tell the story from the animal’s point of view. A dog’s version of the event would be very different than the owner’s: “It wasn’t my fault!”
- If a student doesn’t have a pet, they can write what might have happened when Margaret took that rabbit in a basket on a train.
- Younger children can draw pictures of their pets and dictate what the animal is doing.



More Information about Margaret Wise Brown:

Photo of Margaret Wise Brown by Phillippe Halsman

Web Resources:

- “5 Fascinating Facts About Margaret Wise Brown, the Adored Author of “Goodnight Moon.” Kelly Richman-Abdou. Apr. 9, 2020. My Modern Met.
mymodernmet.com/margaret-wise-brown-facts
- “Margaret Wise Brown—Greenpoint’s Greatest Writer.” Geoff Cobb. Mar. 30, 2017. Greenpointers.
greenpointers.com/2017/03/30/margaret-wise-brown-greenpoints-greatest-writer
- “On the delightfully old homes of Margaret Wise Brown.” Katie Yee. May 24, 2021. Lit Hub.
lithub.com/on-the-delightfully-odd-homes-of-margaret-wise-brown

Books:

Hard to find but worth looking for in the library!

- *Margaret Wise Brown: Author of Goodnight Moon.* Carol Green. Chicago: Children’s Press, 1993.
- *Margaret, Frank, and Andy: Three Writers’ Stories.* Cynthia Rylant. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1996.
- *The Days Before Now: An Autobiographical Note by Margaret Wise Brown.* Joan W. Blos. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

Interview with the Author: Candice Ransom

“Margaret,” the rabbit that inspired the author



Q: You’ve said it took you fifteen years to write *Only Margaret*. Why did it take so long? It’s a short book and you’ve written so many other books.

Candice Ransom: Sometimes the shorter books take the longest to write . . . in truth, I had written a lot of other books, but I had to learn how to write *this* book. And I had to research Margaret’s life, the books she wrote, and what other people thought of her. I began researching in 2002. By the end of 2005, I thought I was ready to write the story.

Q: You weren’t sure after three years of research?

Candice Ransom: The tricky part about writing biographies is that you need to find the way into that person’s life. I tried a lot of beginnings. I wrote the story from her dog’s point of view (cute, but went nowhere). I wrote the story borrowing her style from her picture book *The Dream Book* (fizzled quickly). Finally I wrote a version called “Margaret’s Words: A Portrait of Margaret Wise Brown.”

I sent it to my literary agent, who sent it to publishers. Everyone rejected it. Most editors thought that children would not be interested in reading about someone who had written children’s picture books. That was tough to deal with, but I kept revising my book. I sent it to publishers myself. It was rejected again and again. Yet I didn’t quit. Margaret wouldn’t let me. Once you chose a subject—a person—and write their story, you are deeply involved with that person. Margaret had become alive to me. I call her by her first name. I feel I know her.

Q: How did you keep working on the book year after year? What kept you motivated?

Candice Ransom: I didn't work on it every day—I wrote other books. I'd pick it up again when I found something new about Margaret, was drawn back into her world. I bought a stuffed rabbit that I named Margaret. "Margaret" sat in a child's rocking chair in our den. Every time I walked past the chair, I'd think about my book. I even dressed the rabbit for the season. I told myself that when (if) the book sold, I'd give "Margaret" a break from that chair.

I also kept a journal called "My Journey with Margaret." I cut out images of her book covers, typed up quotes from her books and things she said, and pasted them in a handmade journal. I wrote how working on the book changed my life.

I was asked to speak about Margaret. I gave the Founder's Day speech at Hollins University and presented several slide lectures on her life. I knew so much about Margaret that people thought my book was already published!

Q: How did you begin writing? Do you have any advice for young writers?

Candice Ransom: I started writing for fun when I was seven. It wasn't work. To me, reading and writing stories naturally went together, like breathing. My family liked to tell stories about the "long-ago" days. So I've always been surrounded by stories. I wrote about the kinds of books I liked to read: animal stories, mysteries, stories about haunted houses and ghosts.

How do you begin? Grab an idea like Margaret did and write it down! Words will lead to more words and soon you will have a story. Keep reading! Writers are readers. I am never without at least one book and—don't faint—we don't have television. I don't stream programs, either. I'd rather read. I even read in movie theaters, through the previews and commercials!





It was always about the journey. If
my book had never seen the light of
day, I still had the incredible
experience of immersing myself in
Margaret's life.
Find someone worth knowing and
go on a long journey with them.
You'll be a better person.

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