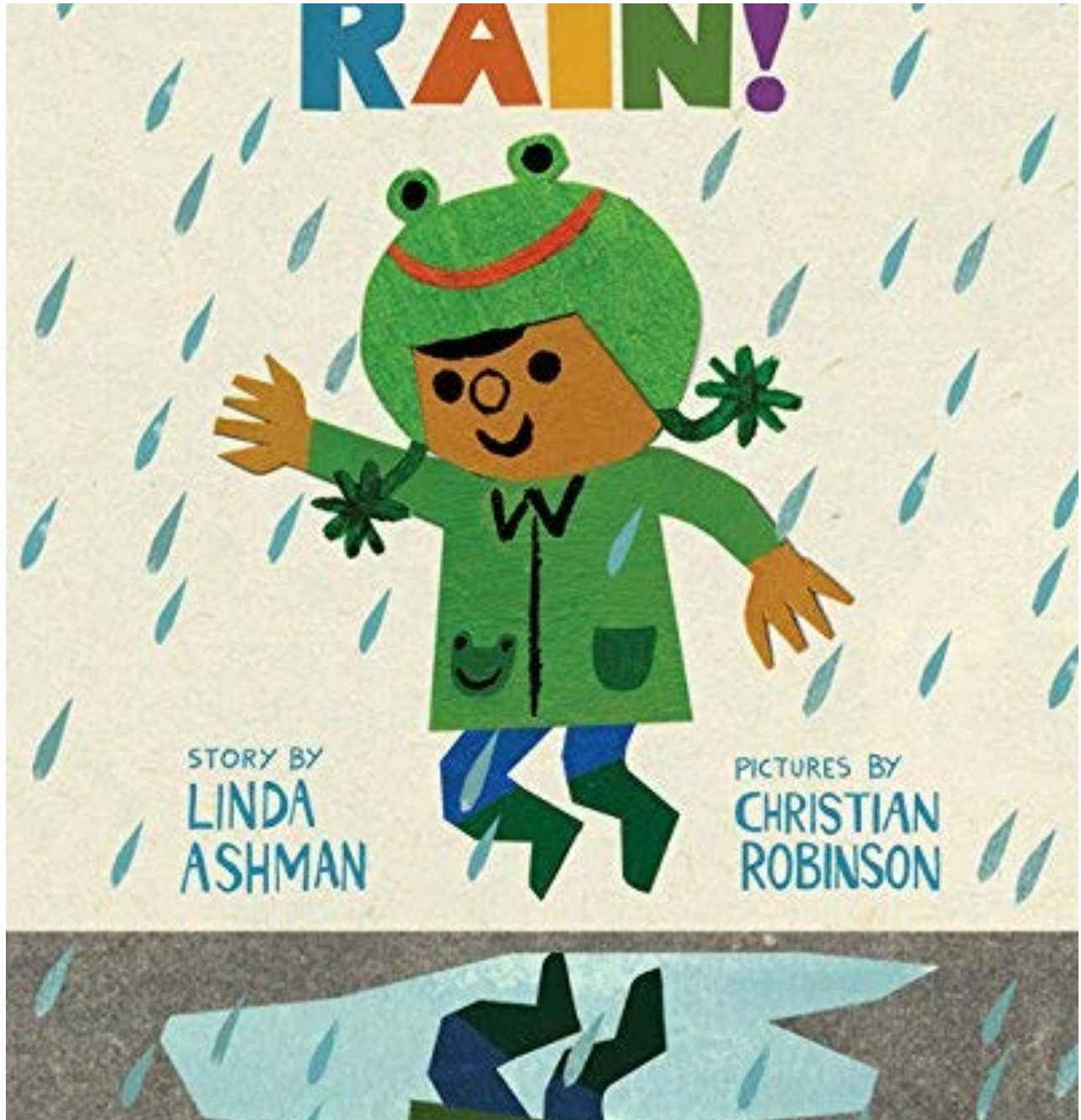


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# Urban Children's Books



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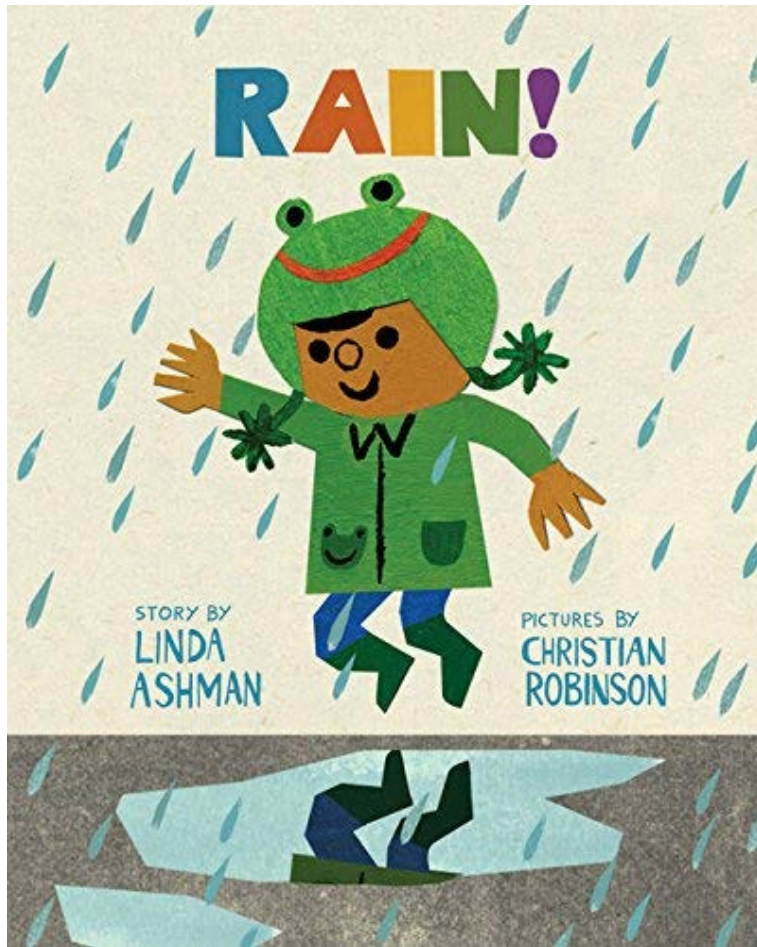
# Preface

Children's picture books have a significant but often overlooked history of presenting urban/city environments as dense areas of excitement, sites of learning, environments of uncertainty and places for play. Such examples of popular picture books taking place in cities include *Corduroy* by Don Freeman, *Eloise* by Kay Thompson, *Apt. 3* by Ezra Jack Keats among others. It has been in recent years that children's literature has included city life as a primary setting or theme as much as nature/greenspaces. Much of the ideology surrounding the dangers of city dwelling for children has begun to shift, resulting in unique representations of an urban environment through an implied child reader. The following selection of children and youth books highlight such settings as New York City and Toronto, include educational practices and themes such as urban relocation, aesthetic appreciation, friendship among others.

By Quentin Stuckey, 2020. Toronto.

With research from Emily Smith, and Helena Wright.

**Ashman, Linda. *Rain!* Illustrated by Christian Robinson, HMH Books, 2014.**

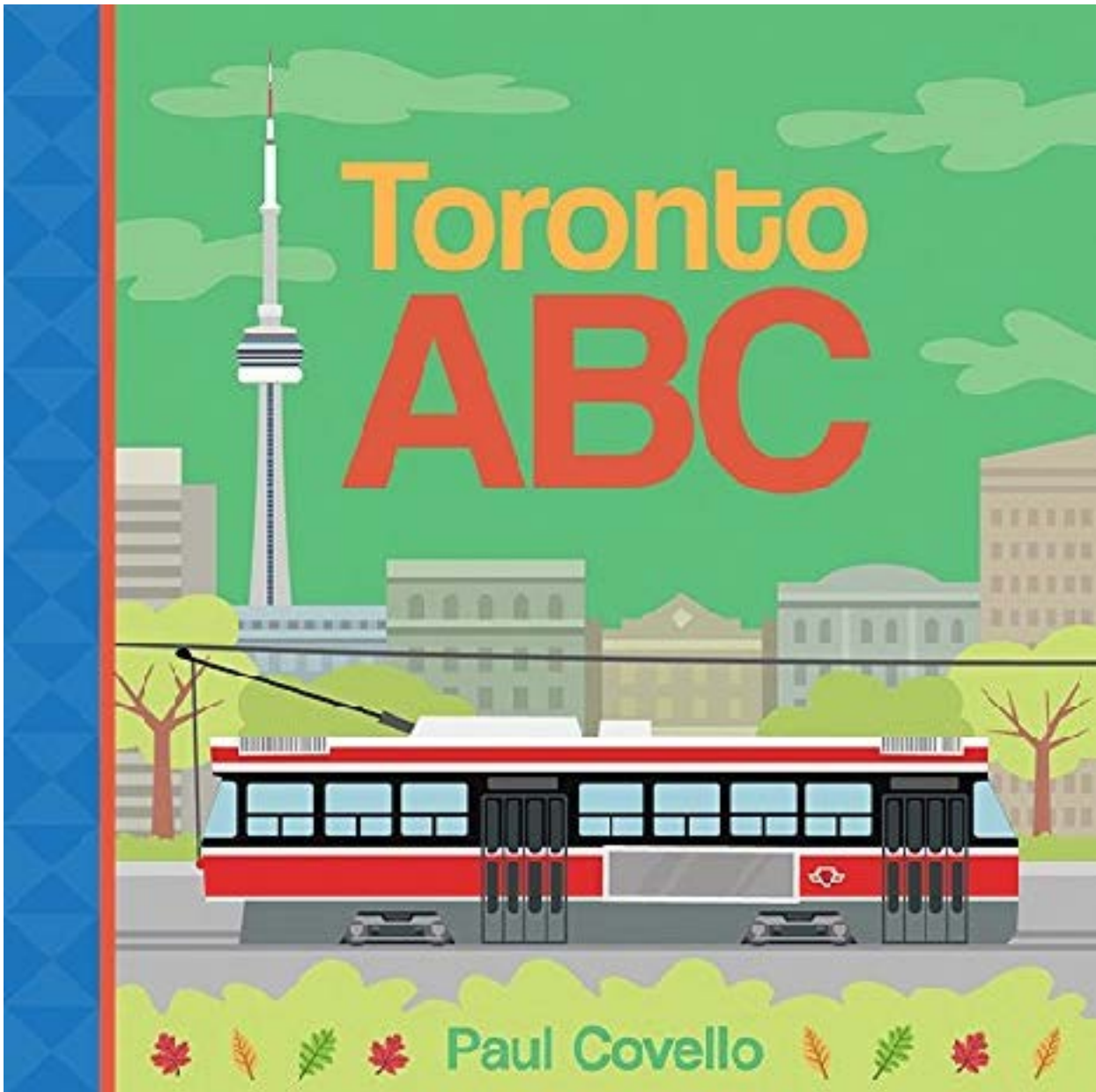


This picture book, written by Linda Ashman and illustrated by Christian Robinson, tells the story of two men going about their day in a bustling urban environment on a rainy day. The older gentleman laments the rain as it puts him in a foul mood. The young boy adores the rain as it puts him in a positive

mood. The two men wear different hats: a dark brown one for the older man and a green frog shaped hat for the young boy. The two cross paths at a city cafe, with the old man leaving behind his brown hat. The young boy chases him down to return the hat. The old man, surprised at the young boy's helpfulness and eagerness to try on his brown hat, asks if he can wear the boy's frog shaped hat. This dawning of the frog hat transforms the old man's attitude towards the rain, and the text ends with him ribbiting like a frog.

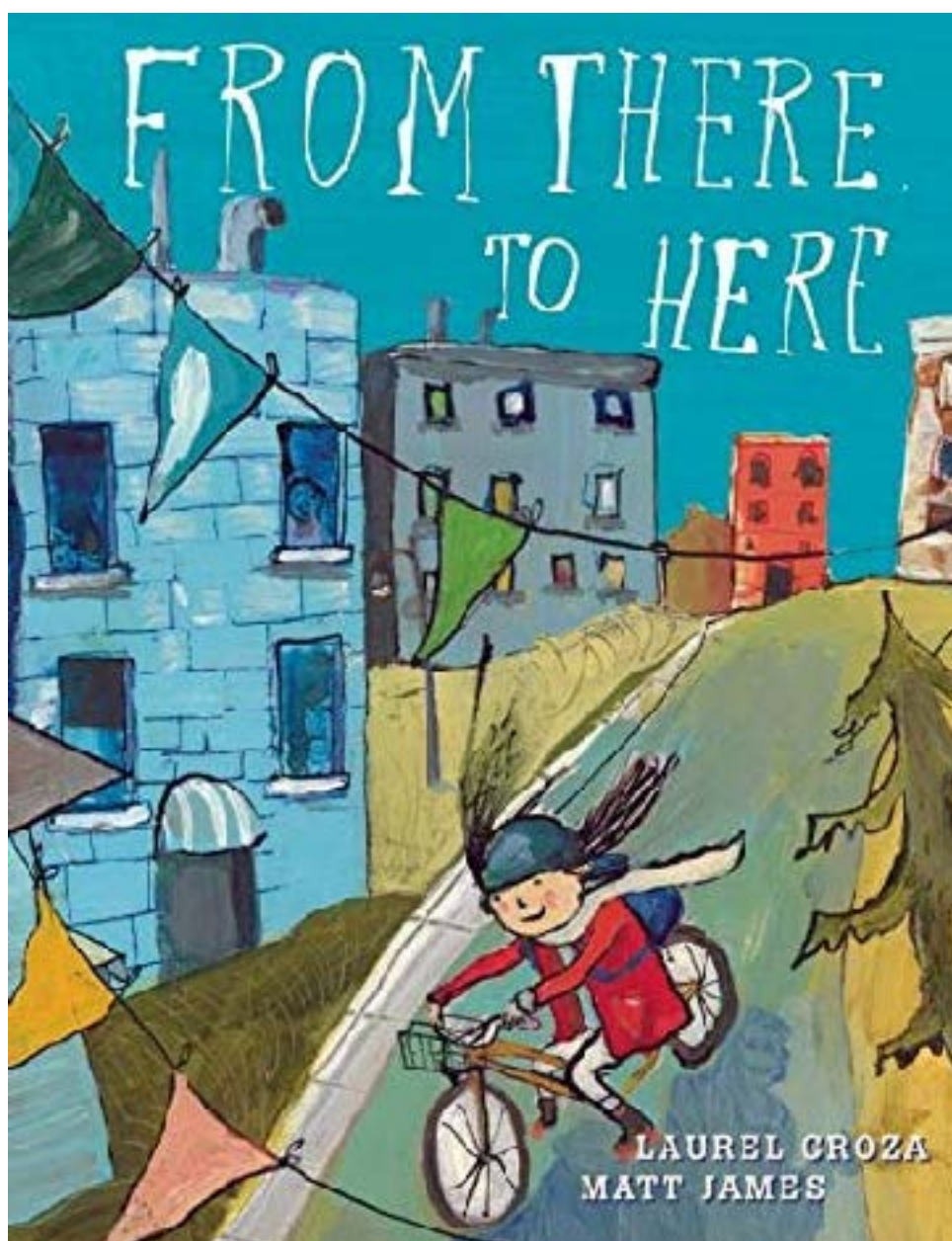


**Covello, Paul. *Toronto ABC*. Harper Collins, 2014.**



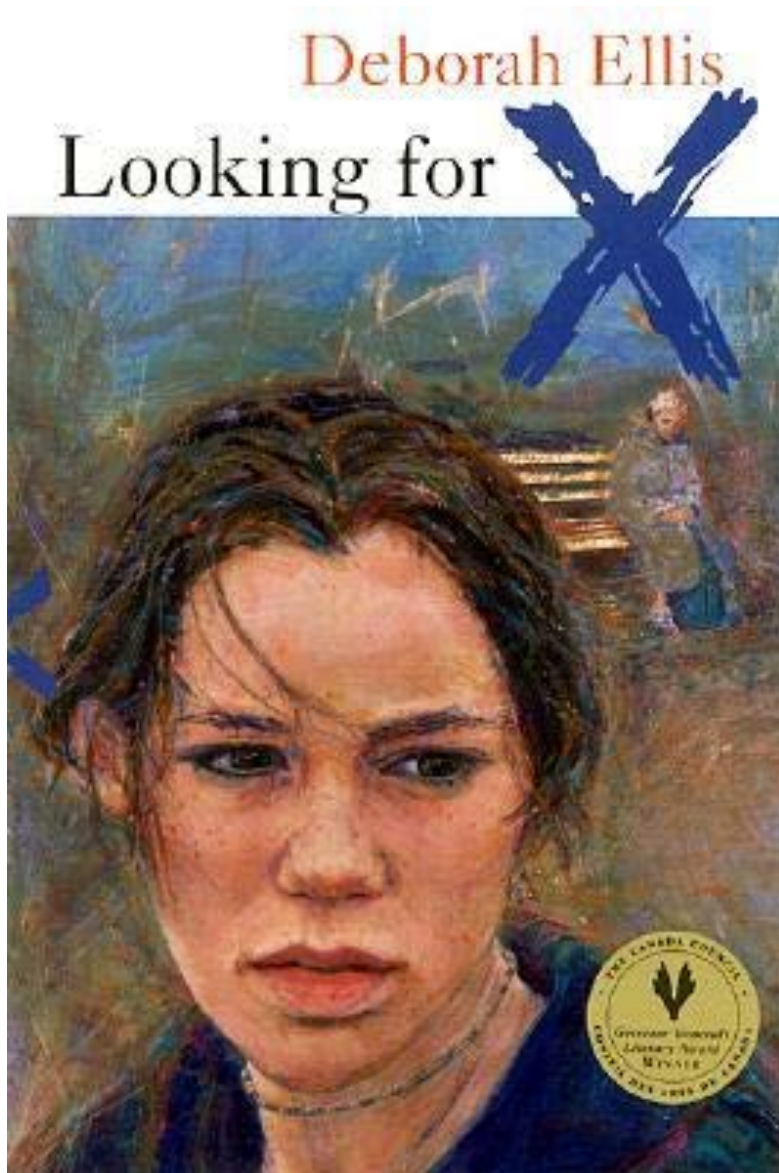
Paul Covello's *Toronto ABC* takes very young readers on a tour of Toronto's most notable attractions and neighbourhoods. The alphabet guides the exploration of places such as the AGO, Distillery District, Lake Ontario, Kensington Market and more.

**Croza, Laurel. *From There to Here*. Illustrated by Matt James, Groundwood Books Ltd, 2014.**



*From There to Here* follows a little girl whose family has to move across Canada. By train, she journeys from rural Saskatchewan to bustling Toronto. The little girl must adjust to all the changes she experiences, like her father working later hours, and seeing city lights instead of stars at night. For a while, the little girl misses everything about home until Anne, her eight-year-old neighbor, knocks on the door.

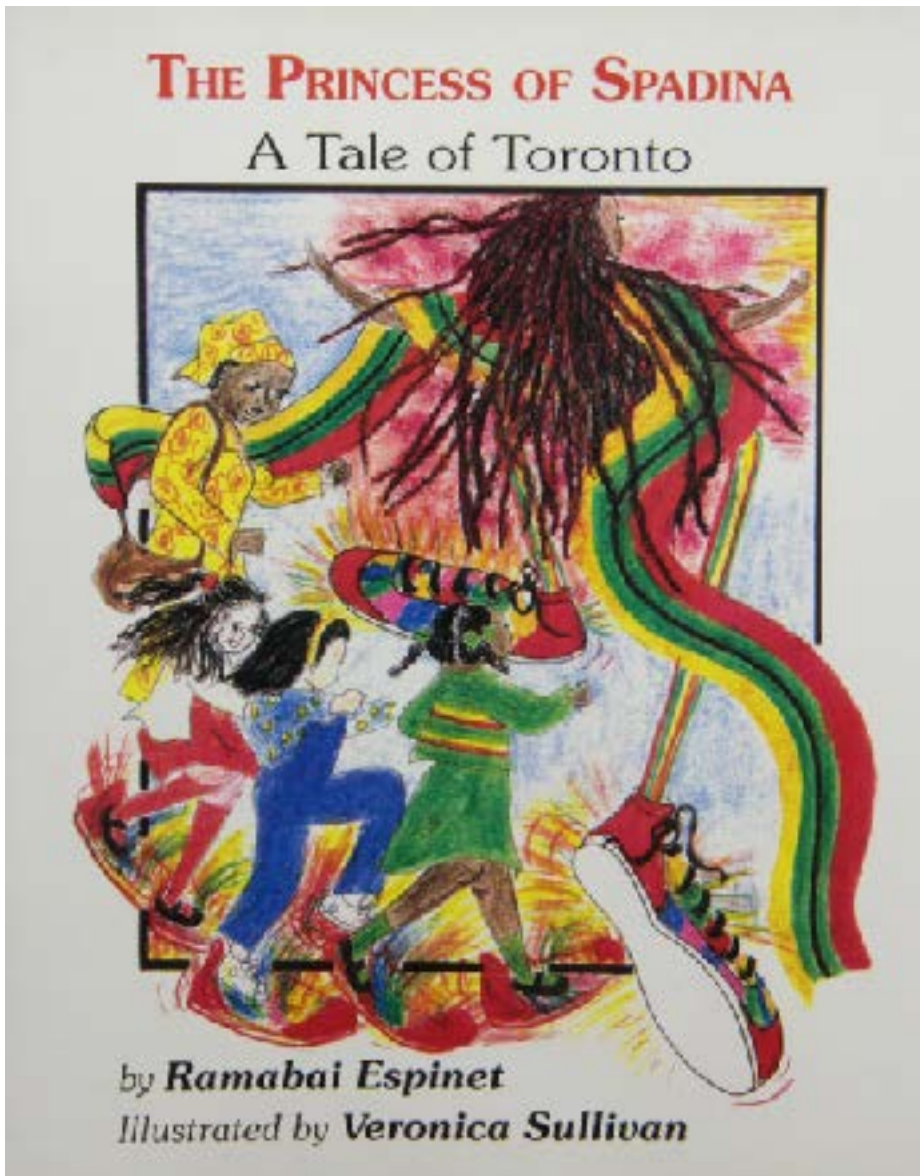
**Ellis, Deborah. *Looking for X*. House of Anansi Press, 1999.**



*Looking for X* is a novel written for 9-12 year olds that tells the story of a girl living in Toronto. Eleven-year-old Kyber lives with her mother and twin brothers (both of whom have autism) in Regent Park, one of the less affluent areas of Toronto. When she shows up at school one day being accused of breaking the classroom window, she embarks on an exciting journey through Toronto looking for her homeless friend X, her only alibi.



**Espinet, Ramabai, and Veronica Sullivan. *The Princess of Spadina*. Illustrated by Veronica Sullivan, Sister Vision Press, 1992.**



*The Princess of Spadina* follows three protagonists all named Claudia: Claudia A., Claudia C., and Claudia S. While they share a name, they are all unique in their ethnicity. While out in downtown Toronto, the girls come across The Princess of

Spadina, distinguishable by her dreadlocks and funky sneakers. The Princess takes the girls on a tour of Spadina and Kensington Market when they cross paths with a robber, they must work together to stop him.

**Fagan, Cary. *The Market Wedding*. Illustrated by Regolo Ricci, Groundwood Books Ltd, 2014.**



*The Market Wedding*

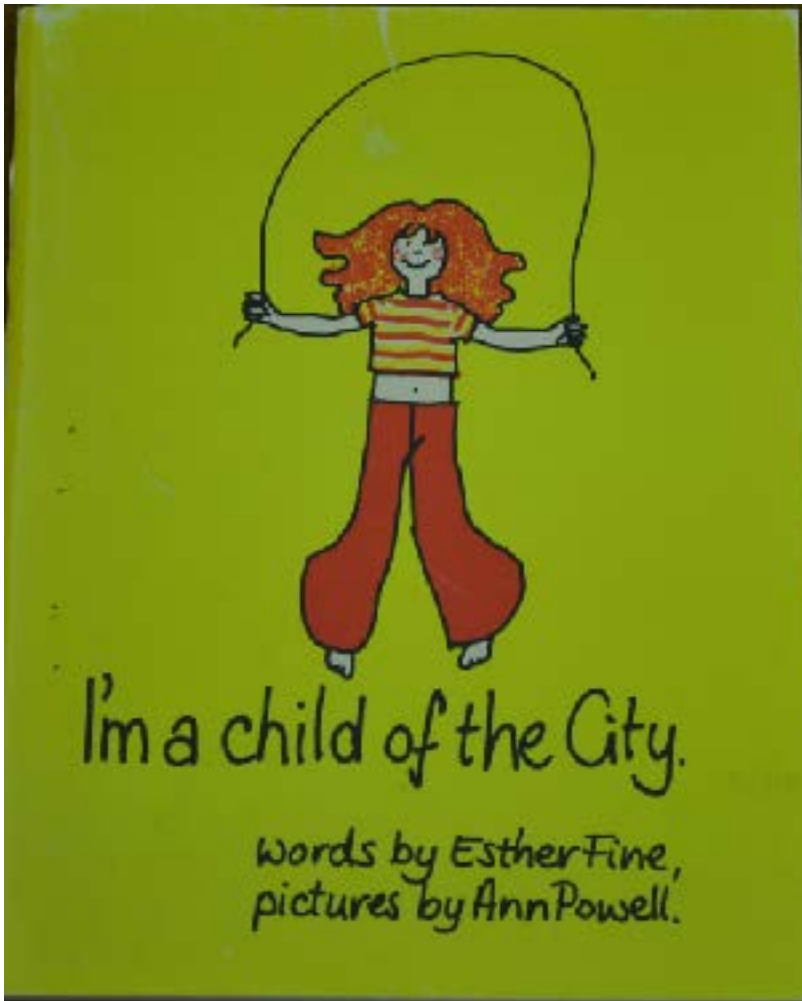
CARY FAGAN • ART BY REGOLO RICCI

*The Market Wedding* is adapted from Abraham Cahan's 1898 novella, *The Ghetto Wedding*. In Fagan's version, the story follows a Jewish couple, Morris and Minnie, living in Toronto in the 1920s. The protagonists met in Kensington Market, where Morris sells fish and Minnie sells

hats across the street. In love and yearning to be married, Morris is worried that he cannot provide the expensive wedding or lifestyle he believes Minnie deserves. He decides to spend his whole life savings on the wedding to ensure it will be fancy, and their guests will have to bring the nicest gifts. However, problems arise when none of their guests show up.



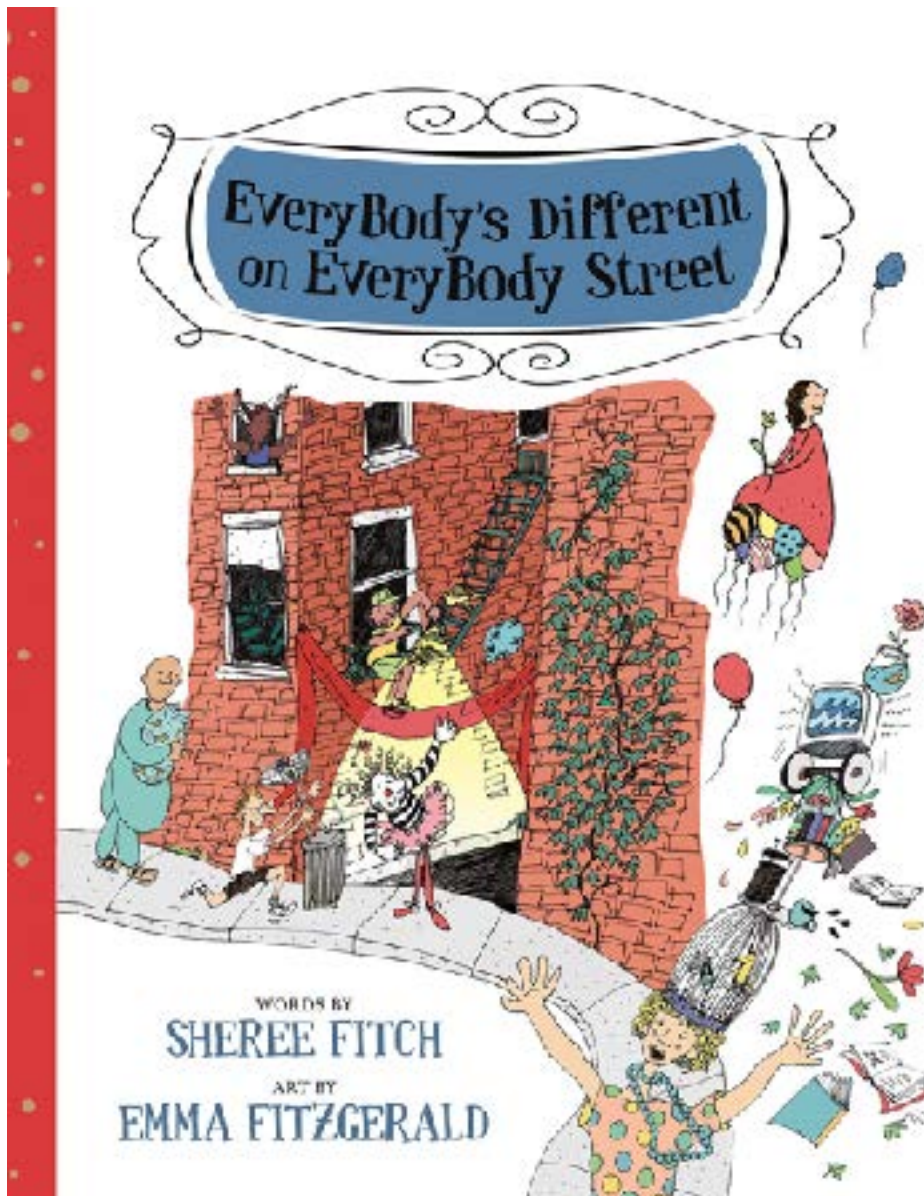
## Fine, Esther Sokolov. *I'm A Child of the City*. Kids Can Press, 1973.



A rare children's text from the Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books, writer/educator Esther Sokolov Fine captures the subtle pleasures of city life from the perspective of a young girl. Fine, as an educator/researcher in the downtown core of Toronto and currently serving as an associate professor at York

University, saw a great deal of both the major and lesser known parts of the Canadian city. Her simple ink illustrations portray the delight in waiting for the streetcar, visiting the Royal Ontario Museum, yelling to friends on a busy street and even sitting on the curb, as if distilling leisurely joy/appreciation from city activities that we often regard as too hectic or mundane. The young girl couldn't imagine being anything other than "a child of the city."

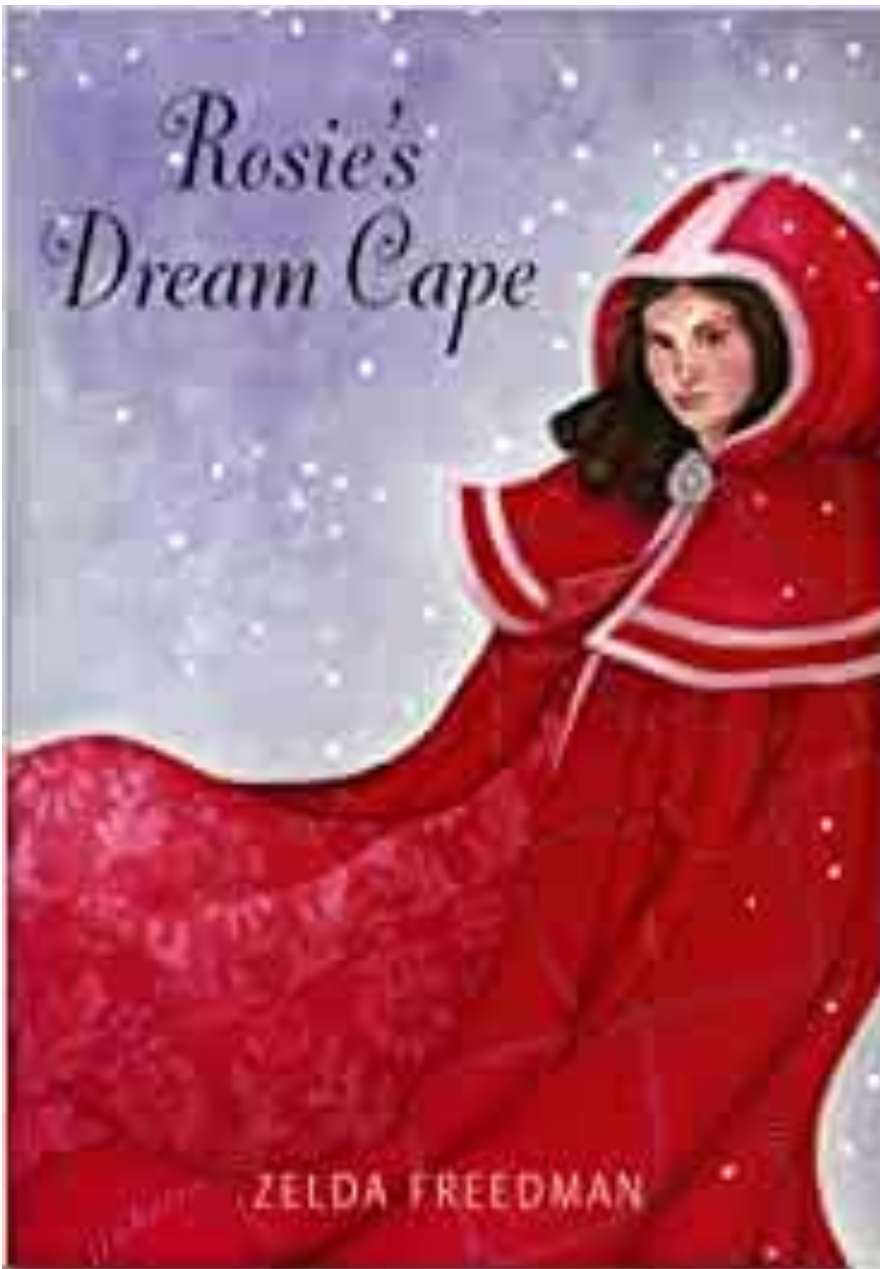
**Fitch, Sheree. *Everybody's Different on Everybody Street*. Illustrated by Emma Fitzgerald, Nimbus Publishing, 2018.**



Canadian writer Sheree Fitch and illustrator Emma Fitzgerald work in stunning collaboration on this children's picture book. Fitch's rhyming scheme and Fitzgerald's playful illustrations portray diversity in skin colour, clothing, height, weight, gender, emotion and more all on one

street, thereby finding mutual peace/consensus in our differences. Echoing Canadian values of multiculturalism and the importance of acceptance, the text stands as an almost mini lesson for young readers and for those living in a multicultural urban space about the importance of diversity and cooperation.

**Freedman, Zelda. *Rosie's Dream Cape*. Ronsdale Press, 2005.**

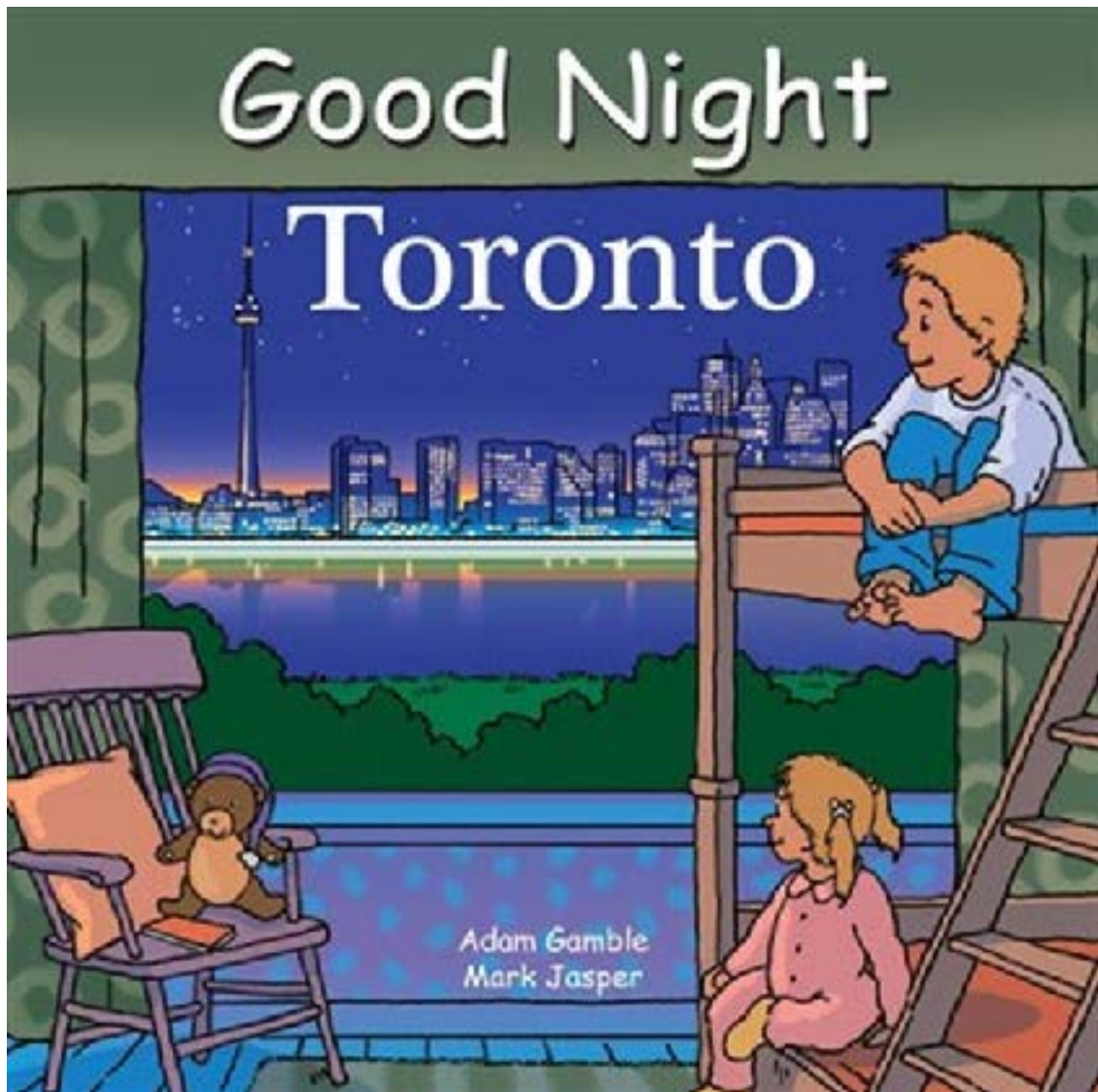


*Rosie's Dream Cape*, based on a true story, follows eleven-year-old Rosie who must flee her home in Russia with her grandmother in the 1920s. Arriving in their new home in Toronto, Rosie helps her family by getting a job at Yitzy's factory sewing capes for Eatons. Rosie dreams of one day wearing her own cape to the

Royal Alexandra Theatre and starts to steal the fabric scraps at the end of each day. After being caught, Rosie is made to work later hours and has her pay withheld in hopes of making her dream come true.

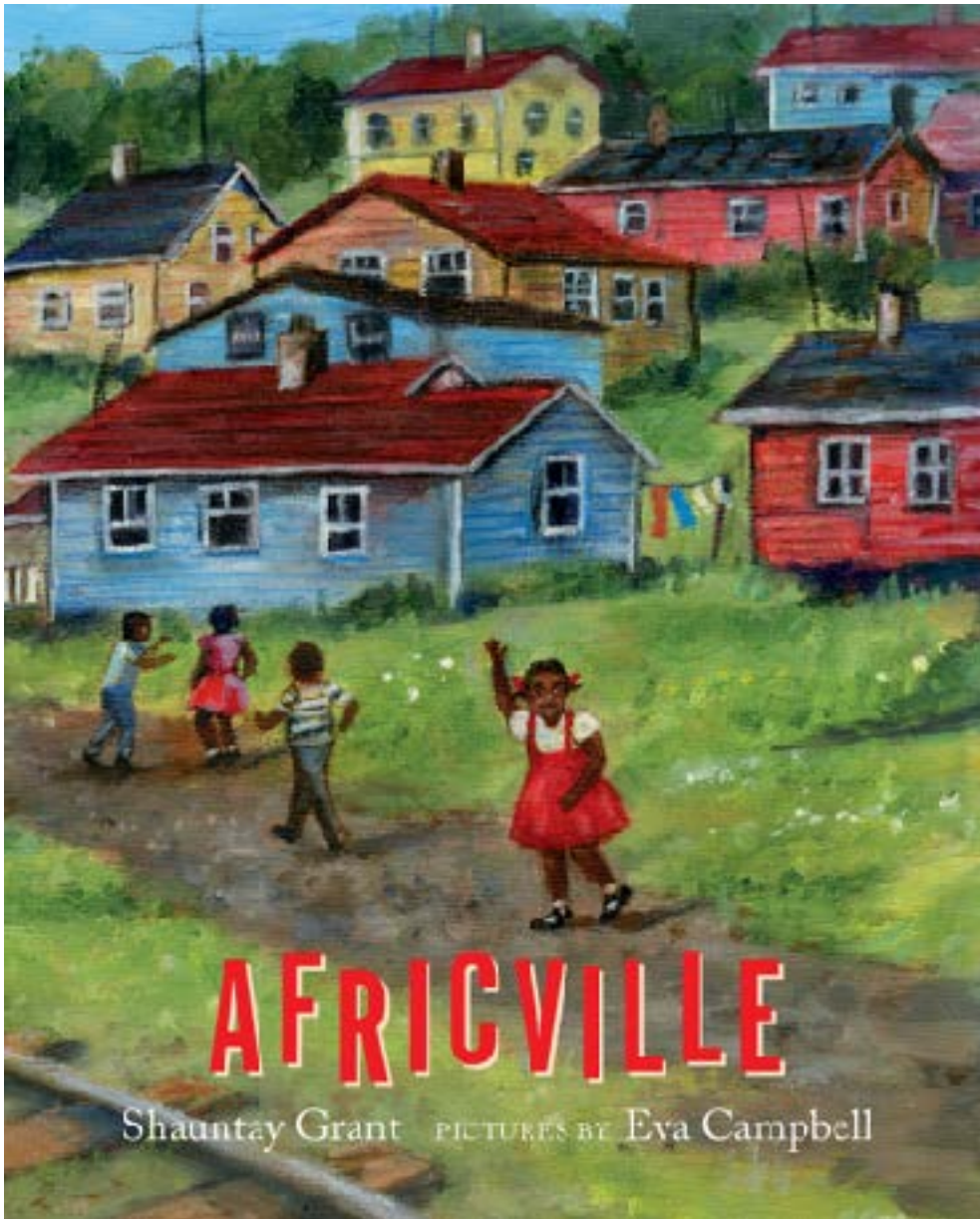


**Gamble, Adam, and Mark Jasper. *Good Night Toronto*. Illustrated by Cooper Kelly, Good Night Books, 2007.**



*Goodnight Toronto* is a part of Gamble and Jasper's Good Night series, which explores North American cultural and natural highlights taking children across the continent to Montreal, Denver, Nashville, Toronto and many more cities. *Good Night Toronto* spotlights the city's attractions through illustration and rhythmic language.

**Grant, Shauntay. *Africville*. Illustrated by Eva Campbell, CNIB, 2019.**

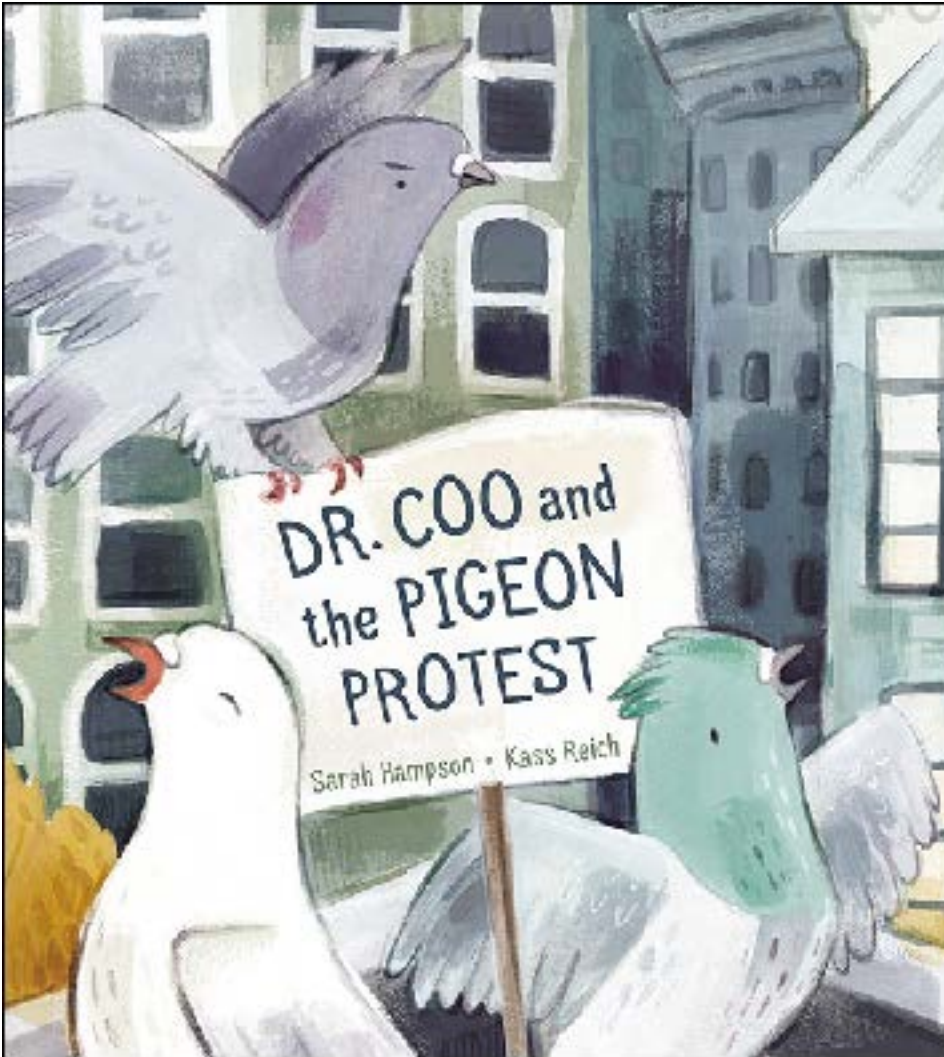


This story is about a vibrant community in Halifax N.S, where its residents were a large black community for close to 150 years. It, however, struggled as a city because it was never funded or got the necessary

city resources, and so it was demolished in the 1960s. This children's picture book is told through the perspective of a young girl visiting africville for a festival, and exploring the geography. Both the illustrator and writer are black Canadian women writing about a girl's connection to the city environment.



**Hampson, Sarah. *Dr. Coo and the Pigeon Protest*.  
Illustrated by Kass Reich, Kids Can Press, 2018.**

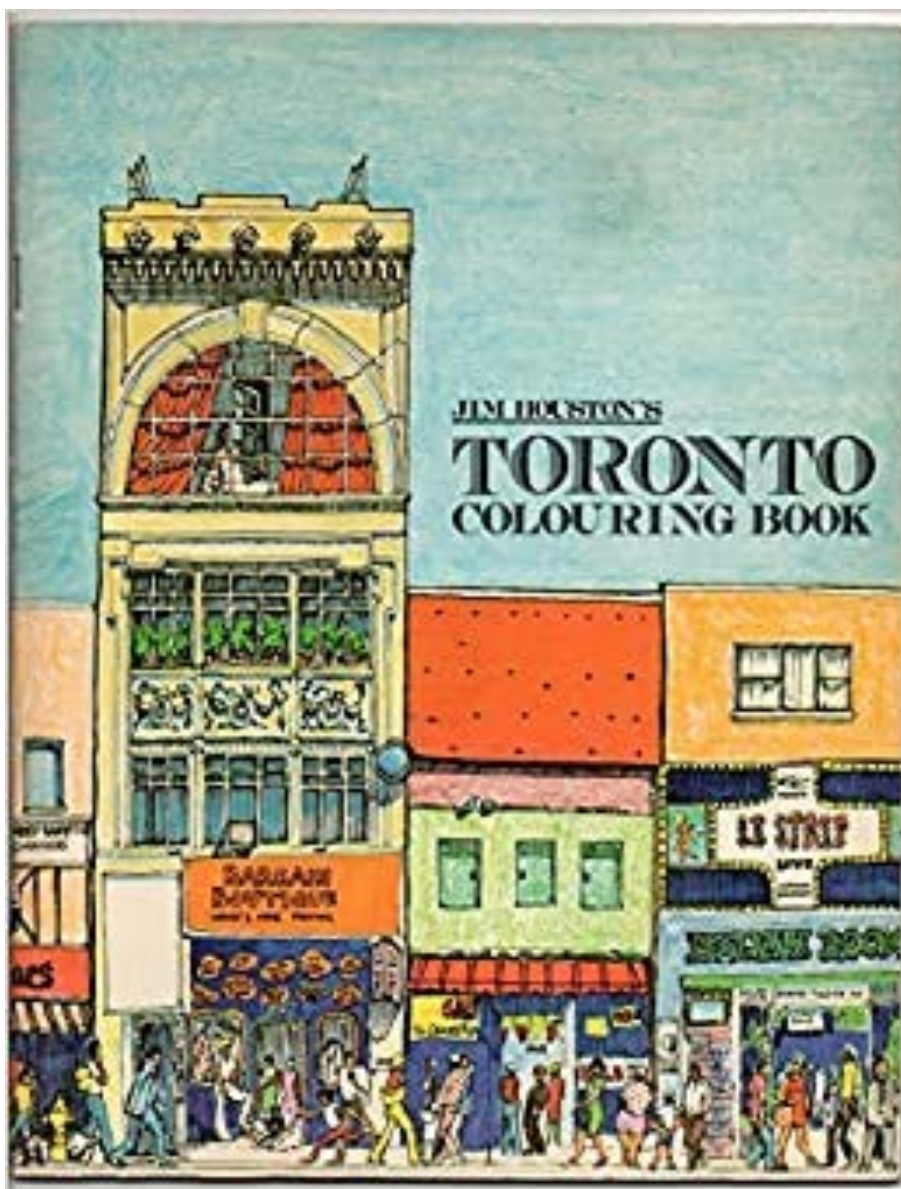


Canadian author Sarah Hampson and illustrator Kass Reich offer this clever satire on the presence and attitudes towards pigeons in major cities. The text explores the “coup” initiated by an intellectual

pigeon named Dr. Coo in which he encourages his fellow pigeons to protest against the city of New York in response to ill treatment. The text offers a glimpse into the history of the species, from their roles as messengers in Ancient Greece to their present day city dwelling in which any urban area like New York or Toronto would feel incomplete without their presence.

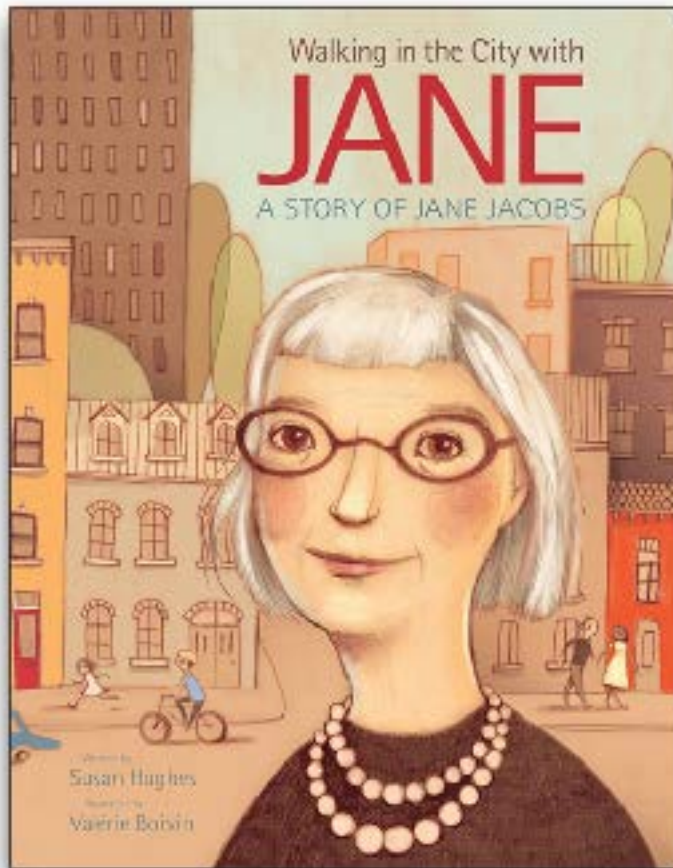


**Houston, Jim. *Toronto Colouring Book*. Green Tree Publishing, 1974.**



A classic example of Toronto tourism, this colouring book aimed primarily at children features the most notorious parts of the city including major historical buildings, intersections of Yonge and Dundas, Church Street, Chinatown etc. This text offers a glimpse into the geographical layout of the Canadian city circa the early 1970's as well as an indication of how the urban area was marketed/geared towards children prior to the twenty first century.

**Hughes, Susan. *Walking in The City with Jane: A Story of Jane Jacobs*. Illustrated by Valérie Boivin, Kids Can Press, 2018.**

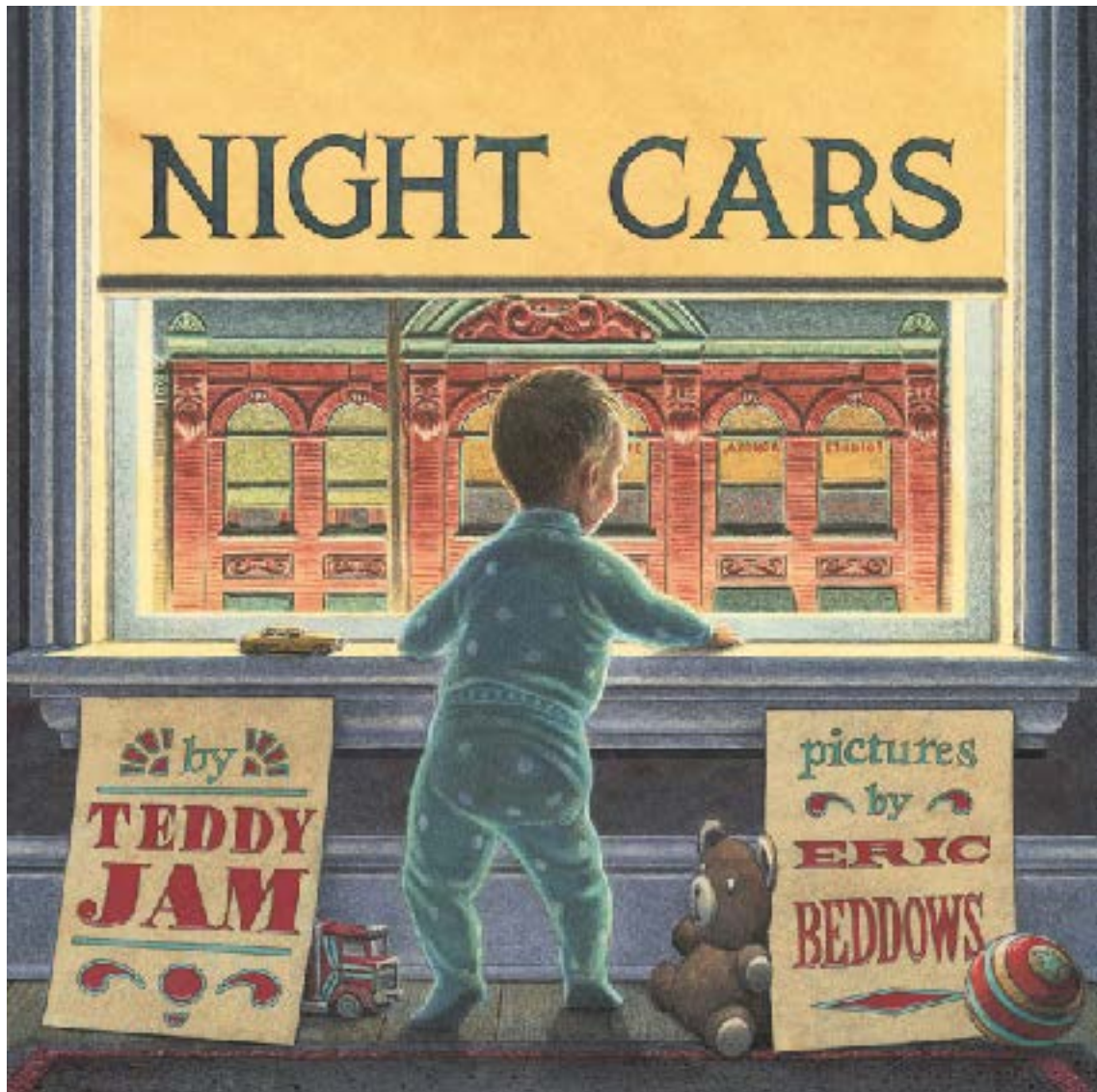


Jane Jacobs has come to be known as one of the most notable urban activists/writers in the twentieth century. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs famously spoke out against urban reconstruction and brought awareness to the impact of reconstruction on the lives of people living in these areas. Canadian writer Susan Hughes and

illustrator Valérie Boivin re-establish Jacobs' primary concerns/goals through a fictional story of her time spent in New York City and Toronto. The picture book may be a fictionalized account but it also contains factual information regarding Jacobs' urban activism as well as offering smooth, rich illustrations of the major parts of New York and Toronto.



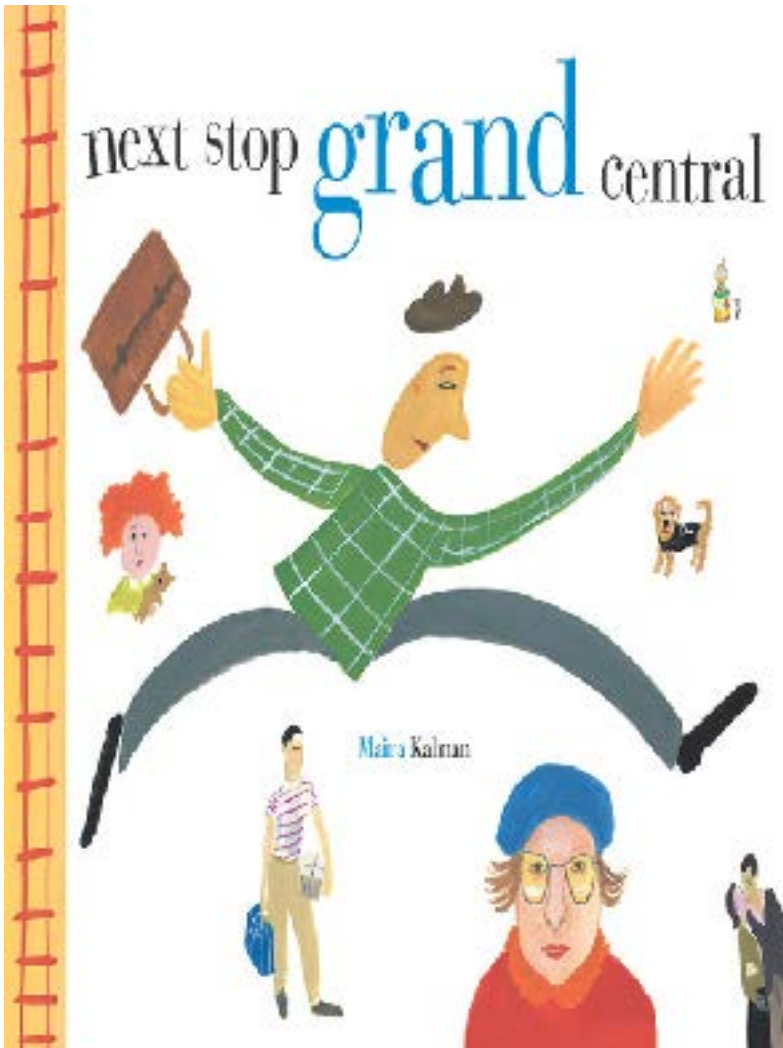
**Jam, Teddy. *Night Cars*. Illustrated by Eric Beddows, Groundwood Books Ltd, 1988.**



Told in simple rhymes, *Night Cars* follows a restless baby at night. Outside the baby's window are cars, bright street lights, dogs and people keeping the baby up. His father explains to the baby what passes by their window all throughout the night until the morning garbage trucks appear.



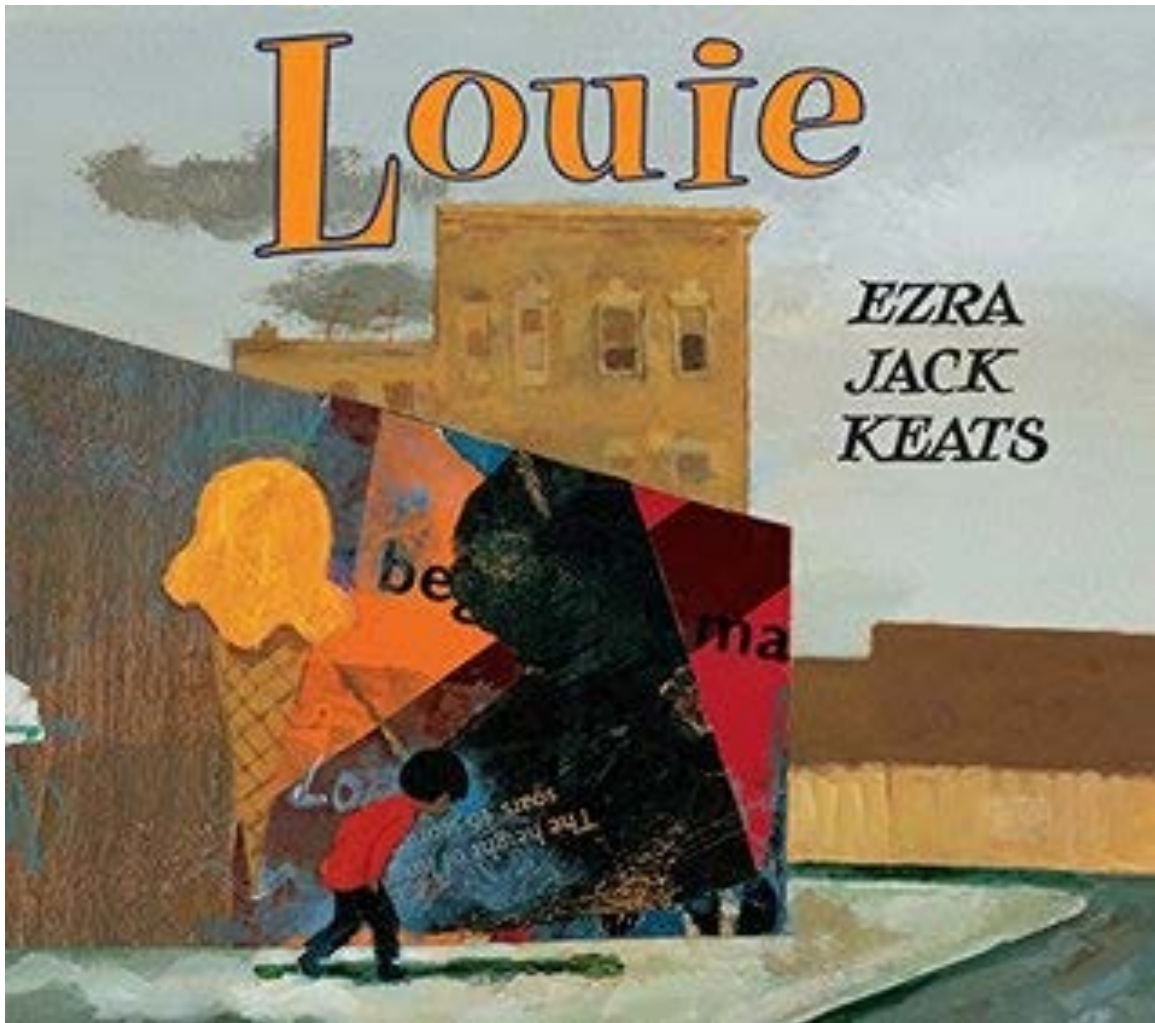
**Kalman, Maria. *Next Stop Grand Central*. Penguin Young Readers Group, 2013.**



This picture book, written and illustrated by Maria Kalman, is a celebration of the historic Grand Central Station in New York City. The various departments/ events in the station are illustrated including the lost and found, customer complaints, people eating at the station, train scheduling and more. The text opens with an idyllic,

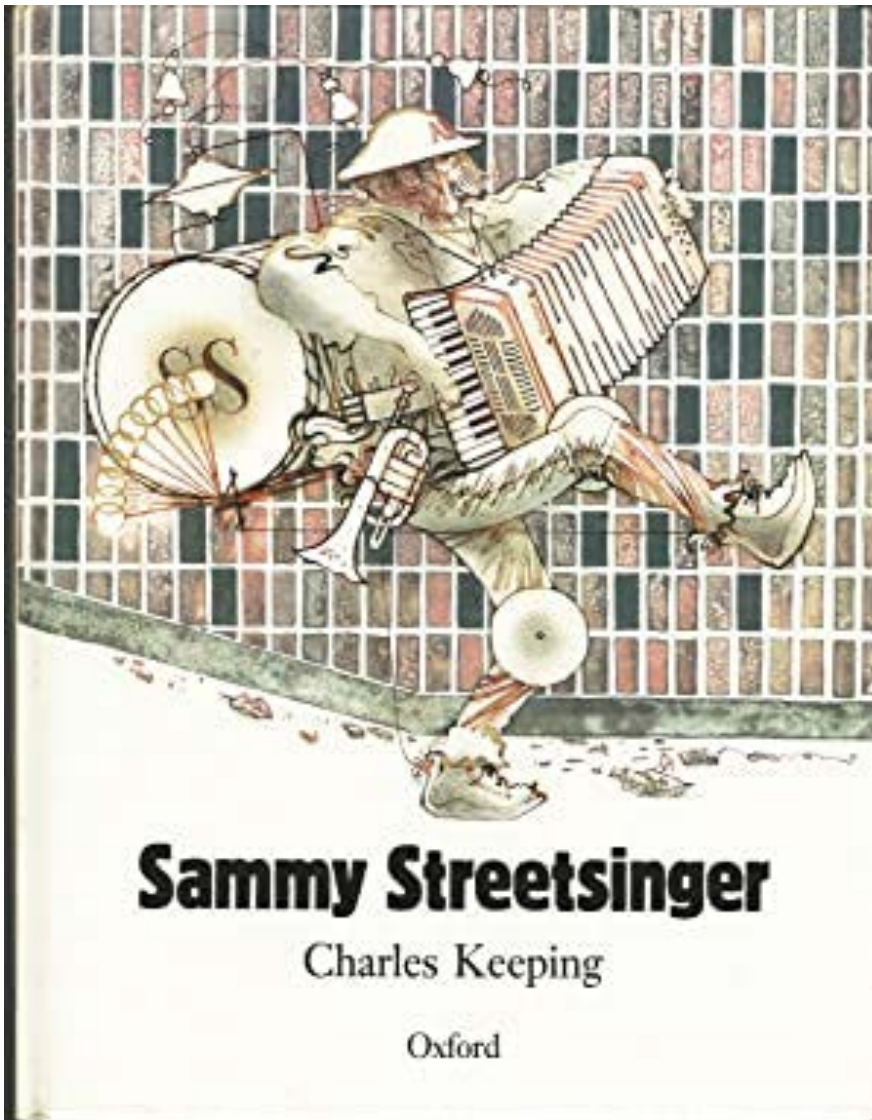
suburban neighbourhood in which the narrator states that one may do “nothing” in such an environment, in comparison to Grand Central where everyone is busy doing something. Kalman’s illustrations look as if they could’ve been taken from *The New Yorker*. The style is crude but engaging, with people of all different shapes and sizes bustling around the station and having their own conversations outside of the omniscient narration.

**Keats, Ezra Jack. *Louie*. Puffin Books, 1975.**



A lesser known work from the author who is credited for bringing multicultural values to the genre of children's picture books, Ezra Jack Keats' *Louie* tells the story of a mute boy living in an urban city who speaks for the first time after bonding with a puppet character named Gussie. Keats' illustrations reflect the raw moodiness of the city streets, the bright cheeriness of the puppet show even appearing in a moody fashion with the use of flat, earthy colours. Both the text's narrative and artistic style reflect the duality between the ideology of childhood innocence and the hustling, grimy state of the city portrayed.

**Keeping, Charles. *Sammy Streetsinger*. Oxford University Press, 1984.**



British writer/  
illustrator

Charles Keeping offers an off-beat portrayal of city life in *Sammy Streetsinger*.

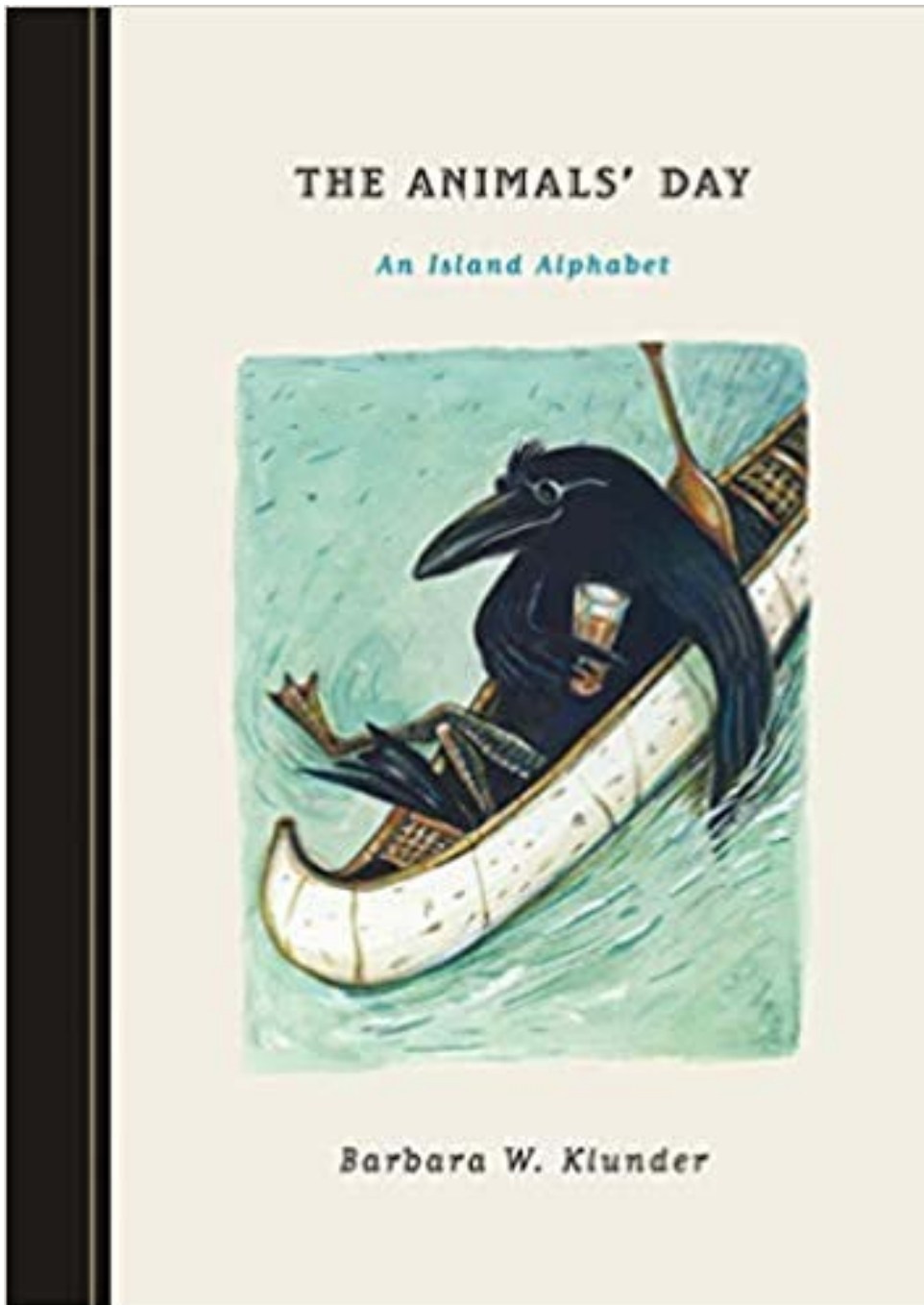
The picture book concerns the life of animated, boisterous streetsinger Sammy, whose talent for singing and playing multiple instruments leads him to a life of fame, a life

which does not

satisfy him in the same fashion as playing modestly on the city streets. Sammy's rise from obscurity to glamour is demonstrated through Keeping's psychedelic, pop art style illustrations, which present extreme variation in artistic style not commonly seen in children's picture books.

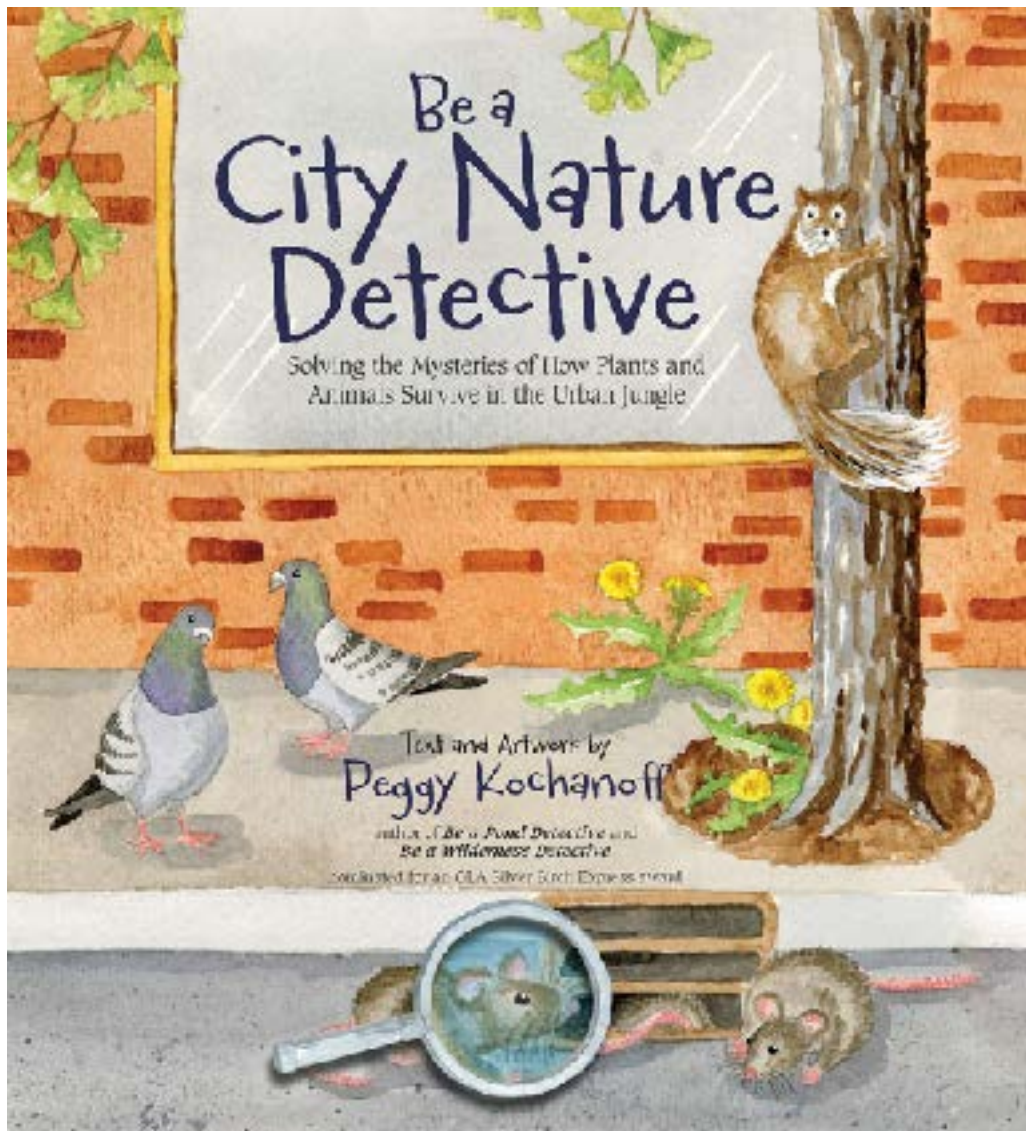


**Klunder, Barbara. *The Animals' Day*. Groundwood Books Ltd, 2009.**



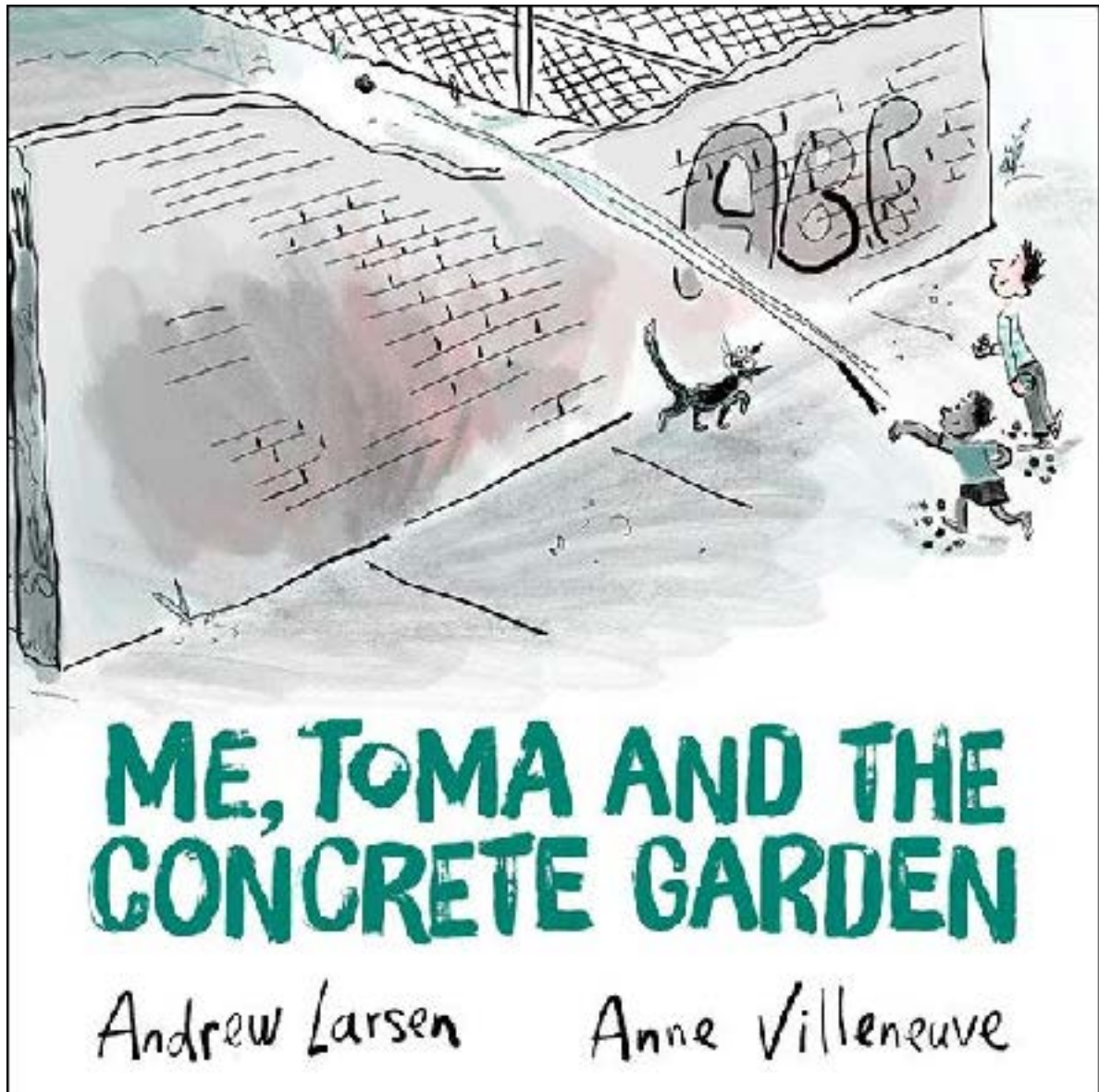
This alphabet book follows the premise of an annual party where, for one day only, animals have fun acting like humans. The illustrations in the book personify Toronto wildlife, including rats playing the violin, and a cardinal canoeing.

**Kochanoff, Peggy. *Be A City Nature Detective: Solving the Mysteries of How Plants and Animals Survive in the Urban Jungle*. Nimbus Publishing, 2018.**



Writer Peggy Kochanoff presents the most contemporary piece of children's educational literature dealing with urban life. The text offers information pertaining to animal and plant life found in urban environments from dandelions on the sidewalk to pigeons to cockroaches and bed bugs. Kochanoff balances playful, colourful illustrations with applicable, factual information making the text both informative and engaging.

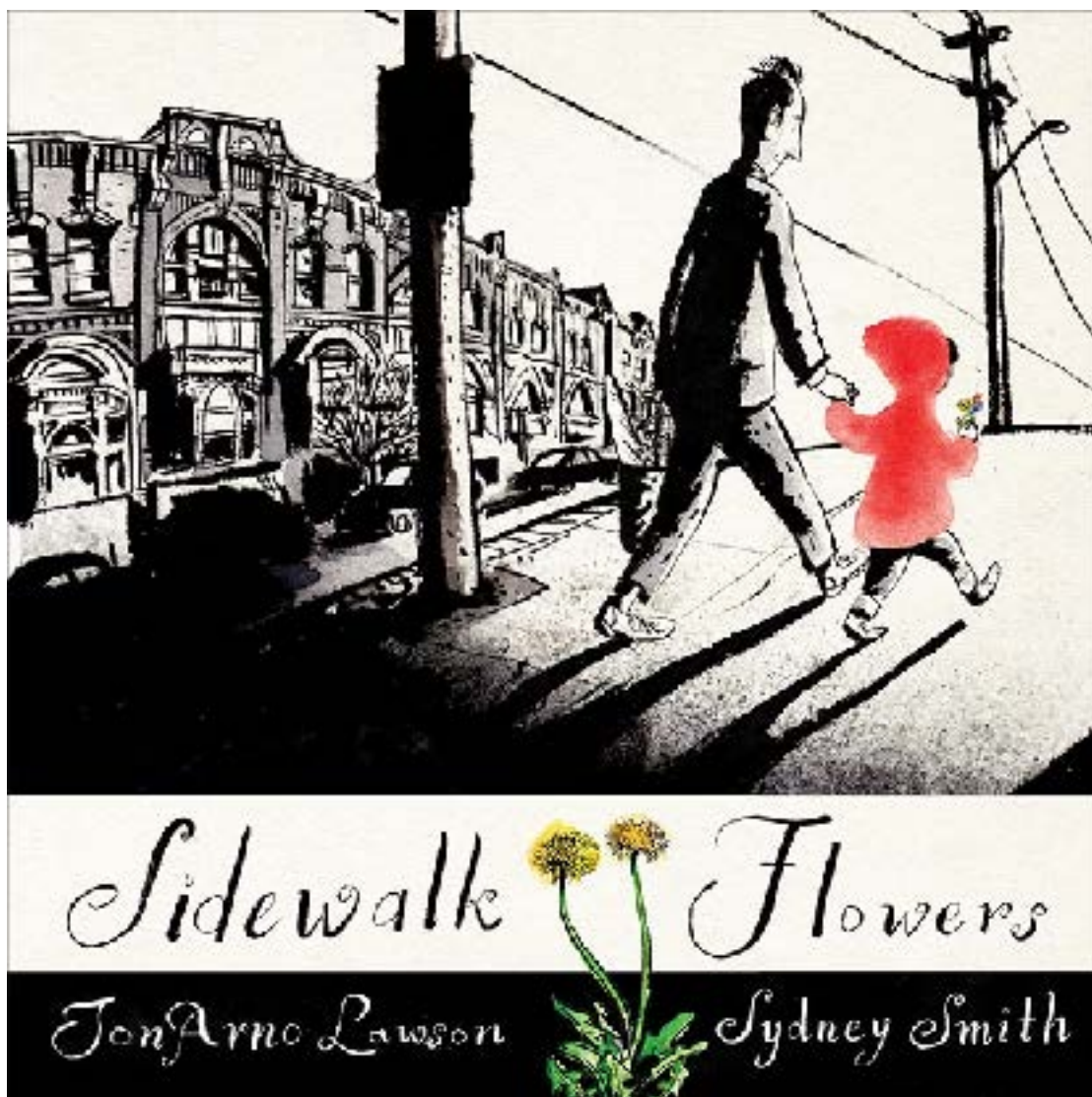
**Larsen, Andrew. *Me, Toma and the Concrete Garden.* Illustrated by Anne Villeneuve, Kids Can Press, 2019.**



From Canadian writer Andrew Larsen and illustrator Anne Villeneuve, this picture book explores the inner-city friendship of Vincent and Toma who spend their days throwing dirt balls into an empty lot, unbeknownst to them cultivating plant life in their neighbourhood. The city landscape is presented in simplistic, smooth colours with blues, greens and greys, pairing well with the sentimental plot concerning friendship.

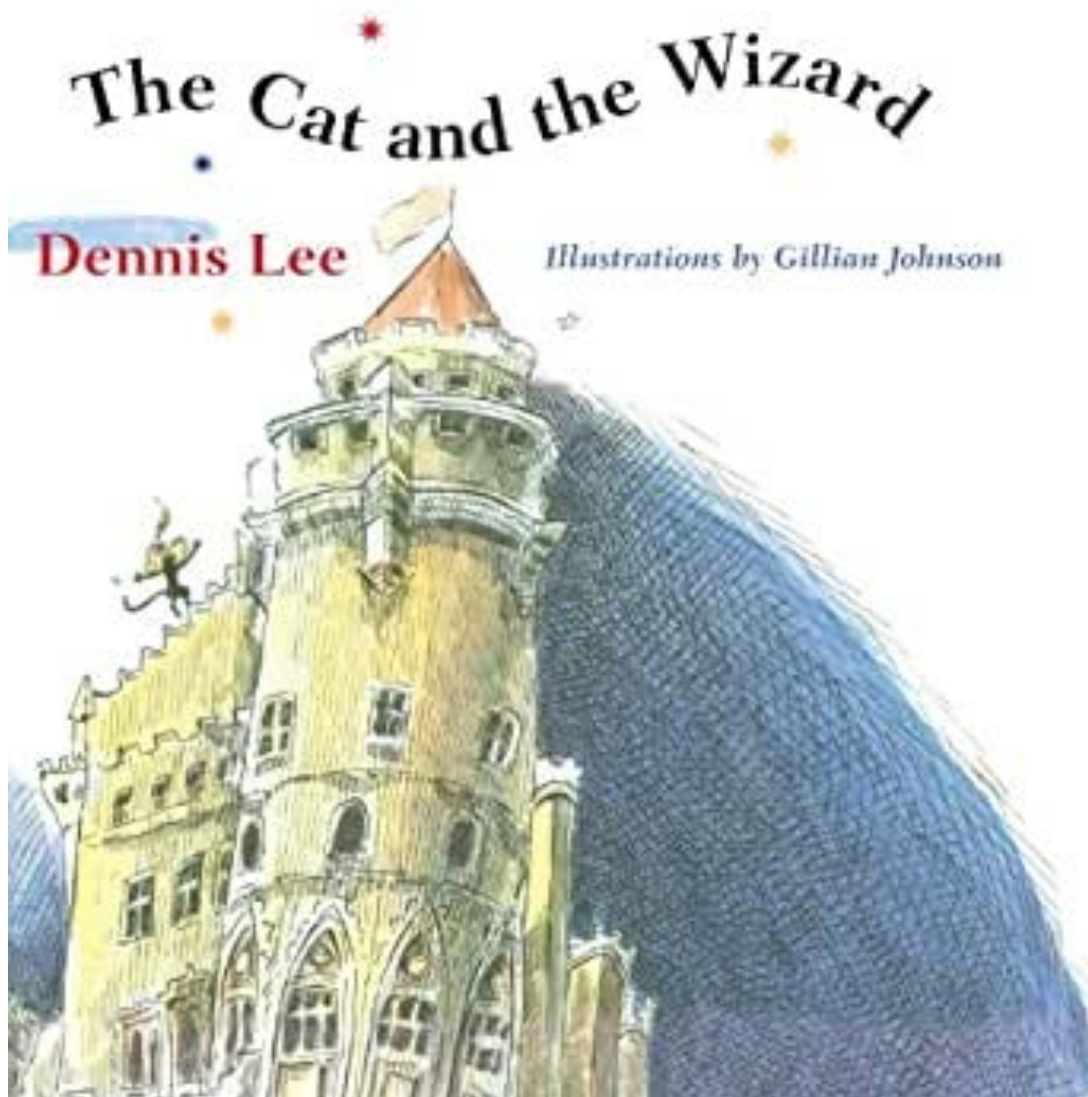


**Lawson, JonArno. *Sidewalk Flowers*. Illustrated by Sydney Smith, Groundwood Books, 2015.**



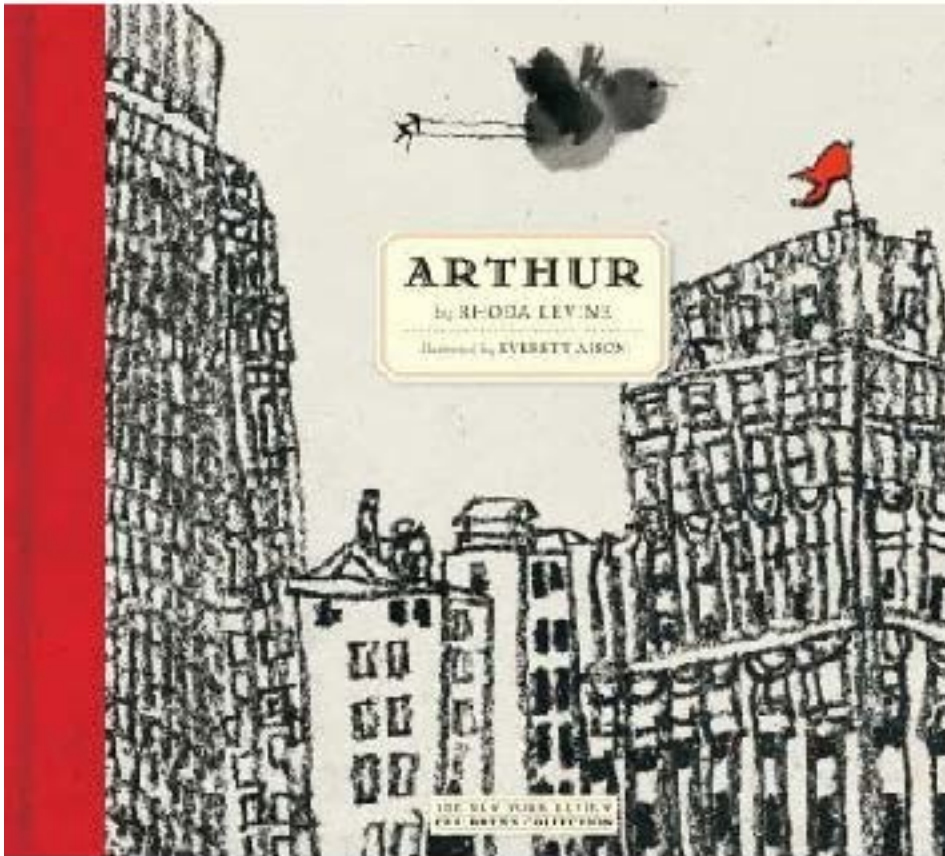
This award winning picture book from author JonArno Lawson and Nova Scotia born illustrator Sydney Smith undoubtedly depicts the beauty of city life from the eyes of a child. Told entirely through illustration, a young girl accompanies her father on a walk home in the city picking flowers carefully off of the sidewalk as she passes by the buildings and inhabitants of various neighbourhoods.

**Lee, Dennis. *The Cat and the Wizard*. Illustrated by Gillian Johnson, Harper Collins, 2001.**



This story follows two lonely characters, a cat and a wizard. After a chance encounter in a laundromat, the homeless wizard and black cat share a wonderful evening in Casa Loma. They eat a delicious tuna dinner and the wizard puts on a magic show.

**Levine, Rhoda. *Arthur*. Illustrated by Everett Aison, New York Review Books, 1962.**

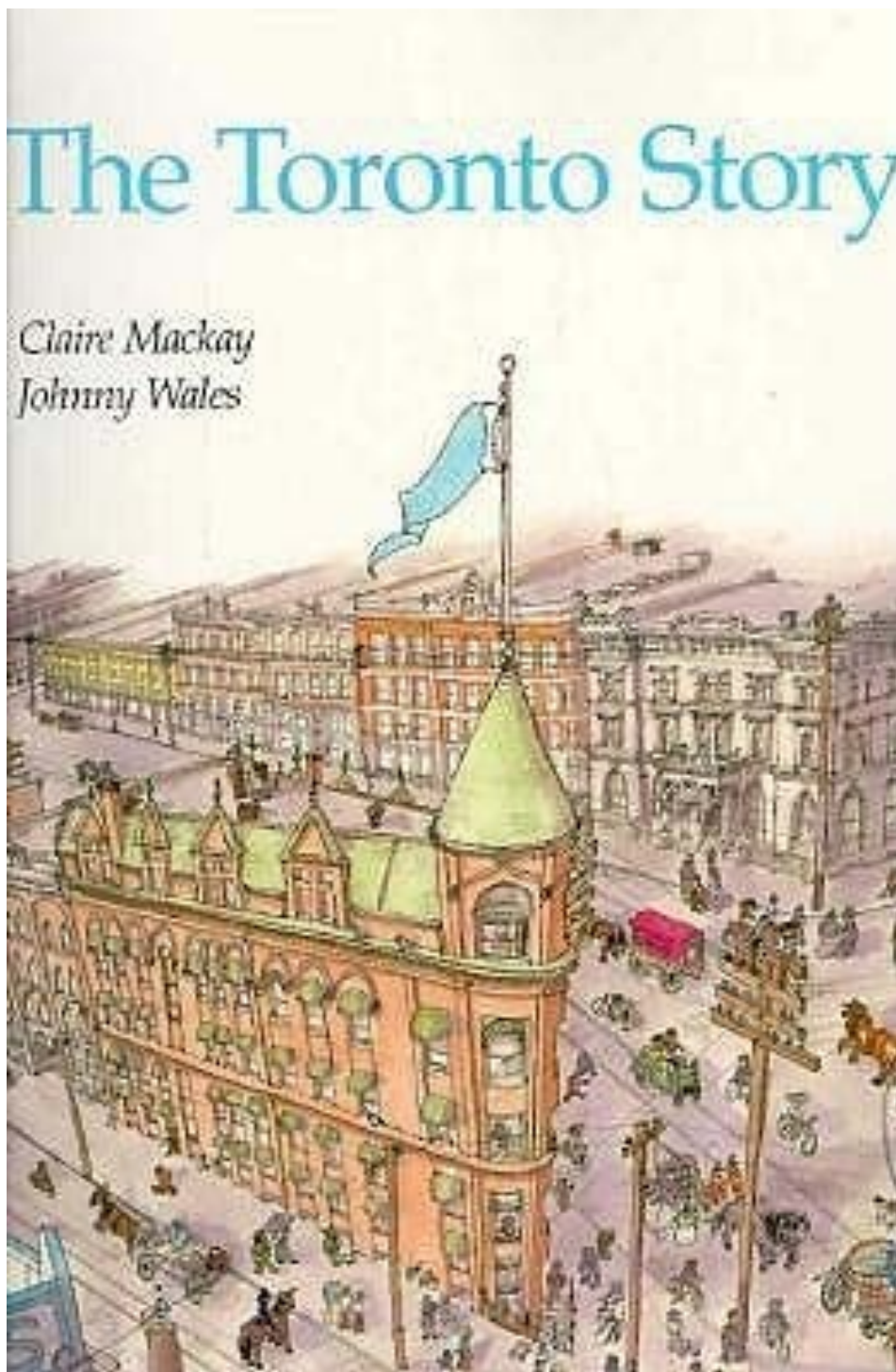


In this vintage picture book, written by Rhoda Levine and illustrated by Everett Aison, a bird named Arthur is so immersed in the scenes of New York City that his fellow bird companions leave him

behind as they fly south for the incoming winter. Arthur must fend for himself: taking shelter on a statue, being fed bread crumbs in the park and observing the changes in season based on the attire of New York city dwellers. Arthur succeeds in taking care of himself with the other birds returning and being shocked by his preservation. Aison's illustrations are minimalist and crudely drawn, leaving plenty of white space which literally gives Arthur more space to roam around the page.



**Mackay, Claire. *The Toronto Story*. Illustrated by Johnny Wales, Annick Press, 1991.**



The Toronto Story teaches children about the history of Toronto through engaging and humorous narrative and vibrant illustrations. Claire Mackay highlights some of Toronto's most influential people, places, and events.

**MacLeod, Elizabeth. Scholastic Canada Biography: *Meet Elsie MacGill*. Illustrated by Mike Deas, Scholastic Canada, 2019.**



In this biography for kids, young Canadians are introduced to the fascinating and inspiring life of Elsie MacGill. MacGill was the first female aeronautical engineer in the world. She was instrumental in the making of the Hawker-Hurricane fighter, which played a huge role in World War II. Notably, in 1923, MacGill came to Toronto to study electrical engineering at the University of Toronto. She would become the first woman to earn a degree in this field at U of T.



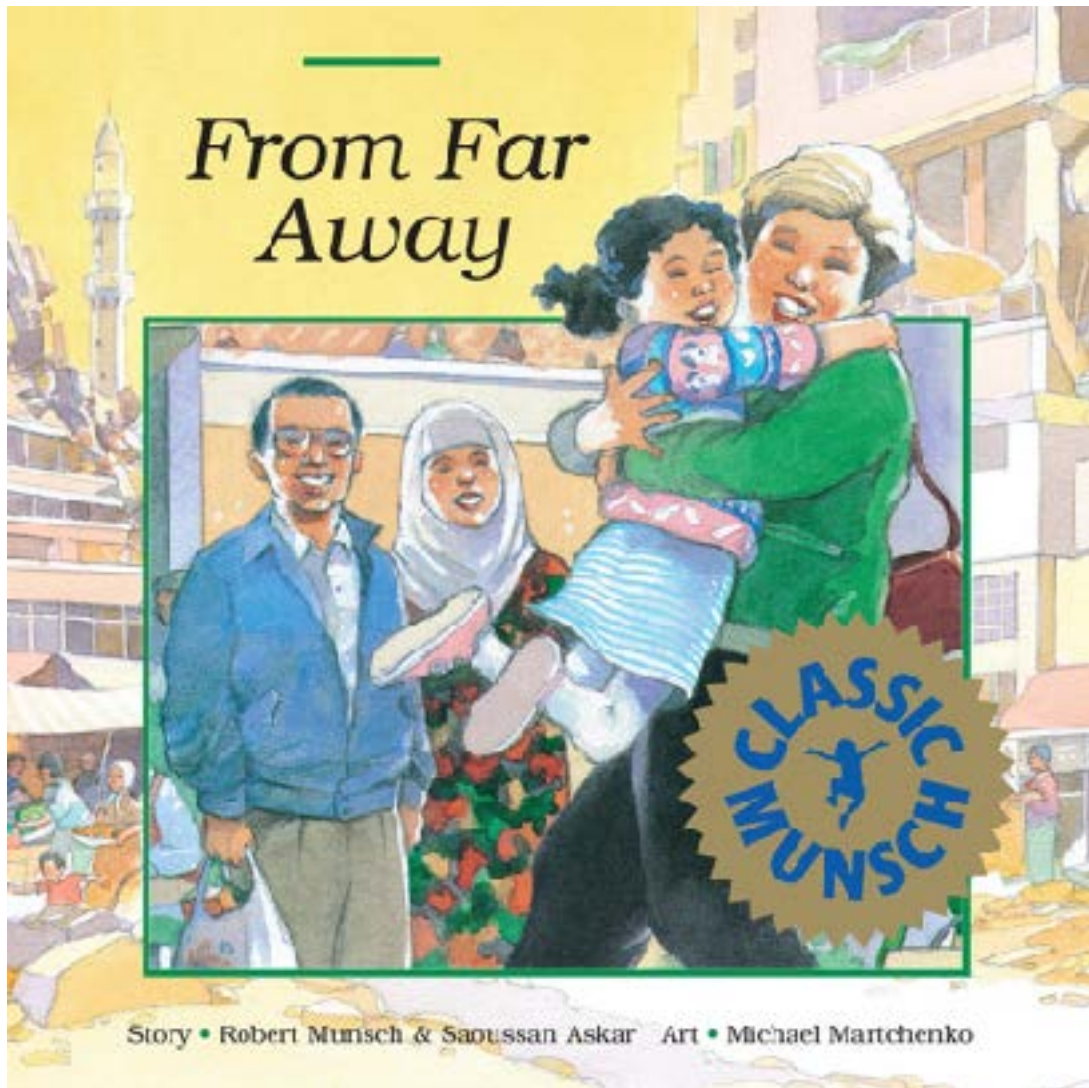
**Moak, Allan. A Big City ABC. Illustrated by Allan Moak, Tundra Books, 1989.**



In this alphabet book, Allan Moak explores Toronto through his inner child. Moak highlights the places in, and things about, Toronto that excite children. Bright illustrations not only bring to life popular tourist attractions, but also more private and local places that make kids feel at home too like neighbourhoods, showing kids playing street hockey.

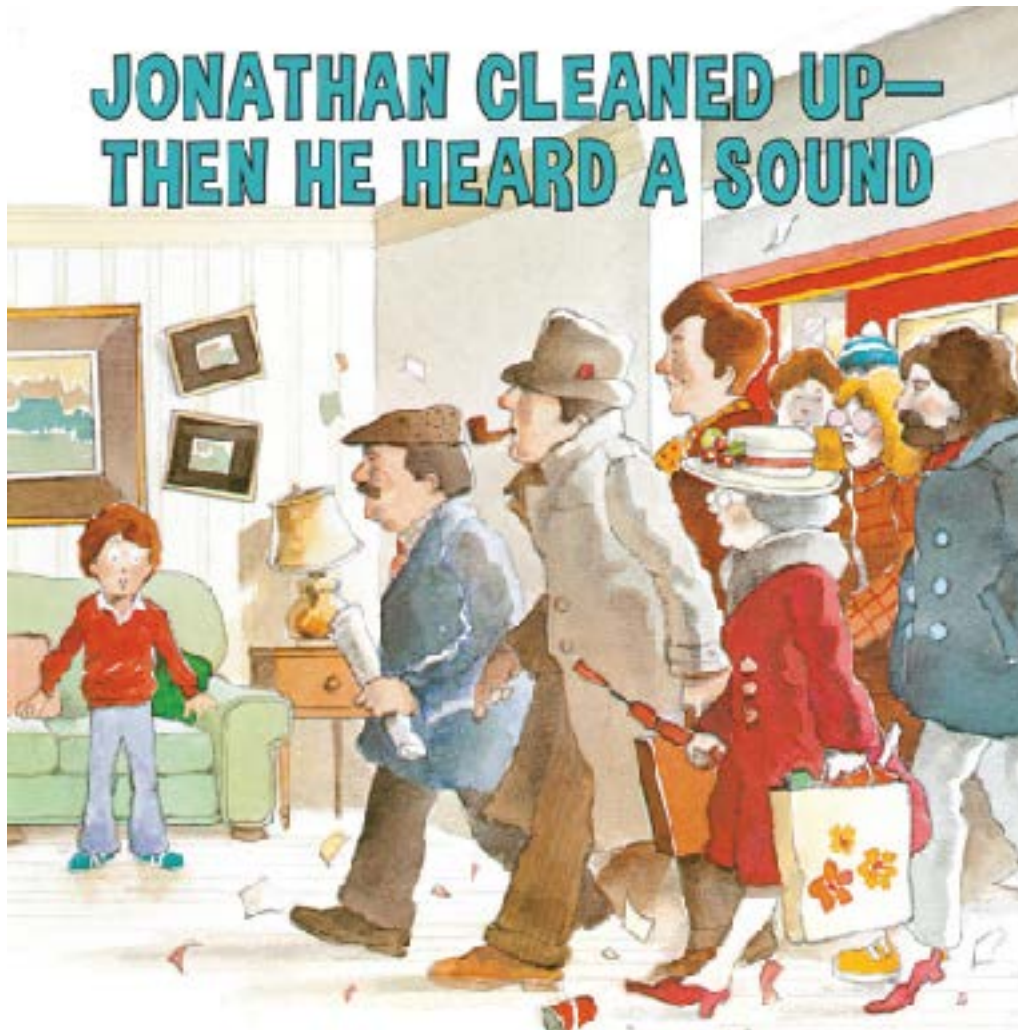


**Munsch, Robert. *From Far Away*. Illustrated by Michael Martchenko, Annick Press, 1995.**



From Far Away is based on the true story of Saoussan Askar, a young girl who fled her war-torn country and came to Toronto with her family. In her new city, Saoussan experiences many challenges at school; speaking a different language makes it difficult to understand the teacher; not knowing certain games distances her from other kids. However, Saoussan starts to get better at speaking English, makes friends, begins to find things she likes about her city like the zoo, and finds a role model in her teacher.

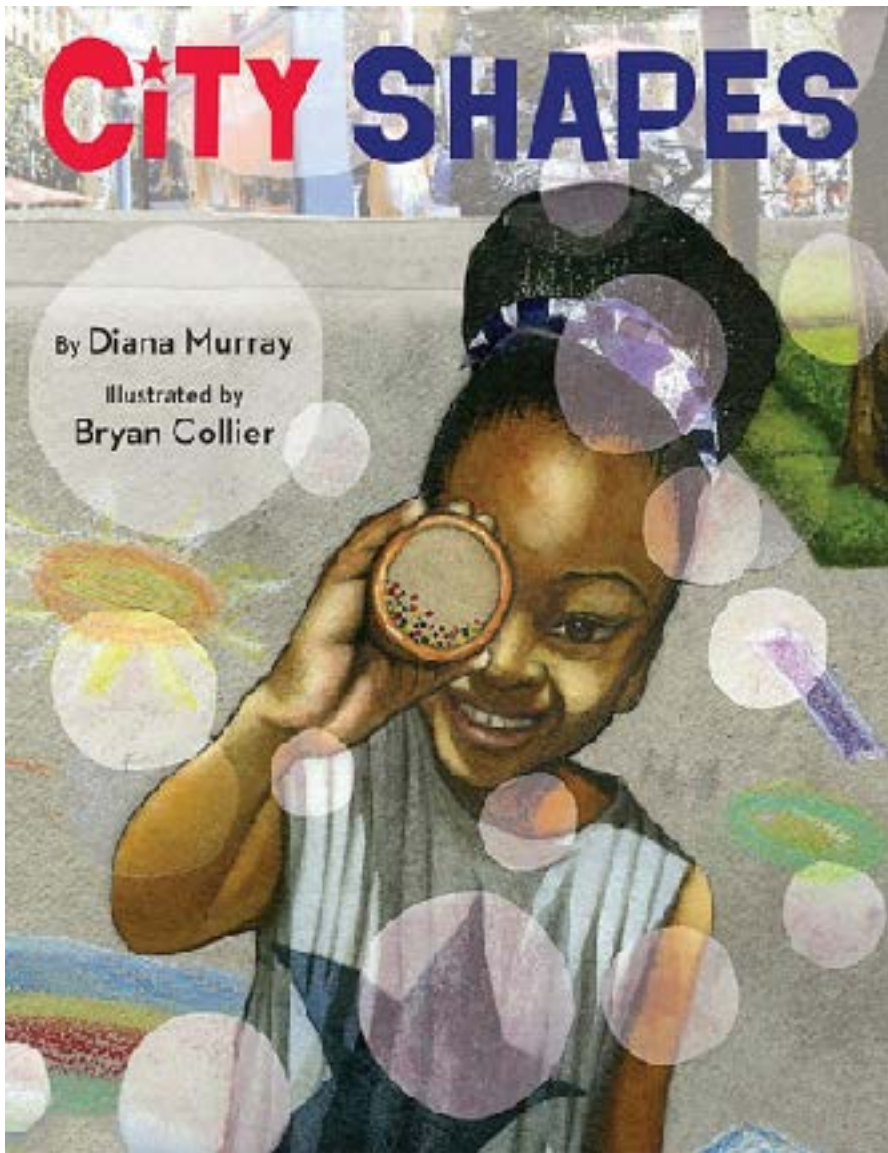
**Munsch, Robert. *Jonathan Cleaned Up – Then He Heard a Sound*. Illustrated by Michael Martchenko, Annick Press, 1981.**



Just as Jonathan finishes tidying up his home, he hears a noise behind the wall. A train comes through his apartment and makes an unexpected stop in his living room, ruining all his cleaning efforts. The train conductor tells Jonathan that he should go to City Hall if he has a problem with the train stopping in his home. There he meets with the mayor and the man behind the computers which control the subway system. Michael Marchenko illustrates scenes of Toronto, including the exterior and interior of City Hall and TTC streetcars.



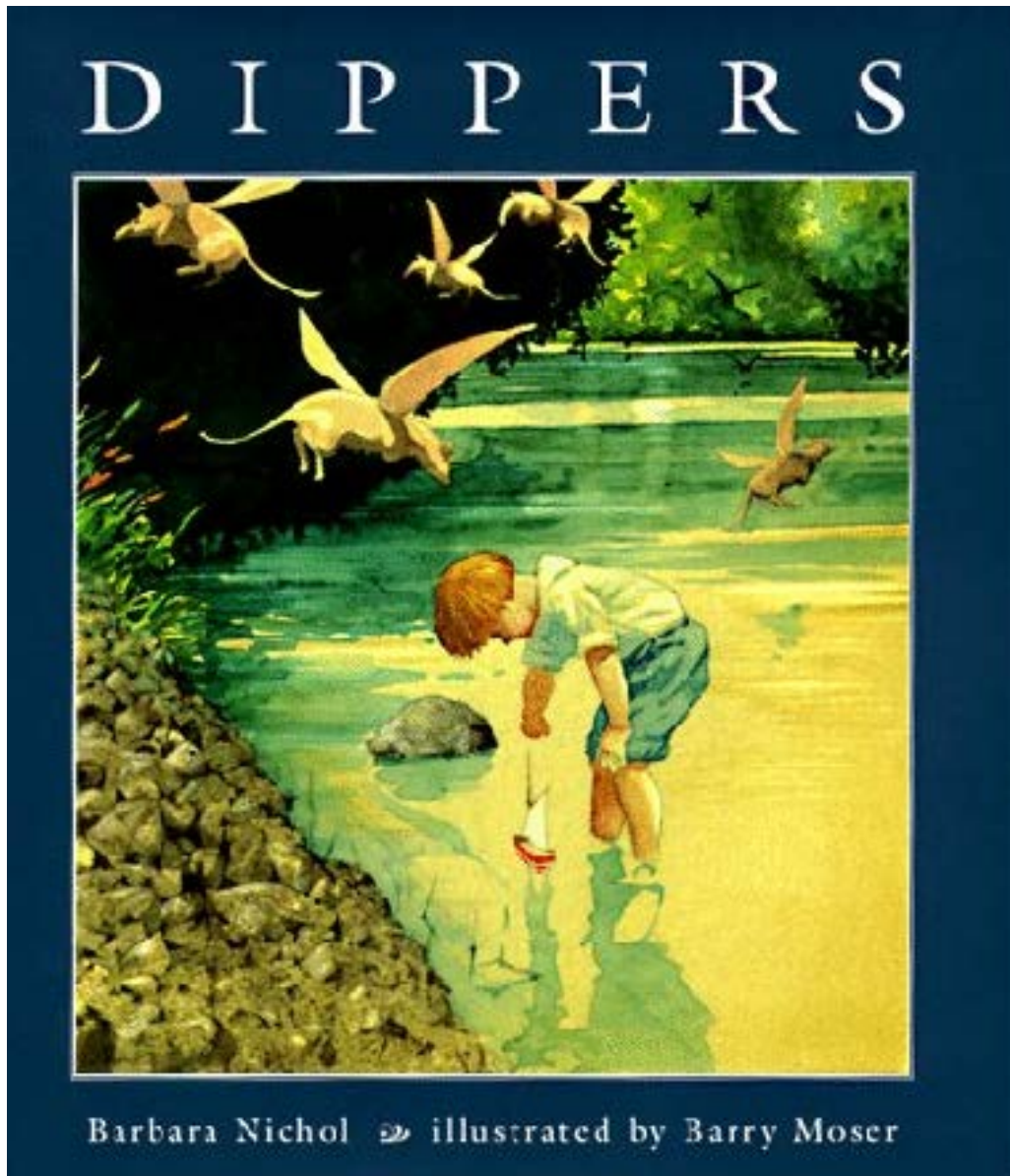
**Murray, Diana. *City Shapes*. Illustrated by Bryan Collier, Little, Brown Books For Children, 2016.**



In this picture book, written by Diana Murray and illustrated by Bryan Collier, a young African American girl travels throughout New York City encountering various geometrical shapes along the way. She sees diamond shapes in the kites flying in Central Park, square shapes on the windows of buses and triangle shapes at the Sea Port. Collier's illustrations are both stylized and realistic, drawing the reader's attention to both the shapes and the city environment which produces the shapes.

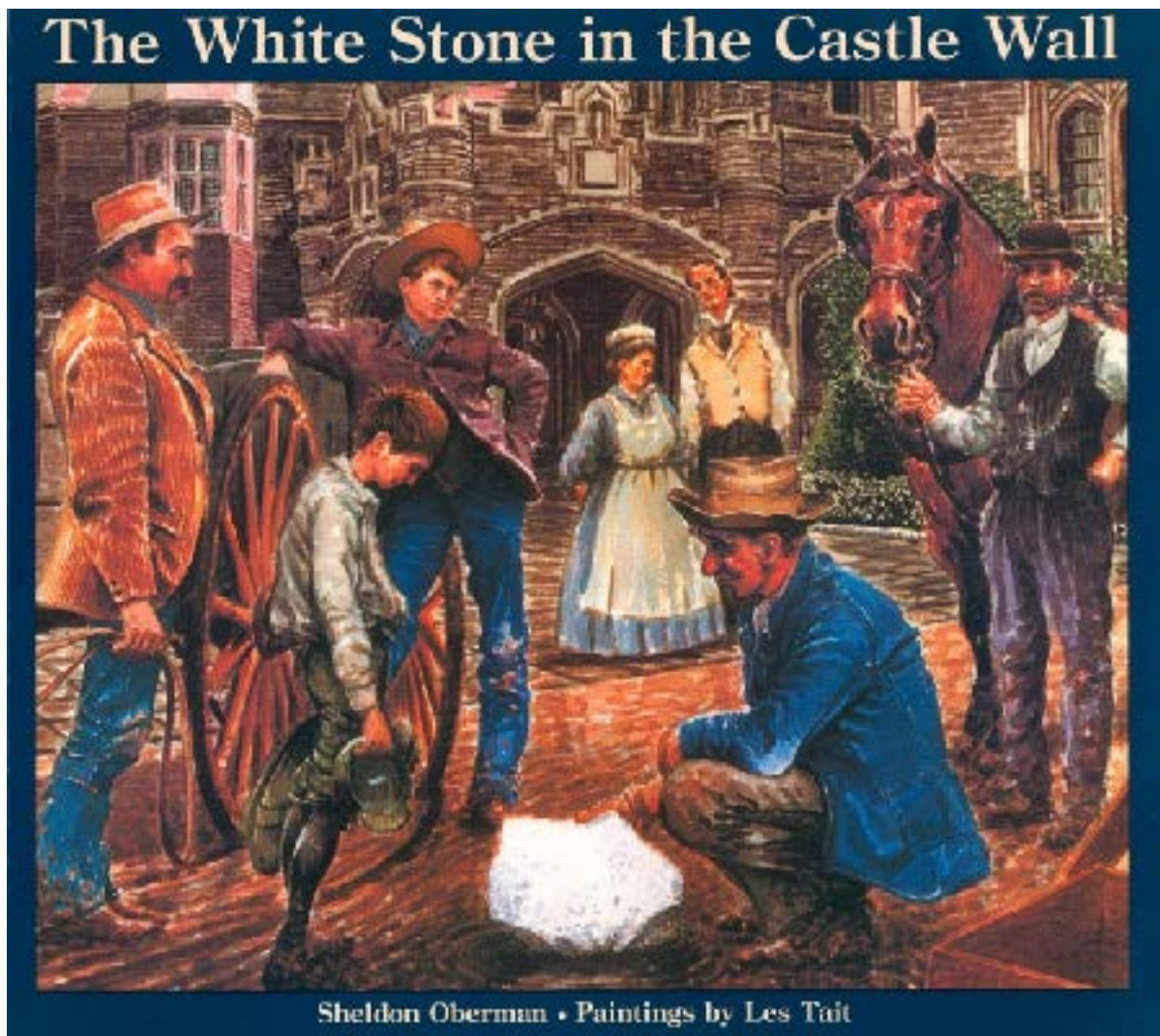


**Nichol, Barbara. *Dippers*. Illustrated by Barry Moser, Tundra Books of Northern New York, 1997.**



*Dippers* is a story book told through old letters written by a young girl named Margaret. Set in 1912 near Toronto's Don River, the letters describe Margaret's memories of the summer the dippers arrived. Dippers, described as dog-like creatures with wings, arrived by the Don River and began populating the neighbourhoods. Barbara Nichols conflates fantastical elements with reality to create this wonderful story.

**Oberman, Sheldon, The White Stone in the Castle Wall. Tundra Books, 1995.**



This book tells the possibly true or not story of how one single white stone ended up within the walls of Casa Loma. John Tommy Fiddich is a poor boy living in Toronto's Yorkville neighbourhood. When he hears that Henry Pellatt, the millionaire who brought Casa Loma to life, is giving away one dollar for brown stones to build a wall, John is determined to bring him a stone. He journeys through the streets of Yorkville to Casa Loma in the pouring rain to see his stone has washed to white when he arrives.

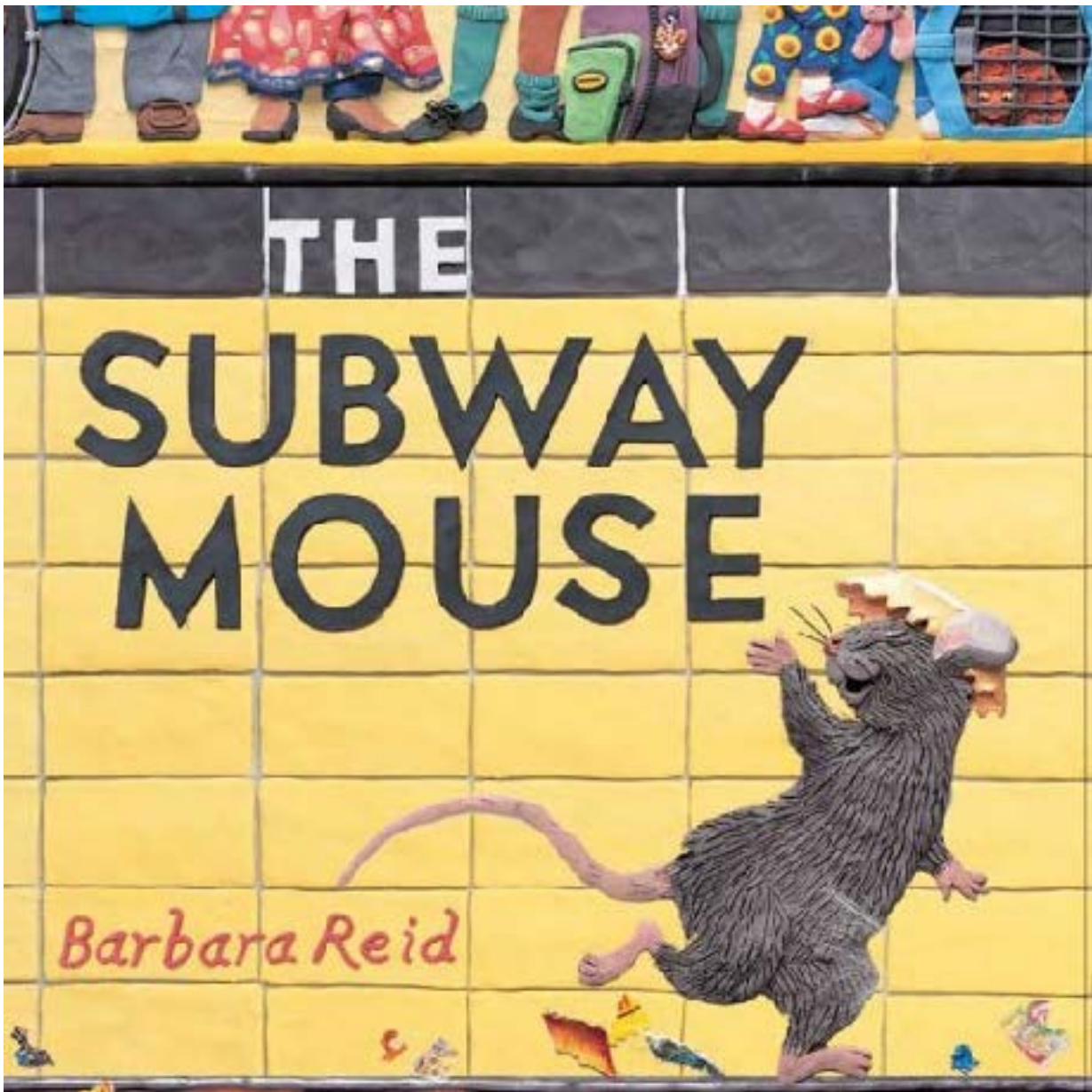
**Puck, 123 Toronto. Duopress, 2013.**



This board book helps teach young children how to count to ten using Toronto landmarks. The book also includes a “Let’s talk” section designed to help parents have conversations with children about the city and its attraction in a fun and engaging way.



Reid, Barbara. *The Subway Mouse*. Illustrated by Barbara Reid, North Winds Press, 2003.



The Subway Mouse tells the story of mice living in the subway tracks. A young mouse in particular is destined to travel to Tunnel's End, a made-up place at the end of the tracks. His journey across the subway line is accompanied by pictures of the mouse and garbage found on the tracks (candy wrappers, hair clips, pencils) all created out of modeling clay

**Smith, Sydney. *Small in the City*. Walker Books, 2019.**

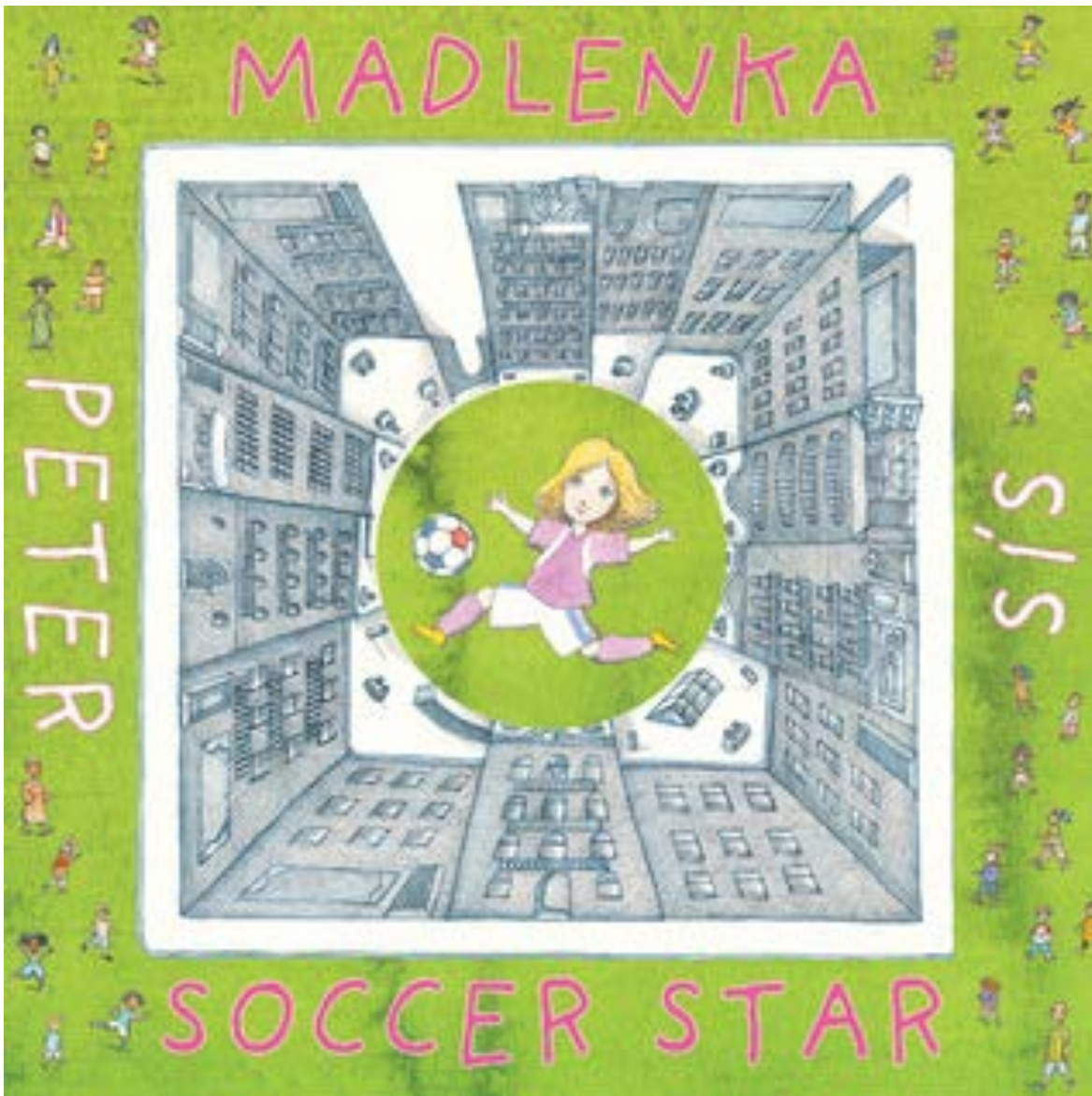


Award winning Canadian illustrator Sydney Smith presents his first autonomous work, with the story and illustrations created by himself. His knack for reflecting the innocence of the urban environment from a child's perspective had been previously demonstrated in JonArno Lawson's *Sidewalk Flowers*, with this picture book continuing on

a similar theme. The text concerns the winter journey of a young boy through the downtown core of a city, searching for his lost cat. Smith's depiction of winter scenes is as enticing as the narrative itself, demonstrating the quiet simplicity of a snowy city.



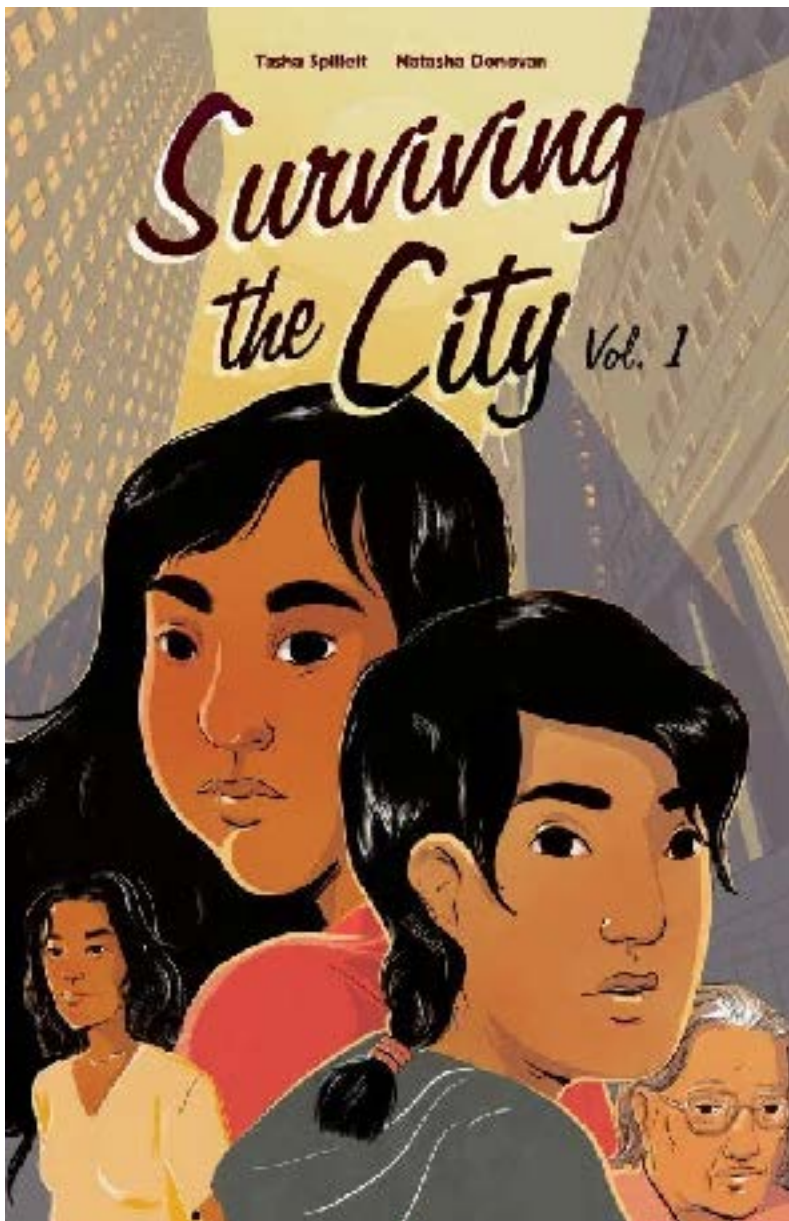
**Sis, Peter. Madlenka, Soccer Star. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.**



Peter Sis' story of an up beat inner city girl named Madlenka and her love for playing soccer anywhere in her neighbourhood is another key example of the representation of urban environments in children's literature. The confident title character is seen kicking a soccer ball with an animate mailbox, a playful fire hydrant against the grey, structural backdrop of the metropolitan environment.



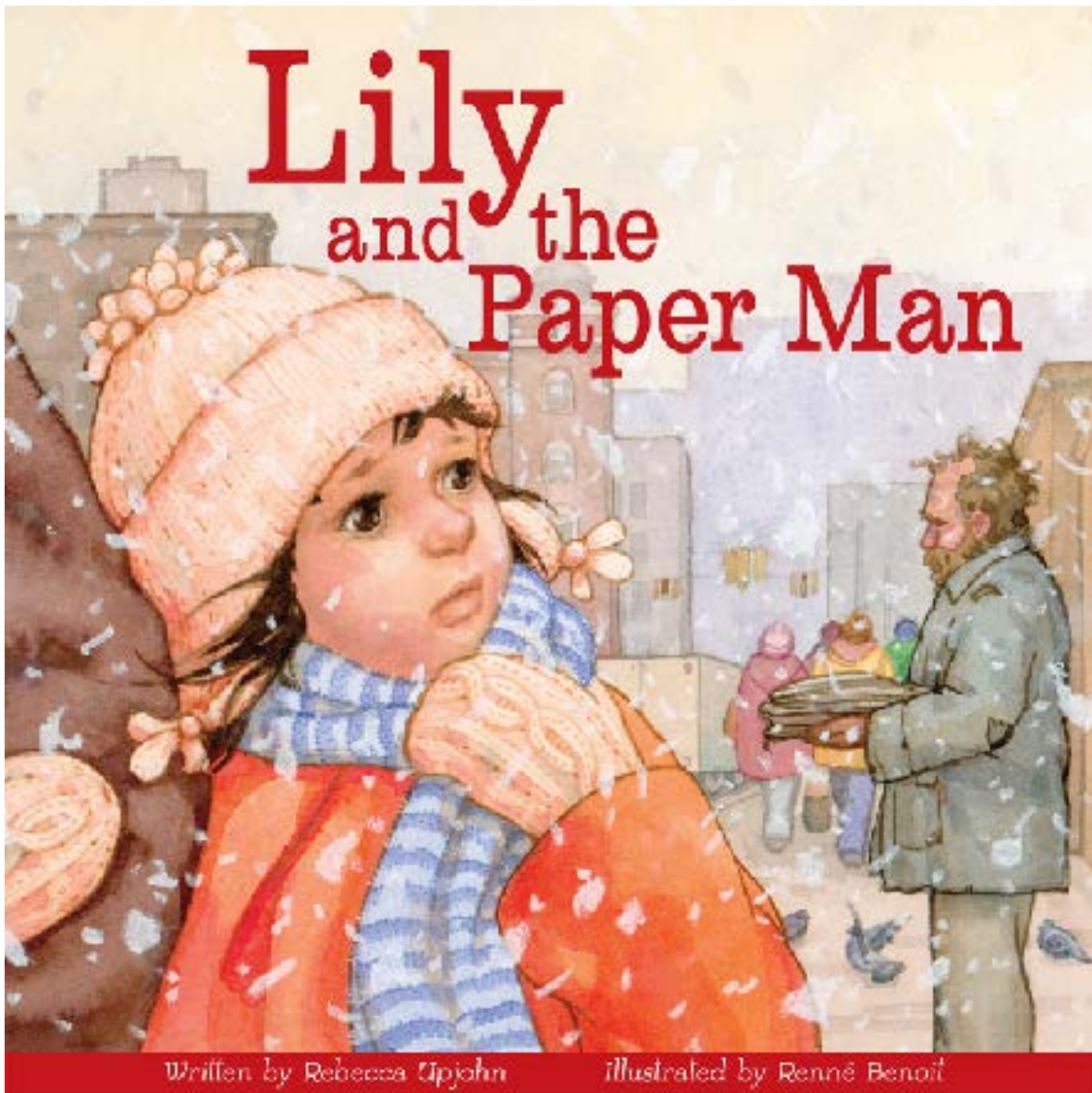
**Spillet, Tasha, and Natasha Donovan. *Surviving the City*. HighWater Press, 2018.**



One of the few graphic novels encountered during the research process, Canadian writer Tasha Spillet and illustrator Natasha Donovan's *Surviving The City* portrays the post-colonial struggles of Miikwan of Anishinaabe descent and Dez of Inninew descent living in a city. After learning that her grandmother is ill, Dez is forced to move out and runs away in response, prompting Miikwan to search for

her. The graphic novel is eye opening both visually and historically, reminding readers of the continued struggles of living as an Indigenous person in a colonized country, but the narrative is also one of friendship and belonging.

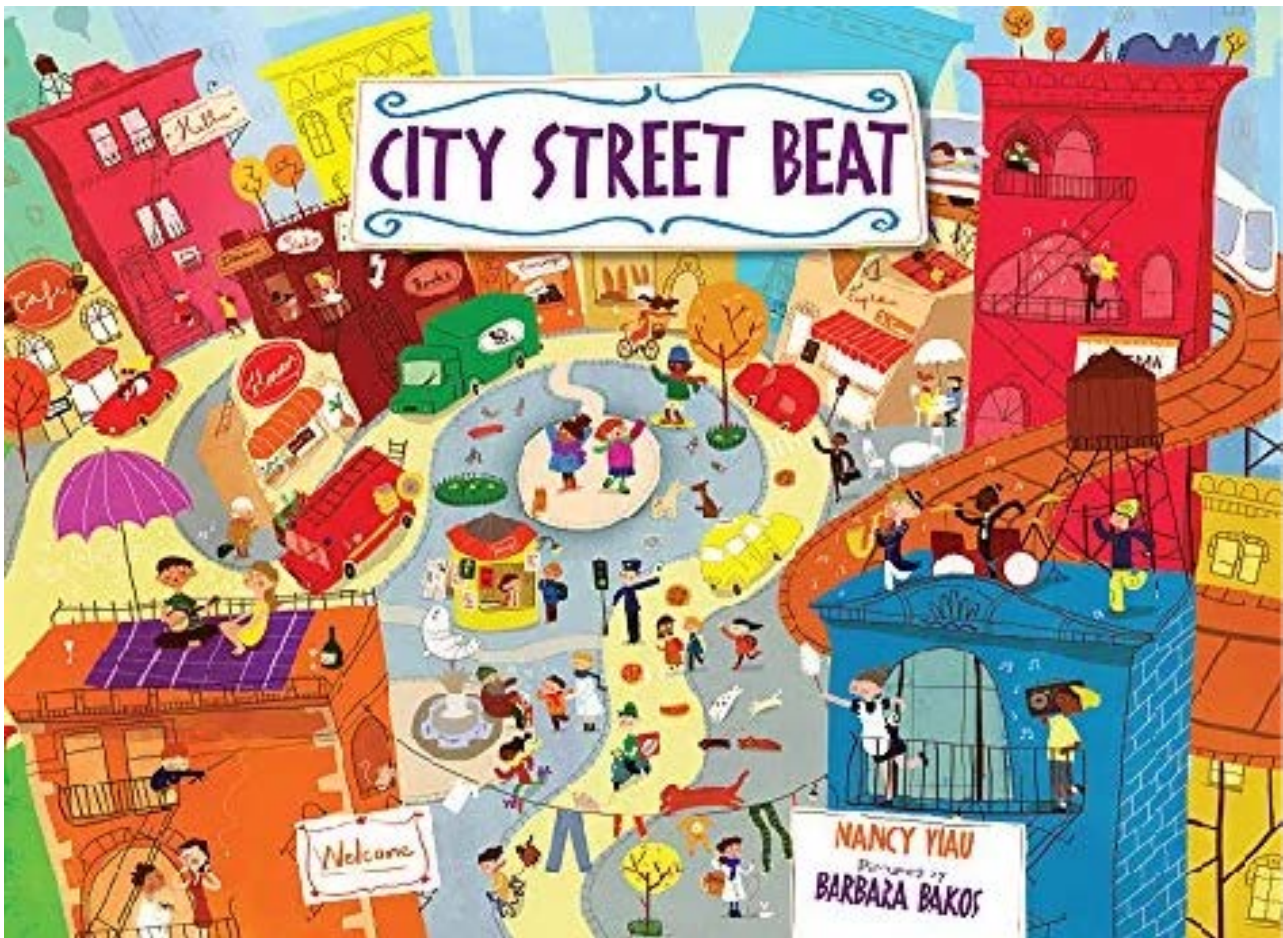
**Upjohn, Rebecca. *Lily and the Paper Man*. Illustrated by Renne Benoit, Second Story Press, 2007.**



Lily walks home from school every day with her mom until she is frightened by an untidy-looking man selling newspapers on the street. She tries to avoid the paper man but one winter day she sees him outside wearing torn apart shoes and clothes. Lily can't stop thinking about how cold he might be and decides to befriend and help him through the Toronto winter.



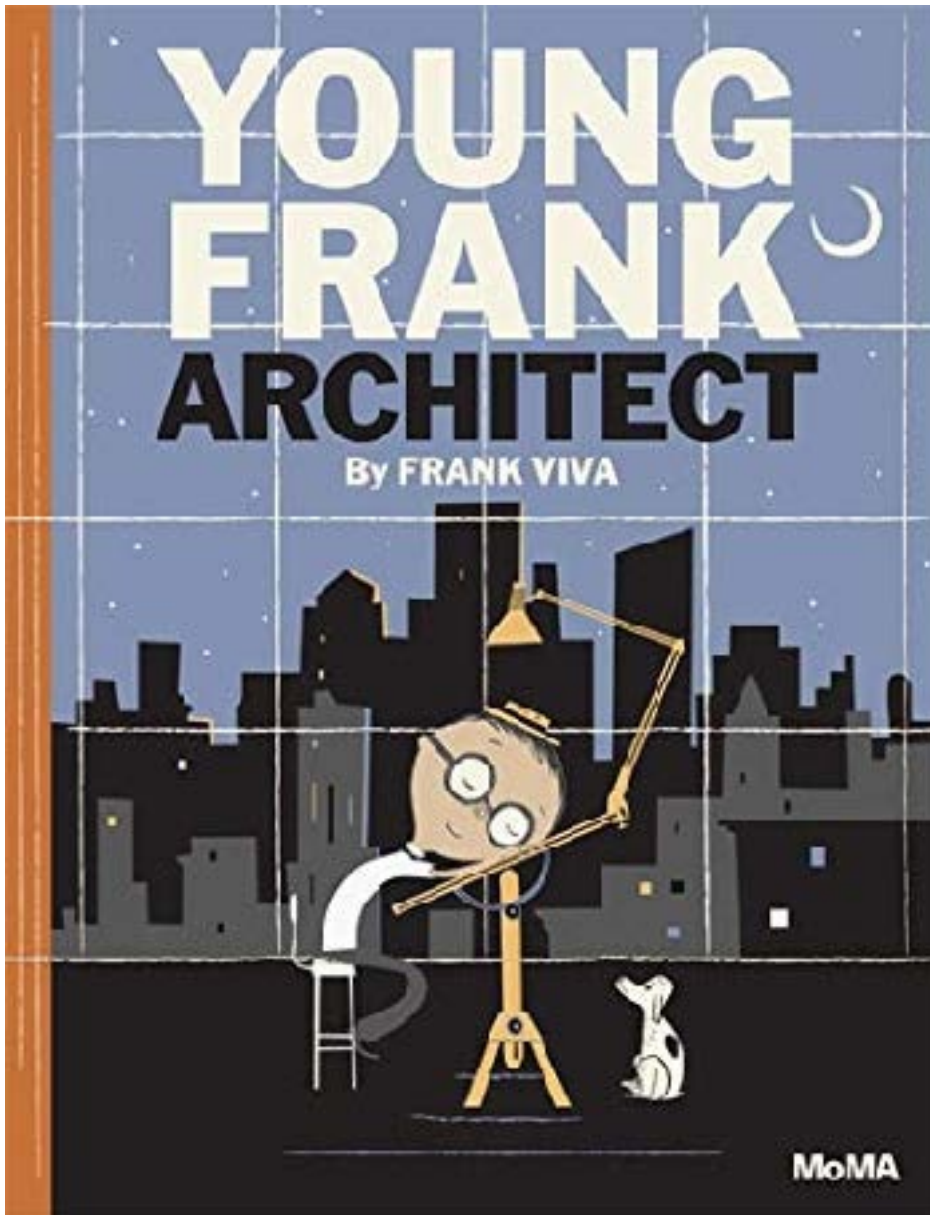
**Viau, Nancy. *City Street Beat*. Illustrated by Barbara Bakos, Albert Whitman & Company, 2014.**



This picture book, written by Nancy Viau and illustrated by Barbara Bakos, is another poetic verse text which celebrates the music like beats emanating from a city environment. Musical beats are found from the street performers, dancing with cooing pigeons, the sound of shops opening up their shutters, the sounds coming from the sewers and other “upbeat” city activities. Bakos’ illustrations are engagingly colourful, animated and perfectly capture the hustle and bustle feeling in which people come to associate with urbanity. Viau’s rhyming verses combined with Bakos’ images paint the urban environment as one of excitement, fun and intrigue.



**Viva, Frank. *Young Frank, Architect*. Harry N. Abrams, 2013.**



Part of a series of picture books focusing on precocious young people, Frank Viva's *Young Frank, Architect* is a delightful story concerning Frank's passion for building and designing everywhere he goes. He builds models utilizing

household articles including popsicle sticks, books and paper, prompting his father to encourage his love of building design by showing him the city skyscrapers. Viva's illustrated depiction of New York City is reminiscent of 1950's-1960's sharp, detailed city life, complete with suits, ties and hats.