

Newsday

Mary Gregory Special to Newsday
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Festival Celebrates the Drawing Power of Children's Books

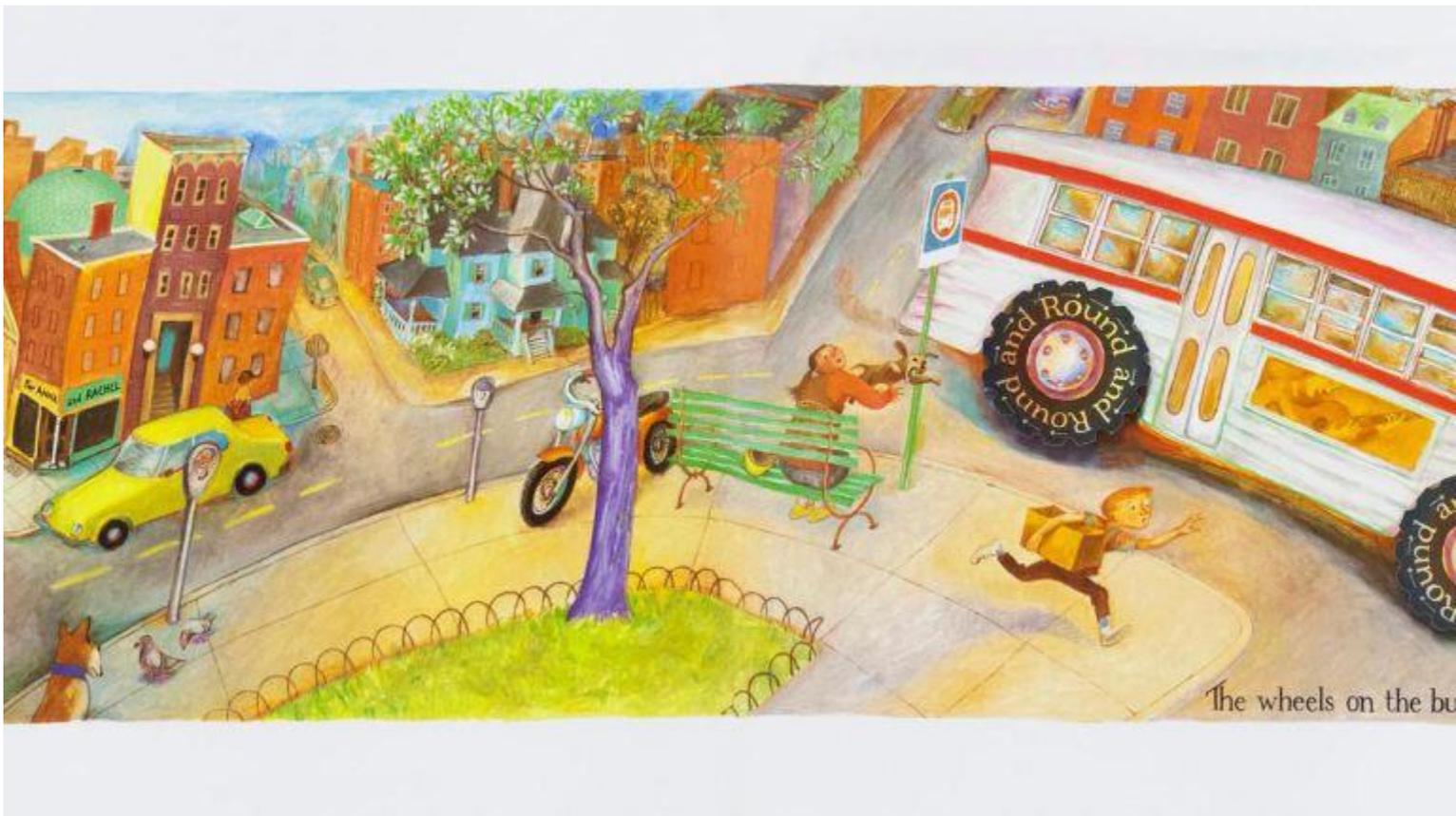


John Parra's illustration of a young Frida Kahlo is from the book "Frida Kahlo and her Animalitos." Credit: John Parra

When Gus, the hero of the children's story "Gus and the Greatest Catch of All," launches his fishing boat in search of a great catch, he finds, instead, empathy, kindness and friendship. So does Bird, who moves into a new forest, and Omu, who cooks a rich stew.

The power of the human heart is writ large in books for little readers. These characters' stories and more, told through paintings, drawings and words, will be on display and read aloud Dec. 1 in Long Island's first Children's Book Festival at the Nassau County Museum of Art's Manes Art & Education Center in Roslyn.

Bibliophiles and art lovers young and old can meet contemporary illustrators who will also teach kids how to create their own art. Storytelling, book sales and signings, and art activities all tie in with the current exhibition, "Picture This: The Art of Children's Books," which runs through Jan. 12. Visitors can also donate gently used books to be distributed by The Book Fairies in Freeport to needy schools and organizations. "It's a day to celebrate art and literature and their presence in people's lives," says Katie Aragon, the museum's school and family program educator.



Paul O. Zelinsky, who wrote and illustrated "The Wheels on the Bus," will be at the Children's Book Festival at Nassau County Museum of Art. Credit: Paul O. Zelinsky

Aragon and director of education Laura Lynch worked with guest curators Isabel Roxas and Tim Miller to bring these children's book creators to Long Island. Illustrators attending include Paul O. Zelinsky, who'll be reading at 1:30 p.m. His classic "Wheels on the Bus" has gone 'round and 'round, teaching children for more than a quarter century. Caldecott Medal winners as well as new and bestselling author/illustrators will be on hand.

PLEASING HER 'CRITICS'

Victoria Cossack, the first-time author of "Gus and the Greatest Catch of All," says she probably worked harder

on the art in her children's book than she does for exhibitions because kids are astute critics. Along with her whimsical artwork, she fills her pages with compassion and, she hopes, inspiration. The same issues of love, longing and belonging found in masterpieces by Rembrandt and Shakespeare are central to children's books.

"Even though the art and story can seem a little naive, children are capable of understanding larger ideas very well. I've learned to not underestimate the stories and concepts they're able to grasp, and how passionate they are about those ideas," says Cossack, 22, of Commack. She based her story on Long Island's fishermen and has created a special print for attendees who purchase a book at the festival.



First-time Commack author also did the illustrations for her children's book "Gus and the Greatest Catch of All" about Long Island fishermen. Credit: Victoria Cossack

DIVERSITY DAY

Aragon and Lynch made sure to include a diversity of cultures, visions and voices, whether through "Cat on the Bus" by Aram Kim, a story told mostly through pictures that recall classical Ukiyo-e woodblock prints; or John Parra's colorful illustrations in "Frida Kahlo and her Animalitos;" or the touching "A Gift From Abuela" by Cecilia Ruiz.

"When you look at a book you should be able to see yourself, or see someone you know, your friend, your neighbor or your classmate," says Aragon. Oge Mora honors her parents' Nigerian heritage in "Thank You, Omu!" about a special stew. She never names the ingredients, so that each child can imagine his or her own family's recipe.

"She has a new book just out called 'Saturday' and it's really about experiencing the everyday. You don't have to go on a monumental trip," says Aragon. "It can be going to the store with someone to get groceries, or just sitting and reading a book on your couch. These small moments create big lives."

Lynch and Aragon hope the festival will draw visitors from ages 2 to 90 and beyond. "A book can take you many places," says Lynch. "A book can help you think about the world and yourself in a different way. It can empower you, can open up your purview. You can imagine other ways of being. A book is a magical space."

Children's Book Festival

WHEN | WHERE 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m., 1-2:30 p.m. and 3-4:30 p.m. Dec. 1, The Manes Art & Education Center, Nassau County Museum of Art, 1 Museum Drive, Roslyn Harbor

INFO \$10, free ages 4 and younger (registration required); 516-484-9338; nassaumuseum.org

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