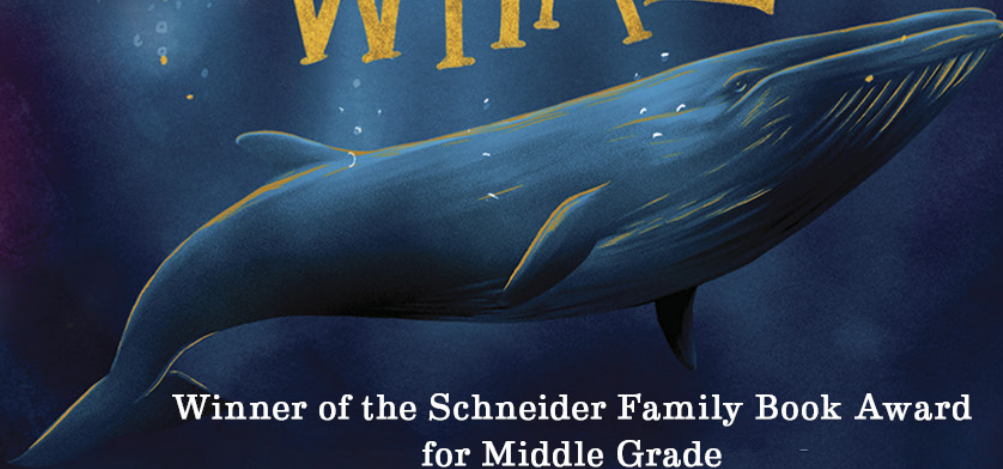


Make waves about something.



LYNNE  
KELLY

# SONG FOR A WHALE



Winner of the Schneider Family Book Award  
for Middle Grade

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE  
[RHTeachersLibrarians.com](http://RHTeachersLibrarians.com)







Twelve-year-old Iris is the only Deaf student in her school. She has a keen interest in electronics and spends her time fixing old radios for a local antiques store. In science class, Iris learns about Blue 55, the loneliest whale in the world. The whale swims about without a pod and cannot communicate with other whales. In some ways, Iris identifies with the lonely whale, and she is determined to create a song for him. Once the song is composed, Iris and her grandmother secretly embark on a three-thousand-mile journey that takes them to the coast of Alaska, where Blue is swimming. Along the way, they undergo life-changing experiences.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**LYNNE KELLY** is the award-winning author of *Song for Whale* which won the 2020 Schneider Family Book Award and was named to many Best Books of the Year Lists including the New York Public Library. She lives near Houston, Texas with her dogs, Abigail and Eloise and works as a sign language interpreter. Visit her online at [lynnekellybooks.com](http://lynnekellybooks.com) or on Twitter at [@LynneKelly](https://twitter.com/LynneKelly).



## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Ask students to read the Author's Note at the end of the novel.

Then listen to whale songs on the following websites:

- [oceanmammalinst.org/songs.html](http://oceanmammalinst.org/songs.html)
- [npr.org/2015/08/06/427851306/it-took-a-musicians-ear-to-decode-the-complex-song-in-whale-calls](http://npr.org/2015/08/06/427851306/it-took-a-musicians-ear-to-decode-the-complex-song-in-whale-calls)

Have students write a one-page paper titled "The Music of Whales."

What is known about their songs? How do their songs vary?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Explain what Iris means when she says, "Until last summer I thought the only thing I had in common with that whale on the beach was a name" (p. 1). How does this statement foreshadow the story that follows?

Describe Iris's relationship with her parents. Why doesn't her father try harder to learn American Sign Language? How does Tristan, her brother, advocate for Iris when she is in tough situations? Iris receives emails from her parents and Tristan while she is on the Alaskan cruise. What is the tone of the emails? Debate whether the messages change in tone the longer she is away.

How do Mr. Gunnar and his antiques store help Iris realize her potential? Iris says, "Whenever I fixed something, I felt like I'd won a contest" (p. 31). How does Iris know when a radio is fixed? Discuss how her knowledge of electronics and sound help her when she finally encounters Blue 55.

Loneliness is an underlying theme in the novel. How does Iris deal with loneliness at school and at home? Discuss whether it's loneliness that causes her to identify with Blue 55. After Iris's grandpa dies, her mother insists that her grandma move to a retirement facility. Why is her grandma so lonely at Oak Manor?

Grandma's favorite book is *Moby-Dick*. Explain why Grandma identifies with Ishmael. What is the "drizzly November" in her soul? How does Iris understand her grandmother's mood? What is the first sign that "that drizzly November in her was looking brighter" (p. 157)?

Language separates Iris from her peers at school. How is this school different from the one she attended before? She visits Bridgewood Junior High with her friend Wendell and discovers that the Deaf students there have their own type of sign language. How does this make Iris feel? Discuss why Iris's mother is reluctant to let her attend Bridgewood, where there are other Deaf students. What is Grandma's role in convincing Iris's parents to send her to Bridgewood in the fall?



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

Describe Nina. Why does Iris dislike her? Iris is punished when she pushes Nina because the school has a zero-tolerance policy on fighting. What might the principal have done to help Nina understand Iris's actions? Later, Iris tells her new friend Bennie about Nina. How does Bennie explain Nina's behavior?

Iris learns about Blue 55 in Sofia Alamilla's science class. Describe Iris's reaction to the documentary about the whale. Cite evidence that Iris approaches her research about the whale's song like a scientist.

How do the music students react after they help Iris create the whale's song? Why does the music teacher feel that Iris should be the person to play the low tuba sound on the computer? What is Bennie's reaction when Iris shares the whale song?

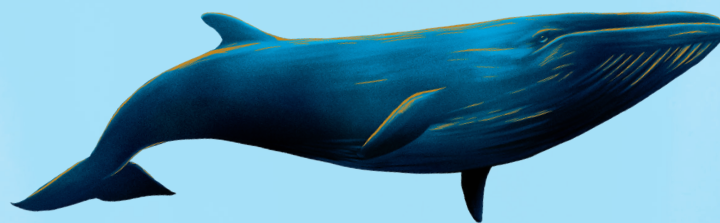
After Iris completes the song, she is determined to go to Alaska to play the song for Blue 55. Why is she hurt when her dad makes a joke about the whale? Grandma understands Iris's need to search for Blue 55. How does the Alaskan cruise satisfy a need within Grandma as well?

Iris tracks Blue 55 with an app on her phone, and is eager to find him. When the whale changes course, Iris says, "All along I was in such a hurry to meet him, and now I just wanted him to wait for me" (p. 226). Discuss Grandma's plan to help her find him.

Explain the following simile: "The whales' songs were like footprints they left in the ocean" (p. 61). Identify similes in the novel that reveal facts about the ocean and ocean life.

When Iris returns, she goes to see Sofia Alamilla to thank her for introducing her to Blue 55. Discuss what Ms. Alamilla means when she says, "I hope you found what you were looking for." (p. 275)

Discuss the structure of the novel. Why does the author include chapters throughout the book about the whale? Explain how this draws a connection between Iris and Blue 55.





## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Ask students to read about the five largest whales on the following website: [the-biggest.net/top-five-largest-whales/](http://the-biggest.net/top-five-largest-whales/). Then have them construct a bar graph that compares the weight and length of each type of whale.

Sura Kilabuk, a naturalist on board the cruise ship, gives a presentation on Alaskan wildlife. The marine wildlife that people may expect to see on an Alaskan cruise includes whales, sea lions, sea otters, Dall's porpoises, and harbor seals. Sea birds include puffins, gulls, and cormorants. Divide the class into small groups and ask them to use books from the library or the internet to research one type of Alaskan wildlife. Instruct them to prepare a PowerPoint presentation that includes pertinent information and pictures that Kilabuk might use when she speaks to passengers. The final slide should cite sources used.

Wendell's mother teaches Deaf history at Bridgewood Junior High. Study the timeline of Deaf history on the following website: [nad.org/about-us/nad-history/](http://nad.org/about-us/nad-history/). Ask students to conduct more in-depth research on one interesting fact from the timeline, then write a summary of what they learned.

Ms. Conn rejects Iris's poem because it doesn't rhyme. Her poem came from a sign language game she played with her grandpa. Read Iris's poem (p. 9), and discuss the imagery she uses to convey meaning. Discuss why her poem is a good example of poetry. Then have students write a poem about Blue 55 that Iris might write after meeting him.

Andi Rivera, a marine biologist at the wildlife sanctuary in Alaska, suggests that Iris might consider a career as an acoustic biologist. Have students research the course of study and career opportunities in this field. Identify the five best universities for Iris to consider. Then ask them to write an essay that Iris might write, titled "My Search for Blue 55," to be shared with marine biology students at these schools.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

American Sign Language Poetry: "Hearts and Hands:  
<https://lifeprint.com/asl101/topics/poetry.htm>

Spoken Without Words: Poetry with ASL SLAM:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmsqXwnqIw4>



# SIGN LANGUAGE POETRY WITH AUTHOR LYNNE KELLY

Instead of writing words of a poem on paper or on a computer, Deaf people can share a poem using signs, movement, space, and facial expressions.

When Iris and her grandparents create sign language poems together, they keep their hands in the same shape throughout the poem for a visual “rhyming” effect. Not all sign language poems use this technique, but some do.

Clayton Valli (1951–2003) was a linguist and an author. He is also one of the best-known Deaf poets, and was the first person to identify features of American Sign Language poetry as a literary genre.

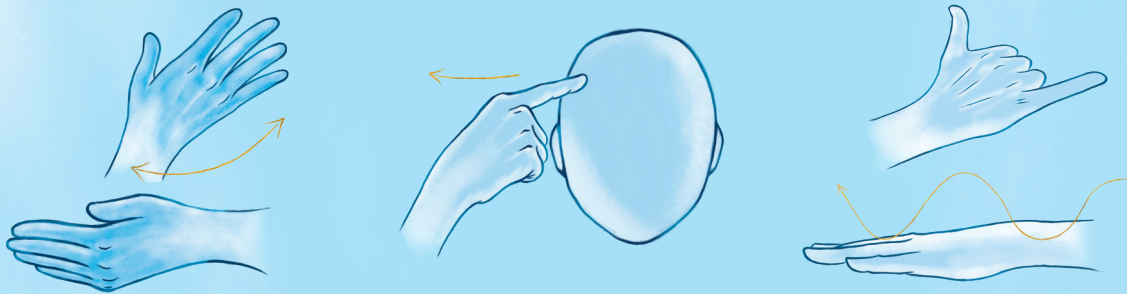
Watch Clayton Valli signing his poem “Dandelions”:

[youtube.com/watch?v=hZ1LTInEQbk](https://youtube.com/watch?v=hZ1LTInEQbk)

The poem is about a man yanking up dandelions and mowing over them. When the dandelions grow back and are pollinated by bees, the yellow flowers turn to puffy white balls of seed. The man angrily pulls up a dandelion again, and the seeds scatter.

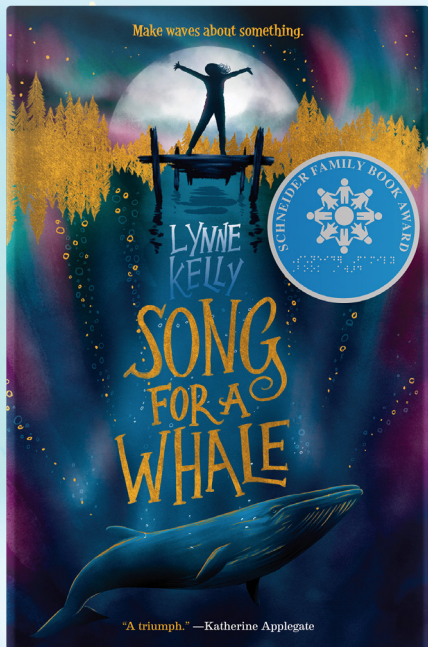
Notice how Valli’s hands are in a “5” handshape for much of the poem. This is the handshape used in the poem Iris and her grandfather sign about the mother bird building a nest in a tree. In “Dandelions,” Valli uses this handshape to show images like flowers swaying in the wind, the puffy white seed ball of the dandelions, the rain, and the scattering of seeds.

Personification is a type of figurative language that gives human characteristics to objects. Clayton Valli uses expressions to add personification to the poem, like when the flowers are “looking around” to see if the man is nearby. A bit of a smirk at the end shows that the seeds are going to scatter and grow flowers elsewhere rather than wither and die.





# PRAISE FOR SONG FOR A WHALE



“Written by a sign-language interpreter, this story **incorporates important elements of Deaf culture and the expansiveness and richness of ASL. A satisfying, energetic read. Iris’ adventures will engross readers.**”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Iris’s depth of empathy, the joy she feels working with radios, and the skillful way she navigates two different worlds of communication **create an authenticity that will resonate with Deaf and hearing readers alike.**”

—*School Library Journal*

“This finely crafted novel **affectingly illuminates** issues of loneliness, belonging, and **the power of communication.**”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“The strength of the book is its **strong portrayal of Iris as a deaf girl in a hearing world** and an intelligent 12-year-old in headlong, single-minded pursuit of her goal.”

—*Booklist*

“Kelly, a veteran sign-language interpreter, effectively incorporates Iris’ Deaf identity into the story and her experiences”

—*Bulletin*

## AWARDS

ALA/ALSC Schneider Family Book Award Winner

WINNER, Pennsylvania Keystone Book Award

WINNER, California Horace Mann Upstander Book Award

Chicago Public Library Best Books of the Year List

New York Public Library Best Books of the Year List

Georgia Children’s Book Award Nominee

Illinois Bluestem Book Award Nominee

Kansas William Allen White Book Award Nominee

Massachusetts Children’s Book Award Nominee

Minnesota Maud Hart Lovelace Book Award Nominee

Missouri Mark Twain Book Award Nominee

Nebraska Golden Sower Book Award Nominee

New Mexico Land of Enchantment Book Award Nominee

Oklahoma Sequoyah Book Award Nominee

Pennsylvania Young Readers Choice Award Nominee

South Carolina Book Award Nominee

Texas Spirit of Texas Reading Program Book

Vermont Golden Dome Book Award Nominee

This guide was prepared by Pat Scales, Children’s Literacy Consultant, Greenville, South Carolina

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