

# The Snowy Day



The Snowy Day is a 1962 children's picture book by American author and illustrator Ezra Jack Keats (March 11, 1916 – May 6, 1983). Keats received the 1963 Caldecott Medal for his illustrations in the book. It features a boy named Peter exploring his neighborhood after the first snowfall of the season. The inspiration for Peter came from a Life magazine photo article from 1940, and Keats' desire to have minority children of New York as central characters in his stories. Peter appears in six more books growing from a small boy in *The Snowy Day* to pre-adolescence in *A Letter to Amy*.

After serving in World War II, Keats returned to New York and started a career in illustration, working first in the comic industry, and then working for such publications as *Reader's Digest*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and *Collier's*. In the 1950s Keats started illustrating dust jackets, and when one book cover caught the eye of an editor of youth literature, Keats was soon commissioned to illustrate children's books.

Keats started solely as an illustrator for the work of other authors. But he soon observed that few children's books showcased an African-American or other minority child as the main character. Published in 1962, *The Snowy Day* was the first book Keats both authored and illustrated, and was a milestone

for featuring the first African-American protagonist in a full-color picture book. "None of the manuscripts I'd been illustrating featured any black kids—except for token blacks in the background. My book would have him there simply because he should have been there all along," Keats wrote in an unpublished autobiography (portions of which have been printed in various publications since the author's death).

Peter in *The Snowy Day* was inspired by a strip of photographs of an African-American boy that Keats had clipped from a May 1940 issue of *Life* magazine. "Years ago, long before I ever thought of doing children's books, while looking through a magazine I came across four candid photos of a little boy about three or four years old," said Keats in his acceptance speech for the Caldecott Medal, the most prestigious award in children's literature, which he won for *The Snowy Day* in 1963. "His expressive face, his body attitudes, the very way he wore his clothes, totally captivated me . . . As the years went by, these pictures would find their way back to my walls, offering me fresh pleasure at each encounter. In more recent years, while illustrating children's books, the desire to do my own story about this little boy began to germinate. Up he went again—this time above my drawing table. He was my model and inspiration."

The source for the story-line, Keats noted, came from his memories of snowy days in his Brooklyn childhood. Above all, Keats wanted to capture the wonderment of a child's first snowfall, a feeling universal to all children, regardless of race. "I wanted to convey the joy of being a little boy alive on a certain kind of day—of being for that moment. The air is cold, you touch the snow, aware of the things to which all children are so open."

*The Snowy Day* was immediately welcomed by educators and critics and embraced by the public. The book is noteworthy not only as a benchmark in racial representation in literature, but also for the simplicity and elegance of the writing, which many be attributed to Keats's love of haiku poetry. The beautiful illustrations also marked the book as a great accomplishment of art in a children's book. Keats, who was a painter first and

foremost, chose to illustrate the book with collage, a medium he had never used before. "The idea of using collage came to me at the same time I was thinking about the story. I used a bit of paper here and there and immediately saw new colors, patterns, and relationships forming."

As the Civil Rights Movement entered a new phase of black cultural consciousness in the mid- to late-1960s, *The Snowy Day* began to meet with some criticism. "After *The Snowy Day* was published, many, many people thought I was black," said Keats. "As a matter of fact, many were disappointed that I wasn't!"<sup>[6]</sup> A 1965 *Saturday Review* article, "The All-White World of Children's Books," criticized Keats for not addressing Peter's race in the text. In the 1970s, some critics argued that *The Snowy Day* was too integrationist, and did not truly represent or celebrate African-American cultural or racial identity. By the 1980s the cultural landscape had shifted again. "How many literary light years separate Little Black Sambo from *The Snowy Day*?" a critic wrote. "Although we have been led to believe by twenty years of reporting that Keats's work was special because of his use of collage, it is his vision of the universal human spirit as personified in one pre-school black youngster that marks this book for attention."

Throughout these debates, *The Snowy Day* has remained a deeply loved and profoundly influential book. Based on a 2007 online poll, the National Education Association named the book one of its "Teachers' Top 100 Books for Children." In 2012 it was ranked number five among the "Top 100 Picture Books" in a survey published by *School Library Journal*.