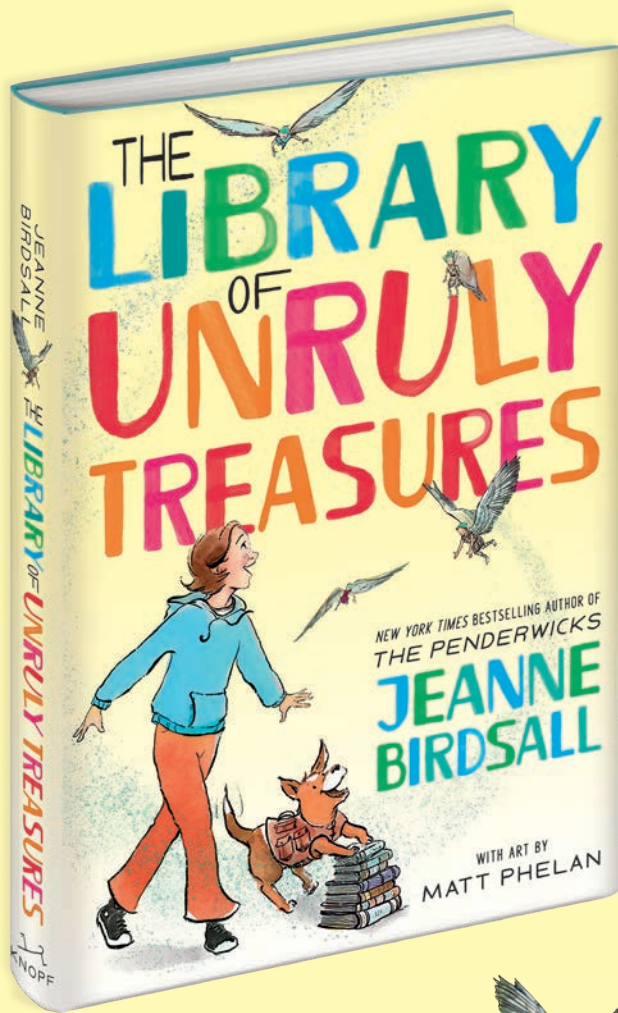


# THE LIBRARY OF UNRULY TREASURES



**EDUCATORS' GUIDE**

[RHCBTeachersLibrarians.com](https://RHCBTeachersLibrarians.com)



## About the Book

Gwen MacKinnon's parents are dreadful. Truly, deeply, almost impressively dreadful. So Gwen's not upset at all when she's foisted onto her never-before-seen uncle Matthew for two weeks. Especially when it turns out he has a very opinionated dog named Pumpkin.

Things take a turn for the weird when Gwen makes a discovery in the local library. A discovery that involves tiny creatures with wings. And no, they're not birds. They're called Lahdukan. But why can only Gwen and the youngest children, gathered for story time, see them?

The Lahdukan insist that Gwen is destined to help them find a new home. But how can a girl as unwanted, uncourageous, and generally unheroic as Gwen possibly come to the rescue? Pumpkin has a few ideas . . .

**Themes:** Self-Esteem, Determination, Growing Up, Family and Relationships, Fantasy

## About the Author

Photo courtesy of Jeanne Birdsall



Jeanne Birdsall grew up in the suburbs west of Philadelphia, where she spent most of her time reading and daydreaming. She decided to be a writer when she was ten years old, though she didn't circle back to that idea until she was all grown up and then some. Her first book was *The*

*Penderwicks*, which won the National Book Award and was a *New York Times* bestseller. Four other *Penderwicks* novels, all of which received glowing accolades and were *New York Times* bestsellers, followed to round out the series. She is also the author of several picture books and a chapter book. Jeanne's days involve plenty of time writing, gardening, and chasing around her two mischievous dogs.

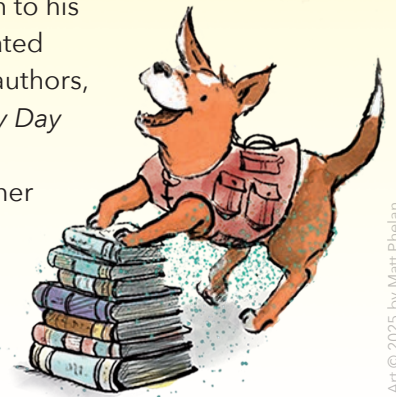


## About the Illustrator



Matt Phelan is an award-winning, *New York Times* bestselling author-illustrator of picture books, middle grade novels, and graphic novels for young readers. He has received the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction (*The Storm in the Barn*), the Carolyn Field Award (*Around the*

*World and Snow White*), and the Jefferson Cup (*Bluffton*), and has been nominated for five Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards. In addition to his own books, Matt has illustrated many books by renowned authors, including *Flora's Very Windy Day* by Jeanne Birdsall and *The Higher Power of Lucky* (winner of a Newbery Medal) by Susan Patron.



Art © 2025 by Matt Phelan



# Pre-Reading Activities

1. The cover is our first introduction to a book. The cover art for *The Library of Unruly Treasures* was illustrated by Matt Phelan, who also created interior illustrations for the story. Judge this book by its cover! What clues do readers get about the book from looking at this cover's colors, fonts, and other artistic details? What predictions can you make about the plot based upon this title? What predictions would you make about the characters based on their presentation on the cover? For example, how does Gwen feel toward the flying creatures around her? How would you describe the dog's behavior?
2. Before you begin to read the book, create a three-column reflection chart to accompany your reading: What do you THINK, what do you FEEL, and what do you WONDER? Use this chart to make notes about your questions and your emotional response to the story as you are reading. What do you notice about the text and/or about the accompanying black-and-white illustrations? Think about the problems Gwen and the Lahdukan face and the steps they take to solve them. Use your curiosity as inspiration and keep track of questions you hope will be answered by the book's end.

## Reading Activities and Discussion Questions



1. *The Library of Unruly Treasures* begins with a series of Charlotte MacKinnon's diary entries.
  - Pause after reading the diary entries. What can you predict about the story you are about to read based on the information you learn from Charlotte's diary?
  - How do Charlotte's journal entries set the stage for the modern-day adventure?
  - Diary entries are one form of *epistolary* writing, a narrative style that uses letters, emails, texts, or other written communication to tell a story. Have you read an epistolary novel before? Try writing an additional diary entry from Charlotte's perspective once she arrives in America, or try writing from Gwen's perspective once she's arrived at Uncle Matthew's.
2. Most of *The Library of Unruly Treasures* takes place in the fictional town of Dalgety, Massachusetts. What details in the story helped you create a strong sense of place as Gwen explored the town? Does Uncle Matthew's home, his garden or kitchen, or the MacKinnon Library remind you of anywhere you've visited before, or of other books you've read?
3. Gwen's home life is complicated. She has moved around a lot and describes her room at Uncle Matthew's as "the nicest room I've ever slept in." (p. 24) What helps you feel safe and comfortable when you visit somewhere new? What do you think could help the Lahdukan feel safe and comfortable after they move to a new home?
4. Why do you think Charlotte MacKinnon chose "a library, a temple of learning and dreams" (p. 12) as the Lahdukan's home in Dalgety? If you were suddenly responsible for relocating a whole clan of Lahdukan in your community, where would you help them settle, and why?



5. Most adults in this story, including Julia's parents and Uncle Matthew, and the older children, like Joaquin, cannot see the Lahdukan and refer to young children's interactions with the small winged creatures as a game. "All the children believe in them, Gwen. The game has been going on for years—an extraordinary example of group imagination," explains children's librarian Lexie Koenig. (pp. 37)

What is it about the age of six that makes it a transition point for seeing the Lahdukan or forgetting about them? Do you think the Lahdukan are invisible to grown-ups, or do you think grown-up brains lose the ability to believe in fantastical things?

6. Gwen's fear of heights comes up repeatedly in the book, and she must overcome her fear to fulfill the prophecy that protects the Lahdukan. You might consider this a part of Gwen's "hero's journey": a quest Gwen undertakes that challenges her but leaves her transformed. What helps you feel brave when you are nervous or afraid? Working in a small group or on your own, create a list of comforting songs, reassuring people, or calming habits that help you face your fears. These could include deep-breathing techniques, physical movements, mindfulness exercises, limit time spent online, or other coping skills.
7. Would you like to live in this fictional world with Gwen and her family and friends? Why, or why not? Would your ability (or inability) to see the Lahdukan change your mind?
8. The book includes warm and expressive black-and-white illustrations by Matt Phelan throughout.
- How would you describe the artwork? Make a quick list of descriptive words that pop into your mind when you look at the images.
  - Belet and Gib are the first Lahdukan that Gwen sees—they're revealed to the reader on page 79. Were the Lahdukan drawn as you'd imagined them: "Their expressions were friendly" and with "obvious intelligence" (p. 78)?

- Would this book make a good TV show or movie? Which unillustrated scene of the story is so cinematic you can picture it like a video in your mind? Create a full-page drawing of that scene, or sketch a comic with four (or more!) panels retelling the moment.

9. *The Library of Unruly Treasures* is told through a third-person point of view, as if the reader is watching the events with Gwen and the Lahdukan unfold. Choose a scene you especially enjoyed and rewrite it from a first-person ("I," "me," or "we") point of view. You might write the section as Gwen, or as Joaquin, but don't feel limited to a human perspective! You could also retell the story as Pumpkin or Gib might have seen it.
10. Jeanne Birdsall's writing style has a gentle sensibility, a timeless quality, and humor. How did the narrative voice make you *feel* as you read this book? Create a collage or build a playlist that matches the mood of the story.
11. At the back of the book, you'll find a pronunciation guide for some Lahdukan words and phrases (but not the rituals!). Did you come across other unfamiliar words while reading *The Library of Unruly Treasures*? Make a list of new-to-you words and look up their meaning. This word list might include *existential void* (p. 17), *profound* (p. 59), *decorum* (p. 112), *scrutinized* (p. 202), *reeking* (p. 214), *stasis* (p. 268), or *solemnity* (p. 295).
12. Sometimes we connect so deeply to a character that we think about them long after the book ends. *The Library of Unruly Treasures* is a stand-alone book, meaning there are no plans for a sequel to continue Gwen and the Lahdukan's story. What do you think might happen after the book ends? Make predictions for Gwen and the Lahdukan clans, or perhaps for Nora, Pumpkin, Joaquin, or for Julia's first day of kindergarten.



# Extension Activities

1. There are references to several classic children's books in *The Library of Unruly Treasures*, including Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* (1952), Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), and author Jeanne Birdsall's own previous work, *The Penderwicks* series. Can you make a connection to other books you've read or shows you've watched? Create a mind map of these associations—links to familiar characters, plots, or settings. If you want to explore the connections to the older stories, ask a librarian or other grown-up to help you find the original version or a modern interpretation of one of those classics (several of them have been reimaged as graphic novels!), and see if you can find themes they share with this book.
2. The final part of this book includes visits to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, a real place in Boston, Massachusetts. With a grown-up's permission, visit the museum's website. Find the ["Explore the Palace"](#) tab to look around the gardens and galleries. Were they as you'd imagined them while reading the book?
3. When Lahduka Zarakir Stewart meets Gwen, she mentions a "tragic burglary" (p. 159). The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum really was robbed in 1990—at the time it was the largest personal property theft in US history. With a grown-up's permission, research that art heist. Those especially interested in notable art thefts might also read *The Mona Lisa Vanishes* (Day and Helquist, 2023).
4. Librarian Lexie Koenig offers Gwen several fantasy books that are unexpectedly reassuring to her. After Gwen reads one, the narrator states, "It had turned out that Kiranmala had a really awful dad. The author probably hadn't meant this to be comforting, but it was for Gwen." (p. 69)
  - Journal privately about a time you felt truly seen and represented by a character or event in a book.
  - Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, a notable children's literature professor, coined the concept of books being windows, mirrors, or sliding glass doors for young readers. Was this book a chance for you to see a life different than yours (like looking through a window); an opportunity for self-affirmation, where you could see your life reflected in the pages of the book (a mirror); or an opportunity to join a world, real or imagined (as if stepping through a door)? Again, journal privately.

Kit Ballenger, JD/MLIS, is a Washington, DC, area youth services librarian and literary consultant. You can find her on Instagram at @KitonLit and at [HelpYourShelf.com](https://www.HelpYourShelf.com).



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