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“Language is democratic.” A Ten Year Celebration of The Right Word with Jen Bryant and Melissa Sweet!

September 10, 2024 by [Betsy Bird](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

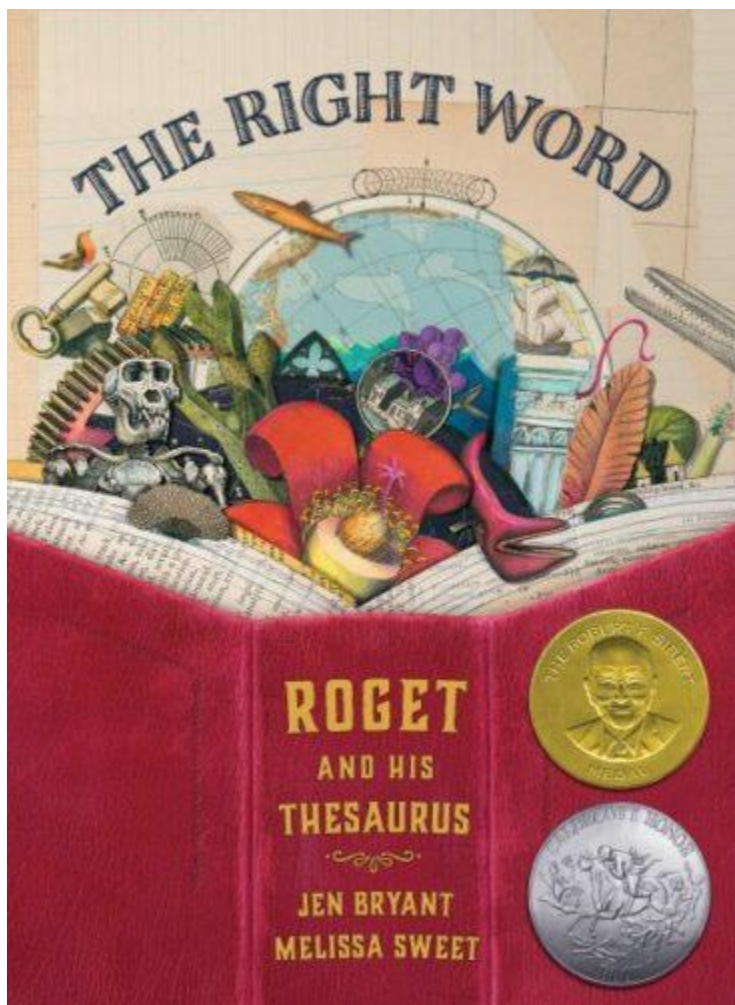
Tenth anniversaries just don’t get enough press, do they? Particularly when they involve smart books, much beloved upon their publication. Take, for example, the book [The Right Word: Roget and His Thesaurus](#) by Jen Bryant and Melissa Sweet. Now there was a book that won multiple awards, was widely praised, and now is hitting its ten year high. Such a momentous occasion is deserving of praise! Of celebrations! Of . . . of . . . an interview with the creators!

I mean, why not? But just in case you forgot about this book, I think it best to give you a little reminder recap of what it was about:

For shy young Peter Mark Roget, books were the best companions — and it wasn't long before Peter began writing his own book. But he didn't write stories; he wrote lists. Peter took his love for words and used it to organize his ideas and find exactly the right word to express just what he thought. His lists grew and grew, eventually turning into one of the most important reference books of all time.

This book is an inviting, visually engrossing portrayal of Peter Mark Roget and the creation of the thesaurus. Readers of all ages will marvel at Roget's life, depicted through lyrical text and brilliantly detailed illustrations. This elegant book celebrates the joy of learning and the power of words.

And now, let's get the skinny on the title, a decade down the road:



Betsy Bird: *Jen and Melissa! A thousand thanks for answering my questions today! And congrats on the ten-year anniversary of THE RIGHT WORD. When it won a Caldecott Honor and a Sibert Medal back in the day, it was a follow-up of sorts to other books you'd done together on subjects like poet William Carlos Williams and artist Horace Pippin. Poets and artists seem to lend themselves naturally to picture book biographies. Taxonomists turned bibliophile thesaurus creators, less so. Do you happen to recall where the early inkling of focusing on Peter Roget came from?*

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Jen Bryant, photo credit: EF Design

Jen Bryant: I had picked up an old Thesaurus at a book sale and, packing too hastily for a road trip, found that it was my sole companion on a five-hour drive. The preface was written by Roget's grandson and explained how the young Peter Mark Roget developed his life-long habit of making word lists and later—as young physician—Roget hand wrote his original Thesaurus. This brief glimpse into Roget's curious, obsessive mind was enough to get me started with some research. I loved his eclecticism, too. He was interested in EVERYTHING and tried to fit all of it, in the form of words and phrases, into his eponymous book.

Melissa Sweet: Thank you! A decade screamed by. The idea for this book was Jen's, but I've always had a fascination by with process, documentation, and data. It was a welcome challenge to bring Roget to life visually.

BB: *You must have received multiple calls for its Caldecott Honor and Sibert wins. It's been a minute or two, but do you remember what those calls consisted of at all?*

JEN: In the basement of our house in eastern Pennsylvania, we hosted an annual neighborhood Super Bowl party. In 2015, it fell on Sunday, February 1, and that evening found me greeting our guests, slicing sandwiches, and arranging snacks and desserts. I had ignored a few calls that day already, letting them go to voicemail, but for some reason I picked this one up, thinking maybe it was a delayed guest. It was Sibert Chair Deborah Taylor! I don't recall very much after that, except that I whisked the phone up to my second-floor office where, when the news began to sink in, I danced a bit and tried to breathe. I do recall the cheers of the committee members in the background (they were in Chicago) and Deb's request to keep the award a secret until the official announcement the next day. There were guests at the front door when I hung up, which made it easy to focus on the messy reality of ham, cheese, and chips and to quell any impulse to shout from the rooftops!



Melissa Sweet

MELISSA: You're right, it has been awhile. My recollection is that the Sibert call came in the night before and the Caldecott Honor the next morning. What those call have in common is an overwhelming acknowledgment, and a group of people cheering madly in the background. Lots of thanks and admiration all around. And as these things go, we didn't speak amongst ourselves (though I told my husband) until the announcements. It was utter elation and astonishment. I doubt I worked the rest of that day.

BB: *The impossible question I wish to lob at you now is to consider THE RIGHT WORD in the context of picture book biographies today. You've been in this business, both of you, long enough to have seen how people judge children's nonfiction in different ways than they used to. How do you feel the book holds up when compared to contemporary bios?*

JEN: I think that’s a very fair question, actually! I’ll start by saying that Melissa’s illustrations for this book are among the most masterful and inventive that readers have ever seen. Great illustrators entertain, inform, and also surprise the reader on every page, and Melissa lifted my text to a whole new level. So it doesn’t matter if you’ve never heard of Roget or if you’ve never used an actual hard copy thesaurus. The reader enters a world when they open this book, and that world is both wide and deep because of Melissa’s extraordinary talent, which gives the book a timeless appeal and makes it as accessible to a kid in urban NYC as it is to a kid on a Montana ranch. The book’s central theme—that language is democratic, that it belongs to everyone regardless of age, economic class, gender, ethnicity, etc.—is also as relevant today as it was in Roget’s time.



MELISSA: For years educators, teachers, and librarians described how they use my biographies for all ages. Sharing true stories with words and images is the best of both worlds. By all accounts, our books hold up and are going strong. But since the pandemic I’m rarely doing school visits and have fewer of these conversations. In addition, in the last years I became a Maine Master Naturalist and got my Maine Guide license. When I’m not in the studio, I’m outside doing my own recording and documentation (not unlike Roget!) as well as teaching nature journaling. My attention has segued from books in the market to all I want to say and do as an artist.

BB: *Since the publication of this book, you two have continued to produce many a fine picture book biography, albeit separately. What, to your mind, makes a biography for younger children truly successful?*

JEN: I marvel at how much I DON’T know about what makes for a “successful” biography for young people. I do know that, for me at least, I have to have some deep emotional

connection to the subject. If that isn't there, then I probably won't write about them. These books take a long time to create, and if I'm not emotionally invested in bringing the person's story to light, then I'm not going to write well. In the case of Roget, I immediately related to his book-love, his social anxiety, his habit of wandering and cataloguing nature, and his eclectic interests (he invented the portable chess set and a new kind of slide rule, wrote about optics and light, improved workers' health, and lectured on natural history). So I suppose I would deem a book "successful" if the reader experiences some of that same emotional connection with the subject.

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MELISSA: Taking a page from Strunk and White's *Elements Of Style*, success comes from "plainness, simplicity, orderliness, clarity." Research informs my art, and I look for innovative ways the art to reflect the person and the story. My hope is that readers come away feeling as if they know this person, or see themselves in them.

BB: Could you tell us a bit about what you two have coming out next? What can we expect from you each in the future?



JEN: Amy June Bates, who did the phenomenal art for my book about young Abraham Lincoln, *Abe's Fish* (Sterling, 2009), is completing the illustrations for my biography of amateur scientist Eunice Foote. *FOOTE WAS FIRST: How One Curious Woman Connected Carbon Dioxide and Climate Change* will be available from HarperCollins in early 2026, and we're looking forward to introducing this science pioneer to young readers!

MELISSA: My third book with Kwame Alexander, *How To Sing A Song* (HarperCollins) will be out soon. I'm working on a book by E. B. White, *The Duck Can't Sleep* (HarperCollins), and illustrating three books based on Mary Oliver's poems with Viking.

It's an auspicious life! Thank you, Betsy.

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Auspicious indeed! I'd like to thank Jen and Melissa profusely for taking the time and attention that they have to answering my questions today. As I've mentioned [The Right Word: Roget and His Thesaurus](#) is out now (and has been out for the last ten years or so) so if any of this has made you curious, who can blame you? And special thanks to Amy Storey and the folks at Eerdmans for helping to put this talk together.

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About Betsy Bird

Betsy Bird is currently the Collection Development Manager of the Evanston Public Library system and a former Materials Specialist for New York Public Library. She has served on Newbery, written for Horn Book, and has done other lovely little things that she'd love to tell you about but that she's sure you'd find more interesting to hear of in person. Her opinions are her own and do not reflect those of EPL, SLJ, or any of the other acronyms you might be able to name. Follow her on Twitter: @fuseeight.

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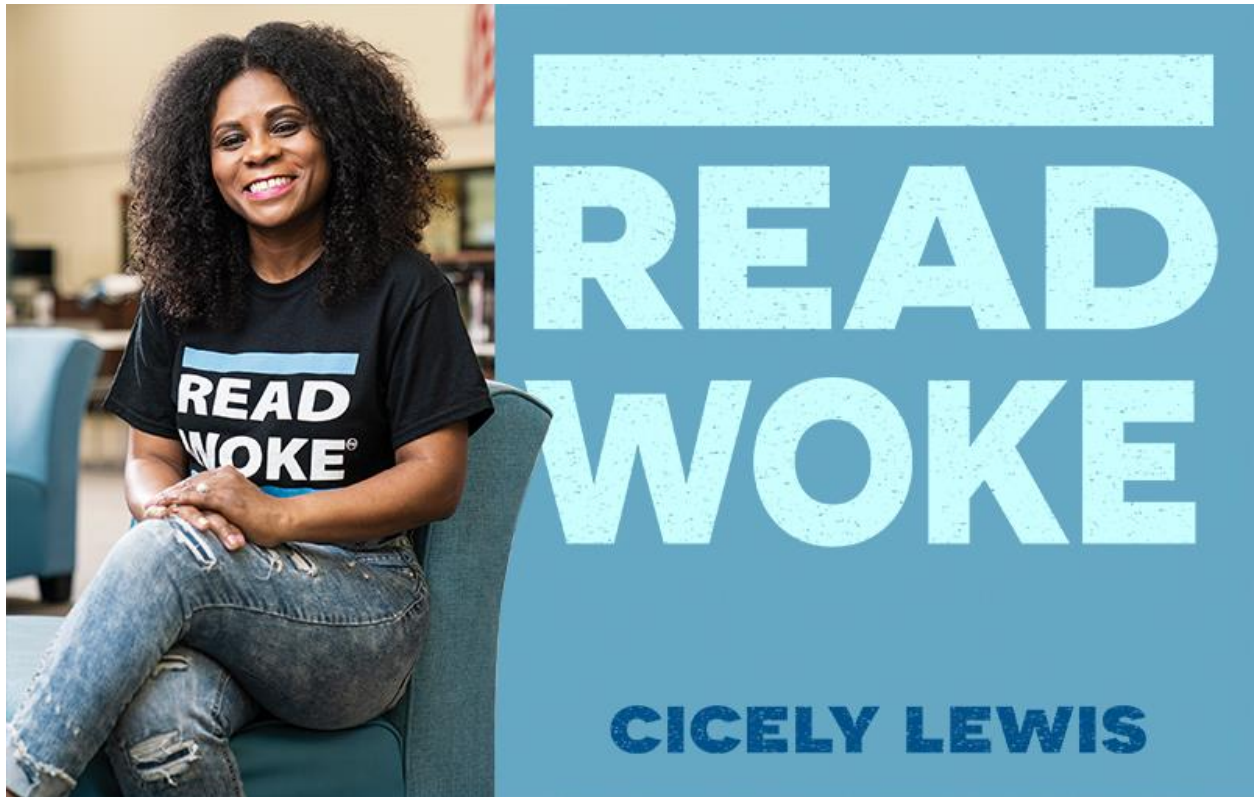
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