

**Books on Horseback: The Packhorse Librarians of Kentucky**

**Curriculum Guide  
by  
Candice Ransom**

# BOOKS ON HORSEBACK

The Packhorse Librarians of Kentucky



written by  
**Candice Ransom**

illustrated by  
**Massimiliano Di Lauro**

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**Times were hard in the hollows of Kentucky during the Great Depression. People didn't have much - having something to read was a luxury. But thanks to a special program, librarians were able to share books with schools and families all over Eastern Kentucky.**

*Books on Horseback*, an inspiring tale written by acclaimed author Candice Ransom, introduces young readers to The Pack Horse Library Project. This initiative, instituted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Great Depression, attempted to bring literature and education to some of the most remote parts of the United States.

Desperate for a solution to bring folks out of poverty, packhorse librarians, also known as “Book Ladies”, rode out on horseback to the Appalachian Mountains and rural Kentucky to bring books to read to adults and children. Public libraries in this remote section of Kentucky were rare, if at all in existence. The residents of these areas were not able to travel very far to find a public library, so they were left without any resources.

Illustrator Massimiliano Di Lauro captures the strength and resilience of the Book Lady in this story as she prepares her journey into Eastern Kentucky. The illustrations provide a vividness of what it was like for these women to brave the elements and rough terrain to reach their destination with hopes of salvation for those in need.

Most cities and towns in America today have access to public libraries, but there are still some locations that lack adequate funding or resources to properly educate their communities. *Books on Horseback* is an important story to share with young readers about the precious value of quality education and how it can affect lives in monumental ways.

## About

*Books on Horseback*  
Written by  
Candice Ransom  
Illustrated by  
Massimiliano Di Lauro





## Candice Ransom - Author

Published over 200 books.

M.A. Children's Literature,  
Hollins University

M.F.A. Writing for Children  
Vermont College of Fine Arts

Teaches at Hollins University

Candice Ransom is the author of more than 200 books for children and young adults. Her many historical fiction picture books: *Bones in the White House: Thomas Jefferson's Mammoth* (2020, Junior Library Guild Selection) *Only Margaret: A Story About Margaret Wise Brown* ("a supplement to Brown's own charming works," Kirkus, 2021).

Other historical picture books include *When the Whippoorwill Calls*, *The Promise Quilt*, *Liberty Street*, and *One Christmas Dawn*. Her classic picture book, *The Big Green Pocketbook*, has been continuously in print for more than 30 years. Her books have earned many commendations and awards, and have been translated into thirteen languages.

**Massimiliano Di Lauro** illustrates children's books and magazines. He is also an art director for an animation studio. His books have been translated into seven languages. His work has appeared in international and Italian publications, such as *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, and *Corriere della Sera*.

*School Library Journal* declared De Lauro's unusual art in Reycraft Book's *Dolley Madison*, *the White House*, and *the Big Tornado* (2021) as "stunningly illustrated." Fans of that book will recognize his distinctive style in *Books on Horseback*, especially his depiction of horses.



## Books on Horseback

Reading Level: 8 to 12

Grade Level: 2 to 5

Pages: 32

Publisher: Reycraft Books

Publishing Date: January  
2026



### Common Core Standards

**Grade 2:** CCSS.ELA.LITERACY.RL.2.1; 2.3; 2.4; 2.5; 2.7; 2.10

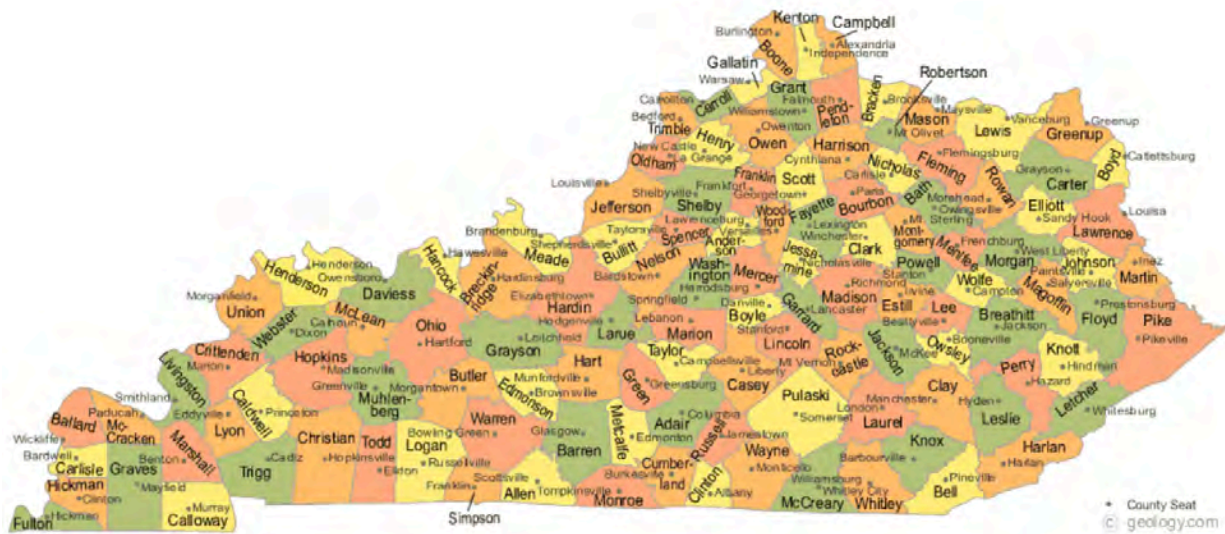
**Grade 5:** CCSS.ELA.LITERACY.RL.5.1; 5.2; 5.4; 5.5; 5.6; 5.7; 5.9

### Standards of Learning (Virginia)

**Grade 2:** The geography strand entails the study of both basic geographic skills and specific geography standards that align with and enhance students' understanding of the history taught at each grade.

**Grade 2:** In the economics strand, students are introduced to U.S. history through the lives of changemakers and events. They focus on civics education, with an introduction to key aspects of the U.S. constitutional democracy, and learn more about citizenship, patriotism, geography, and economics.

**Grade 5:** The student will use textual evidence to demonstrate comprehension and build knowledge from a variety of grade-level complex literary texts read to include poetry, fantasy, humor, mystery, adventure, realistic fiction, historical fiction, and folklore/tall tales.



## Geography of Kentucky

Kentucky is located in the south central part of United States. Northern Kentucky is separated from Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois by the Ohio River. The Big Sandy River runs between northeast Kentucky and West Virginia. Virginia borders Kentucky to the southeast, and Tennessee lies to the south. The Mississippi River flows between Kentucky and Missouri.

In the east, the Appalachian Mountains stretch from north to south. Between the eastern mountains and the Tennessee River a large area of lowlands rolls to the west. The westernmost part of the state is an area of flat plains sometimes called “horse country.” Thoroughbred horses are raised, grazed, and raced here. The most famous race is the Kentucky Derby each May.

Of the state’s 120 counties, 54 counties are located in the Appalachian region of Eastern Kentucky. *Books on Horseback* is set in these mountain counties.

Kentucky is home to the longest cave system in the world. Mammoth Cave National Park has more than 350 miles (560 kilometers) of mapped caves. The state enjoys four seasons. Kentucky’s climate has cool winters and warm summers.

## Brief History of Kentucky

The first people came to Kentucky about 14,000 years ago. It is possible these early hunters followed mammoths, mastodons, bison, and other large game. Later, Native American tribes, including Shawnee, Chickasaw, Yuchi, and Cherokee lived and hunted on the land.

In 1774, pioneer James Harrod, along with 40 men, founded the first permanent white settlement. Woodsman and frontier leader Daniel Boone made the Wilderness Road over the Allegheny Mountains, bringing more settlers with him. Boone built Fort Boonesborough in 1775.

For years, eastern Kentucky was part of the Virginia colony. In 1792, Kentucky became the 15th state admitted to the United States. It is nicknamed the “Bluegrass State,” for its lush, bluish-green grass grown in central and western Kentucky.

Eastern Kentucky is known for the industry of coal mining. The Appalachian Mountains were rich with coal fields in the 20th century. Coal was used to generate electricity. Today, there are cleaner alternatives to burning coal, such as solar panels, wind turbines, and gas to power homes and businesses.



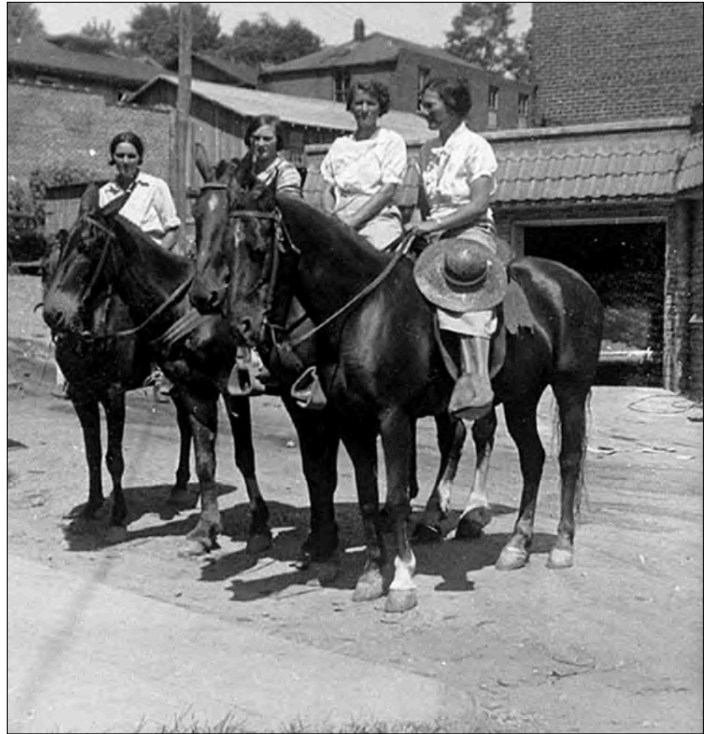
## Student Activity

### Writing Prompt

Help fill Boots' saddle-bags with your favorite books.

Boots delivers books to young kids as well as kids your age. What were the books you liked best when you first learned to read?

What books do you enjoy reading now? Put them in, too!



## Student Activity

### Writing Prompt

In the story, the little boy who lives in Possum Bend wants a book about dogs. The Book Lady doesn't have a dog book. So she makes a book about dogs from magazine pictures, greeting cards, and even draws dogs. She binds the book together and gives it to Charlie on a special trip to Possum Bend.

A friend loves \_\_\_\_\_, but can't find a book in the school library on that subject. Gather magazines, newspapers, greeting cards (things the Book Lady used), cut out pictures and words and glue them to plain paper. You can also draw pictures! Make a cover for your book, adding a title and your name as the author. Staple the binding. Surprise your friend with your homemade book! Handmade books make great gifts!

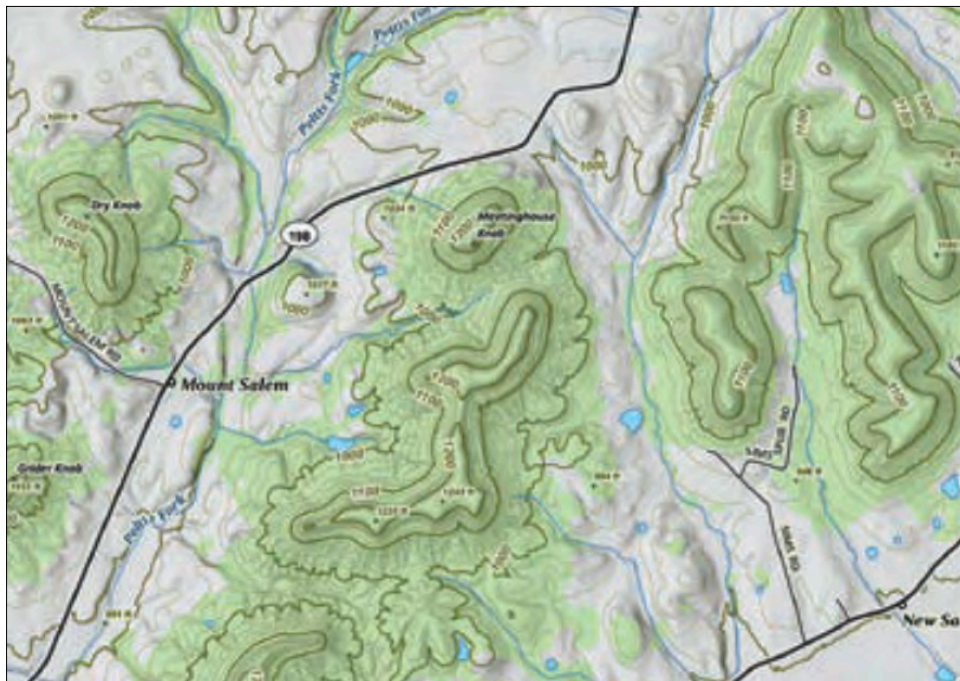


## Student Activity

### Learning About Topographical Maps

When Candice Ransom was researching *Books on Horseback*, she studied topographical maps from the 1930s to understand the areas Boots and the Book Lady traveled each day to deliver books.

A topographical map is a detailed map that shows natural features of land forms: mountains, hills, creeks, rivers, lakes, and valleys. These maps may also show manmade roads and trails.



The green areas on this map depict mountains. The green color indicates tall vegetation, such as trees. The white parts of the map have no trees. Thick black lines show roads. Blue lines outline rivers and creeks. Other blue areas are ponds or lakes.

The curvy lines on the mountains are called *contour* lines. They show if the mountain is steep or has a gentle slope. The numbers tell how high in feet the elevation of each section of the mountains.



This map shows a section of Eastern Kentucky. Turkey Knob, the name of a mountain, is 1124 feet high at the top.

The numbers 800 feet to 900 are far apart. That means the slope is gentle. Near the top of Turkey Knob, notice the numbers 1000 feet to 1100 feet. They are closer together. That means the mountain is steeper in that area.

A landmark called Buzzard Rock is noted on the map. The blue line on the right side indicates a creek.

At the top, the black line marks Medlock Creek Road. The road is built in an area that doesn't have trees or tall vegetation. The broken line in yellow and black marks a trail that winds between steep parts of the land.

We rely on GPS (Global Positioning Systems) to tell us how to find places. It is still handy to understand paper maps. Draw a map of your neighborhood. Or a place in a fairy tale (For example: Little Red Riding Hood's journey to Grandma's house). Or stretch your imagination and make up a land. Give it a name!

Draw mountains, rivers, creeks, valleys, roads, and buildings like castles or log cabins. Add towns or villages. Is your land ruled by a king or queen? Draw the castle. What kind of animals live on your land? Name features after them, such as Dragon Peak or Catfish Creek or Eagle Mountain.

Break out your colored pencils or makers. Use green to color mountains and hills and forests. Use blue to color rivers and creeks. (Remember, water travels around mountains.) Leave grassy areas white. Add roads or trails in black or brown. Have fun!



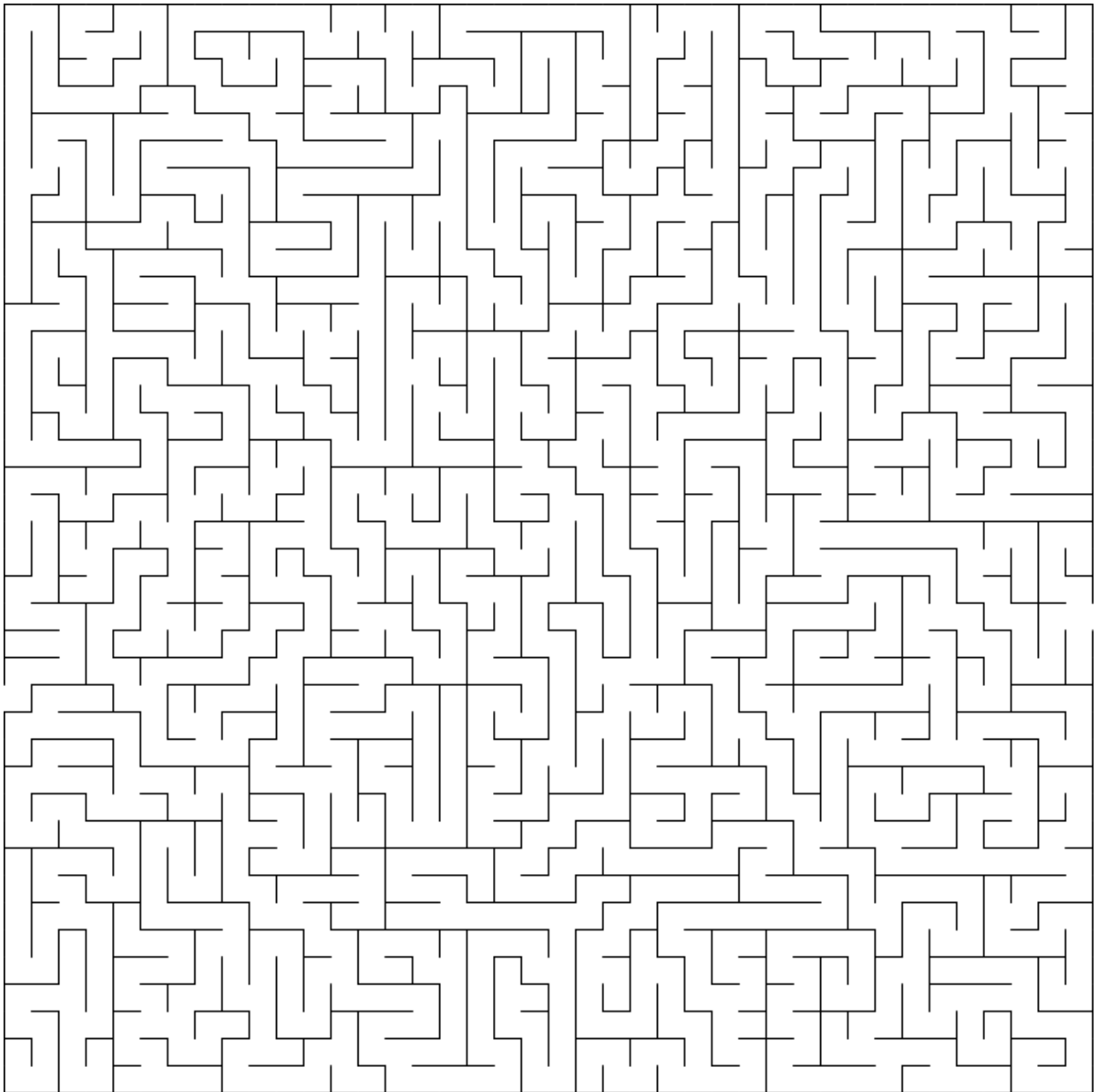
This is a map Candice Ransom created that shows the neighborhood of a fiction book she was writing. As she worked on the story, she found that she couldn't picture in her head where the houses were and other features of the neighborhood. She decided to make a map.

She drew the buildings on construction paper, then cut them out and glued them on white paper. Making this map helped her figure out where her characters were in each scene. Maps are very cool tools!

## Student Activity Maze

Help Boots find the path to Thousandsticks so the Book Lady can deliver books to children and adults.

Solved maze on page 15.



## Student Activity

### Word Search

Answer on page 15.

V A R Y L B H Y D H G J L G U  
P N H K R O K T Y A T F A A C  
Z C F I V C P K K M A W O K E  
W C D R U D A E R L N H C U F  
E L L T S A D D L E P W E Y R  
E U N O S K Y H B T Q G D V X  
V E W U U T Y N A K W W M L C  
K Y S V S D O L R N O S I G V  
Y T O G K Z S O N G L E J U W  
B R V B T C T K B M L I K Y J  
P Z D T H I R P A M O H B B C  
L I B R A R Y O X E H U C C H  
O K B W B U F R W M P B M B V  
J B Z Q D Y M D Q S E E M K A  
M Q P D E S R O H Z L Y G O H

clouds

Boots

books

coal

Kentucky

crows

hamlet

hamlet

bridle

peaks

hollow

wait

saddle

barn

horse

library

read





## Educator Sources

### Videos:

“The Pack Horse Librarians of Appalachia.”

[www.pbs.org/show/pack-horse-librarians-appalachia/](http://www.pbs.org/show/pack-horse-librarians-appalachia/)

“The Depression in Eastern Kentucky - Kentucky Studies.”

[vpm.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/the-depression-in-eastern-kentucky-video/kentucky-studies/](http://vpm.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/the-depression-in-eastern-kentucky-video/kentucky-studies/)

## Web and Print Media

Clark, Amy D. & Nancy M. Hayward. *Talking Appalachian: Voice, Identity, and Community*. Lexington, UP Kentucky, 2013.

Crawford, Byron. “Times were tough, but the book woman was tougher.” *The Courier-Journal*. Dec. 17, 1995.

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[www.smithsonianmag.com/history/horse-riding-librarians-were-great-depression-bookmobiles-180963785/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/horse-riding-librarians-were-great-depression-bookmobiles-180963785/)

Rehder, John B. *Appalachian Folkways*. Johns Hopkins Press, 2004.

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[www.npr.org/2018/09/13/647329067/the-pack-horse-librarians-of-eastern-kentucky](http://www.npr.org/2018/09/13/647329067/the-pack-horse-librarians-of-eastern-kentucky)

## ***Books on Horseback***

### **Q&A with Candice Ransom**

1. Can you share what was the spark that prompted you to write *Books on Horseback*? How did you learn about the Depression-era initiative, the Kentucky Pack Horse Library?

I've been writing books for children for 43 years and many of those books are research-based. I've been reading books since I was seven years old, and as a writer, I continue to read widely. About 30 years ago, while researching a children's book set during the Depression, I came across a reference on the Pack Horse Library project. As someone who loves both horses and books, I decided to write a picture book on the subject.

2. What kind of research did you do to capture the mood, the feel, and the details of the period, the geography, how people lived during that time in history, etc.?

My own background played a part in capturing the feel of that time period. My parents lived through the Depression. My mother's family was from the Blue Ridge Mountain region. My father grew up in the Allegheny Mountains in southwest Virginia. Both of these ranges are part of the Southern Appalachians found in Eastern Kentucky. I've traveled through these mountains many times. I know how these people speak and how they live.

I spent countless hours in two university libraries, ordered books for my own use, scrolled through reams of microfilm in the basements of historical societies, and copied period newspaper stories. Research led me down many trails: Appalachian geography, the Depression and the WPA (Works Project Administration), Kentucky history and folkways. I worked more than six months drilling down to find the heart of my book and to make sure I created an accurate portrayal.

I leaned heavily on a vintage topographical atlas of Kentucky, squinting through a magnifying glass to trace rivers, (“runs”), creeks (“cricks”), hollows (“hollers”), and the ever-present mountains. I located the settlements the packhorse librarians traveled. I studied images of people, their homes and farms from that time period and read doctoral theses on the subject. My research filled two 4-inch binders.

3. Marjorie is one hardy woman! How did you come up with the character? Was she based on or inspired by anyone in particular?

Marjorie is a combination of many of the women in my own family. My grandparents were born in the 1890s; I’m a ninth generation Virginian on both sides. When I was a child, I met a few of my mother’s aunts and uncles, who spoke, dressed, and lived as they did around the World War I era. One of my mother’s aunts wore a long calico dress, apron, and a sunbonnet. She carried a split white oak basket and was going berry picking. My Book Woman is partly based on the sturdy stock I came from, like my Great-aunt Mandy, and partly from the gutsy packhorse librarians I read about.

4. What do you think makes this story relevant today?

During the Depression in Eastern Kentucky, books opened the wider world for children and adults. Today, the world is on a little screen held in our hands. Increasingly, children's textbooks are becoming digitized. And yet, when I walk into our public library which I do at least three times a week, the children's room is always a hive of excited voices and books being pulled from shelves. Kids often plop down in the middle of the floor to open a book.

I hope my story might remind children that books—found in libraries, discount stores, and bookstores—aren't always available. They might wonder what would it be like *not* to have books, something they may take for granted.

5. What is the main thing that you want readers to take away from this book?

I think in terms of reaching *one* reader. And I think in terms of what books meant to me when I was young.

While I worked on *Books on Horseback*, I kept a photograph near my computer. It was a vintage image of a girl about nine years old from 1930s Appalachia. She wore a sweater with holes and her hair was uncombed. But she was smiling for the camera, her eyes hopeful.

During the Depression, photos taken back then, as now, were often staged. They were meant to portray the “hill people” to the Outside World, as if these people lived in a foreign country. This girl seemed like a poster child for Appalachian poverty.

As I worked on my story, I wondered what happened to that girl. Did she get an education? Did she dream bigger dreams because of the books she may have gotten from a packhorse librarian?

In my own so-not-Dick-and-Jane-childhood, there were few books in our home. No one was a reader. Yet I constantly had my nose in a library book.

The summer I turned eight, my mother spent weekends taking care of her ailing parents. I had to go with her, though I hated staying in that dark, camphor-smelling house. The Saturday before my birthday, Mama walked to Drug Fair, returning with a paper bag.

I saw a book sticking out the top and sneaked a peek. A big book about birds, my favorite thing! It cost a dollar!

I could hardly wait until my birthday to get my hands on that book. It had a beautiful turquoise cover featuring a great blue heron. I read the print off of that book. But it slipped out of my life, as many childhood treasures do.

Whenever I went thrifting as an adult, I always kept an eye out for that book. I didn't know the name of it or who wrote it, only that it was turquoise. (Doesn't this sound like some kids who try to find a book by its color?)

One day, I spied a turquoise-colored book in the basement of an antique shop. My heart stopped. My book! For a mere \$7, *Birds: A Golden Fun-to-Learn Book* was mine again.

I understand what it means to know a book is meant especially for you, even a mass-produced book sold in drug stores. I know what it means to spend a lifetime trying to get it back. That is the power of one book in one child's life.

I wrote *Books on Horseback* to help a child realize that not everyone has access to books. I wrote it for a child who desperately wants to own a book. I wrote it for my younger self, grateful that books and librarians saved me. Mostly, I wrote it for that Kentucky girl in the old photograph.

I hope she climbed out of poverty with books as her stepping stones.

6. What do you think the illustrations by Massimiliano Di Lauro add to the book?

Di Lauro's art captures the steep mountains and deep green forests of Appalachia. It shows the rugged territory that makes the Book Lady's job so difficult and even dangerous, just to get books to people who don't had no access to libraries.

He utilizes vignettted inserts in several double-spreads that add extra information beyond the text and also to help move the story along from scene to scene. The world of 1930s Appalachia is foreign to most children. Di Lauro's illustrations made that era come to life. And who can resist a strong woman and her faithful horse delivering books?



## **Contact Information:**

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