

Village School Childrens Book Review of the Month

Snowflake Bentley by Jacqueline Briggs Martin

Reviewed by Katrina Walton, early childhood science teacher and Karen Walton, Village School alum

Thanks to William Bentley, born in Vermont in 1865, we now know that each snowflake that falls from the sky presents a unique hexagonal pattern. *Snowflake Bentley*, by Jacqueline Briggs Martin, uses handsome wood block illustrations to share William's journey to become the first snowflake photographer.

William Bentley grew up in rural Vermont and was a keen observer of nature throughout his childhood. Although unable to finish high school due to family obligations, he was well read and interested in the world around him, observing apple blossoms, insects and other natural life over the years. As a young teen he started recording weather patterns and drawing his first snowflake observations. William could not photograph a snowflake until, at age 17, his parents bought him a special microscope with a camera attachment. Although clunky and cumbersome, he began experimenting with his camera during snowstorms when he would attempt to catch the falling snow stars on a black tray, then carrying them indoors to be photographed. Because the snowflakes always melted before he could take their picture, there were many failed attempts before he finally captured one on film. When he developed a collection of snow crystal slides William began to share all of these amazing images with educational institutions, family and friends.

Martin's tenderly illustrated story celebrates the life of a great visionary in pictures and prose easily grasped by young children. The book works as an especially wonderful read-aloud for grades K-2, though extra clarification may be helpful due to the historical context of the book and use of some technical terms.

The Village School kindergarten-2nd grade classes recently spent time exploring this book. The children went outside with black paper to catch snowflakes and examine them closely. They also learned to fold, cut and create unique paper snowflakes.

Take it from Will - if you happen to be outside during a perfect snowfall - pause a minute, observe each unique flake that lands on your coat, before the jewel melts. Bentley's life inspires us to slow down and take a look at what is all around us. After all, when his interest in snow first became clear, his fellow Vermonters scorned him, pronouncing snow in Vermont to be "as common as dirt."

Hopefully we know better. And we'll share in his wonders with our children.