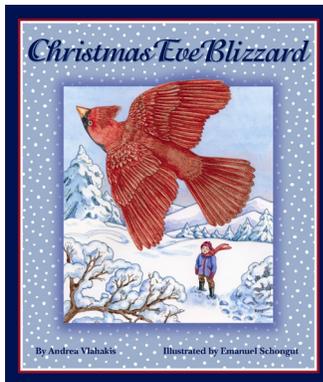


A Conversation with Andrea Vlahakis *author of Christmas Eve Blizzard*



What inspired you to write Christmas Eve Blizzard?

It started with a blue jay. We had a nasty blizzard one year. During the storm, I heard jays screaming. Usually, I assume that means there's a hawk nearby, but when I went to the slider door, I saw that my peach tree was full with blue jays and that one of the jays had fallen onto the snow. I'm not sure what possessed me. I got bundled up, trudged out into the storm and scooped up the jay. He was alive. I brought him into the garage and put him in a large cardboard box. Then I called my dog's vet.



The vet gave me some pointers on how to care for him temporarily. He also gave me the number of a woman in a nearby town who was a wildlife rescue person. But with knee-deep snow and a raging storm – the roads hadn't even been plowed yet – she couldn't come to get the jay and I couldn't get him to her. I had an overnight guest.

The plan was, that in the morning, if he still seemed ill to bring him in to her. If he was better, then I should release him and let him be on his way. After she asked me some questions, she figured it probably was the storm, the temperature, and the inability to find food that were too much for him. And she figured correctly because the next morning he was up and alert, hopping around and doing all these soft vocalizations. I put a small tin of water in his box, which he pulled away from my hand with his beak. *So, you want to play*, I thought. I pulled the tin back a smidge. Then he pulled it toward him. We did this tug-of-war a couple of times before I knew he was fine and ready to get back outside. I released him and that, I figured, was that. Except, it wasn't.

With the storm over, and fresh seed brimming over in the bird feeder, the stream of birds filling up on food was what I expected. But by midday, there was one blue jay that fed voraciously. In the afternoon, he was still there. I figured it was my jay. I had an old wheelbarrow out by the slider door, right next to the glass. When this jay wasn't eating, he glided over to the slider, sat on the wheelbarrow's handle and made the same vocalizations he was making that morning in his cardboard box. It had to be my jay. He kept looking inside the slider and made his little qweedle-qweedle noises. He'd go back and eat some more, then come back to the slider. He did this the rest of the day, all that week and into the spring. It was my jay.

I knew I wanted to share this event, so little by little, the story of Nicholas and the cardinal evolved. But I also wanted to write about a boy and his grandfather and about that relationship. It was important to show that they had a special connection, and that time – growing up, growing old – wasn't going to change that. The love you have, the times you share and the memories you hold never go away.

What are the most frequently asked questions you encounter as an author?

Way back when it used to be *Do you use a computer?* Now, the most common question I get asked by kids is *How long did it take you to write this?* When I tell them not long, their eyes pop out. Then I explain I've written about cardinals before and had had all that research done. Also, the story had been in my head for several years. So when it came time to write, it just about came out whole. I think it only went through about five or six major drafts—if you don't count the drafts I wrote in my head. This is unusual for me. I'm a big fan of lots of revision.

The next most common question I get asked is *Are you famous?* It makes me sad to see the disappointed faces when I tell them no. Not because I'm not famous and I wish I was, but because of the notion that fame is so important to people today.

What sparks your creativity?

Reading. I tell my students to read everything. You can't write if you don't read.

I find reading children's books and books written by some of my favorite authors before I start writing, or better yet, when I'm stuck, helps a lot. I tend to gravitate toward Patricia MacLachlan, Richard Peck, Gary Paulsen, and Lois Lowry – among *many*, many others. Also E.B. White, Willa Cather, Truman Capote, Norman Maclean, William Maxwell, and Joseph Mitchell – whether for voice, clarity, cadence or just joy. Finally, poets like Jane Hirshfield, Jane Kenyon, and my favorite, Mary Oliver.

The other thing I do right before settling down to pick up my writing for the day is to read what I wrote the day before. I find re-reading it gives me a good push back onto the road and helps me move forward. It also gets my ear back so I can hear the characters' voices. It drops me back into their world. And I always try to finish my day's work by ending with the story hanging. It gives me something to mull over overnight. It also gives me a jumping off point when I pick up the draft the next time.

What tips do you have for parents who want to take their children birding?

One of the easiest ways to get started is to get a pair of binoculars and a field guide and then set up a feeder in your backyard. A fun motivator is to do Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Project Feederwatch. (You can go online to www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw for more information.) Not only will you be exploring the natural world, you'll also be helping scientists track bird populations and their movements while monitoring trends. It's a great family project and it's easy – you select your bird-count days so it's convenient for you. You'll learn different bird species, you'll be contributing valuable information and you'll be an important link in the chain of scientists helping nature. The way I figure it, if you're helping nature, you're helping the world – and having lots of fun doing it, too.

Want to continue this conversation? Schedule an interview!

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