

# Author Study: Janell Cannon

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## Childhood

Janell Cannon was born on November 03, 1957 in St. Paul, Minnesota to Burton H. and Nancy A. Cannon. Cannon was the type of kid who was always coming home with a new pet. However, it was never a cute kitten in a shoebox or a lost mutt down the street. Instead, she always had a soft spot in her heart for animals most people found unusually disgusting. In fact, her childhood backyard was literally crowded with all sorts of creepy-crawlers. "Crayfish, frogs, turtles, snakes, salamanders — we always found them to be so beautiful and people kept telling us they were awful."

## Career

Cannon attended Burnsville High School, and graduated in 1975. After high school she moved to southern California, and from 1981 to 1993 she was a graphic artist for the Carlsbad Library. Her love of bats, spiders, Komodo dragons, and snakes inspired her work at the public library, where she started award-winning summer reading programs about these unusual and misunderstood animals. While conducting research for a program about bats, Janell found only two books on the subject, both of which were out of print. She decided it was time to make her own story about these wonderful creatures.

Janell Cannon created *Stellaluna* (1993) in hopes that she would transform young people's fear of bats into informed affection. "Fruit bats don't drink blood and won't get caught in your hair. I hope to show them in a positive light so that they might be given more respect," she said. Janell points out in the book that fruit bats benefit our environment as they pollinate plants while

searching for nectar and distribute, through their droppings, seeds from fruit eaten whole. The artist and writer also wanted to touch readers with a story about a friendship shared by two different kinds of creatures, a bat and three baby birds. Since a lot of the time her animal subjects have to do things slightly out of character, she has to go beyond her research and really stretch her imagination and visualize. "When *Stellaluna* ate the grasshopper, I thought about the celery casserole my mom used to make me eat and we'd be at a stalemate at the kitchen table. So a lot of emotion goes into the drawings!" she laughed. Cannon compares the book to "a mirror, so that anyone who looks into it will see their own story their own way." She never suspected her book would become a runaway bestseller.

After the success of *Stellaluna*, Cannon left her job at the library in order to devote more time to writing and illustrating books. She was happy finally to have the opportunity to tell the adventures of one of the mysterious, gentle creatures who entered her imagination more than ten years ago. Before *Stellaluna* was even a thought, Janell was creating a series of elaborate, detailed drawings of what she calls Fuzzheads. In *Trupp: A Fuzzhead Tale* (1995), she created the first of two stories about these intelligent animals that explore the world of humans.

Cannon works from her home studio in southern California, which she shares with a cat and a parrot. She has ideas for many more books about Fuzzheads and "animals that make people uncomfortable." All she has to do for inspiration for her next story for children is take a trip to the zoo. She is a careful observer who sits back and simply watches how people react to certain animals. "The animals that get the meanest, worst comments automatically become candidates for a story."

Although all of her stories are fictional with talking creatures, she leaves a trademark on the back of her books with realistic information. On the back page of each of her stories, she includes information and notes about the creatures featured in each story. In the story *Verdi* (1997), for example, Cannon includes the page "Snake Notes" which contains background information on pythons.

## Book Connections

I believe that all six of Cannon's books could be used as great mentor texts. Every one of Cannon's books connects to some sort of animal or creature. Although both *Trupp: A Fuzzhead Tale* and *Little Yau* aren't about any specified

creature, they both can teach children about imagination and exploration. *Stellaluna*, *Verdi*, *Crickwing*, and *Pinduli* are all amazing books to teach children about animals that usually make people uncomfortable. *Stellaluna* not only teaches students about different characteristics of bats, it is also a fantastic story about mother/daughter relationships. This charming picture book has become a beloved story of both children and teachers because of the lessons that are woven throughout the story about friendship and acceptance. *Verdi* teaches students about pythons, but is also a good concept book about being yourself. *Crickwing* teaches students that cockroaches aren't as bad as they may seem. I think this story would be great to read to a group of students with behavior disorders because it teaches about bullying and being different. Finally there is her children's book *Pinduli*. This story can be connected with *Stellaluna* because it also teaches about mother/daughter relationships. The book also introduces characteristics about hyenas and other animals in Africa. Most of all, this story teaches the skills of being yourself and not being afraid to be different. Although all of Cannon's books connect in some way or another, they are also all very different and fabulous to read.

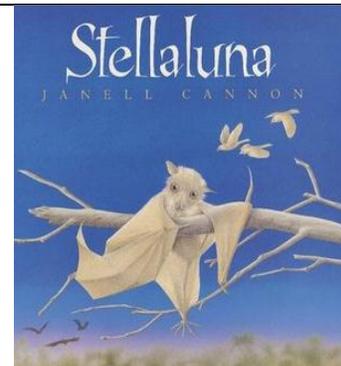
## Children's Books and Reviews

### **Stellaluna (1993)**

In this story, a mother fruit bat and her baby Stellaluna get separated when they're attacked by an owl. The baby bat lands in a bird's nest occupied with three baby birds. The mother bird will only let Stellaluna be part of the family if she follows her bird rules. She isn't allowed to hang by her feet, sleep during the day, or eat anything besides bugs. While the animals are out flying, Stellaluna and her mother are happily reunited and Stellaluna finally understands why she is so different. This award-winning book by Janell Cannon has sold over 500,000 copies and was on the bestseller list for more than two years.

### **Review**

This story was one of my favorites growing up. I remember begging my mom to read this book to me almost every night before going to sleep. Picking it up and reading it again this year sparked so many great memories of my childhood. It's a great book for a mother and daughter to sit down and read together. Normally, I would have been afraid of bats, but this book showed bats in a whole new light. It also taught me a great deal about friendship.

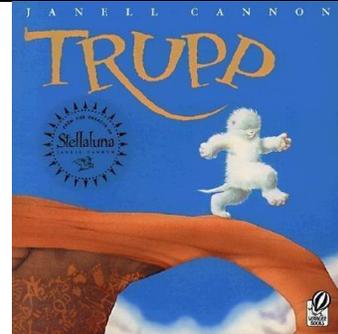


**Trupp: A Fuzzhead Tale (1995)**

In this story, a young Fuzzhead named Trupp sets off into the world on a journey. He and his newly found raven friend wonder through the city. Although Trupp doesn't look like any regular human, he is ignored by every human he sees. Before he can decide whether to stay in the city or run away forever, he is stopped by a homeless woman. This is the only person who sees him for what he truly is and decides to help him stay.

**Review**

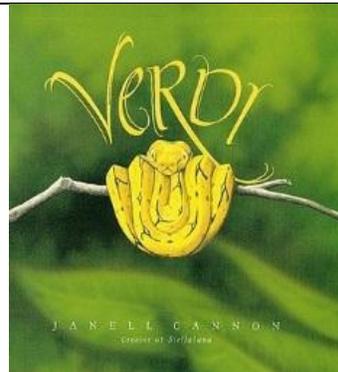
Like many other people who read this book, I thought it was very strange. It is about Trupp, a "fuzzhead" who decides he wants to go where the people are and dresses like a human. He appears to be in NYC and no one realizes that he is not a human, except for a homeless woman. The plot is a little odd, but the illustrations look very nice.

**Verdi (1997)**

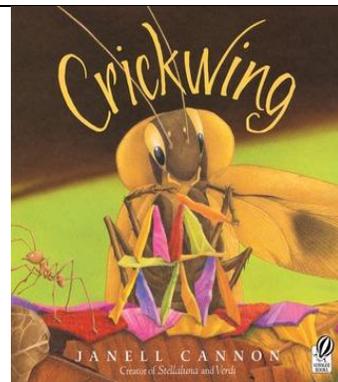
In this story, you meet a young python named Verdi. He meets several older snakes that appear to be either rude, lazy, or boring. All of the older pythons are big and green, but Verdi doesn't want to grow up like them. He likes his bright yellow scales and sporty stripes. When Verdi discovers a light green stripe extending across his entire body, he tries several tricks to get rid of it. However, this only gets him into more misfortune. Regardless of his efforts, Verdi turns green. Fortunately, he is delighted to realize that growing up and being green does not mean he has to stop being himself.

**Review**

This story reminded me a lot of *Stellaluna*. Although I'm still afraid of snakes, this book makes snakes appear beautiful and non-harmful. I remember reading this as a child and being in awe of the illustrations. This story teaches children that you shouldn't be scared of growing up and to be yourself.

**Crickwing (2000)**

In this book, you meet Crickwing, an artistic cockroach. He is a lot different from the other insects in the forest because he has a cricked wing and a flair for sculpture which makes him an easy target for bigger creatures. He only wanted to create his art work in peace, but ended up being seen as a bully instead. He just wanted to even the score with the leafcutter ants. However, this adventure takes a turn for the worst when a swarm of aggressive army ants threaten the colony and cause everyone to be in danger. Although he is an artist, not a fighter, Crickwing comes up with a really clever idea and decides it is up to him to save the day.

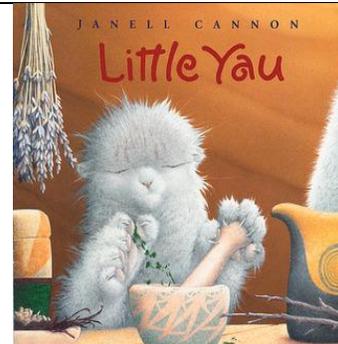


**Review**

Cannon has a real talent for writing books that de-mystify some of the world's most misunderstood and loathed creatures. I had a hard time believing that Cannon could make such a disgusting creature lovable. However, this book made you fall in love with a cockroach. This story was clever and action-packed, despite being a short children's story. The book is also incredibly educational. Especially her fascinating notes at the end.

**Little Yau (2002)**

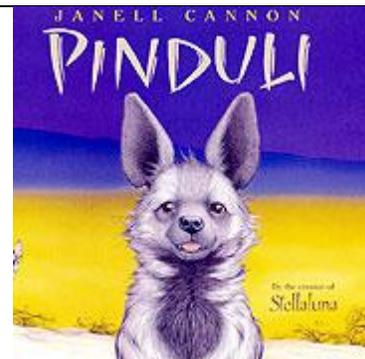
This story is an extension of *Trupp: A Fuzzhead Tale*; however, it is about a Fuzzhead named Little Yau instead. In the book, "Little Yau wants nothing more than for the Wise Ones to teach her the great secrets of the mountains". Unfortunately, her dreams are put on hold when her best friend, Trupp, is put in danger and poisoned. It is up to Yau to help him. So, she ventures out into the world of humans dressed in clothes and shoes to search for the herb they need to make a cure.

**Review**

This story is an extension to Cannon's story *Trupp*. This story was also a little strange. It was also somewhat hard to follow. However, the illustrations were fantastic yet again.

**Pinduli (2004)**

This story is about a hyena named Pinduli. The story starts off with Pinduli and her mama hunting through Africa. When Pinduli loses her mother, she comes across a pack of wild dogs, a lion, and a zebra who all tease her about her looks. She wants to disappear, so she pins her ears back and rolls in the dirt until her striped coat is a pale gray. The animals think that she is a "ghost" that has come for them. The creatures confess to the ghost that they teased the hyena because other animals had made fun of them before. Pinduli understands and tells them to find their tormentors and make peace. She also asks them to always leave a bit of every meal as an offering. At the end, the animals resolve their problems and Pinduli and her mother never have to search for meals again.

**Review**

Like most of Cannon's stories, Pinduli offers up a sensitive and sympathetic protagonist. The East African setting and charming yet realistic illustrations introduce young children to another continent, yet the experiences Pinduli faces are all familiar ones. As Pinduli encounters other animals, they poke fun of her appearance, but all is made well when Pinduli is able to outsmart them. This is followed by the other animals pointing out their own insecurities about their appearances. This is an excellent book for introducing how to deal with insecurities. Pinduli's relationship with her mother is also heartwarming.

# Response Activities

## **Stellaluna**

After reading *Stellaluna* and several non-fiction stories about bats and birds, talk to students about their differences and similarities. Create a fun environment in the reading corner where half the wall is filled with a bat cave and the other half is a tree with bird nests. Have the students create cutouts of birds and bats with googly-eyes and place them throughout the reading corner. Students can even hang bats from the ceiling with clear strings in the cave. Create a big Venn diagram stating the different characteristics of bats and birds. Post this on the wall between the cave and tree. Students should love reading in the environment they helped create.

## **Verdi**

After reading aloud this book, discuss how the author used sensory details to make the words, pictures, and stories come alive. As a class, create a list of sensory details from the book. Find other mentor texts that are strong in sensory details and add their details to the list as well. Provide a bag for each student with five small everyday items inside (cotton ball, piece of candy, a tissue, etc.) and have each student close their eyes and pick out an item. Encourage them to notice how the item feels, smells, what they hear, what it looks like and if they can taste it. Then have them write a list of sensory details about the item in their writer's notebooks. Encourage them to use the list when they write.

## **Crickwing**

### Writing Activities

Sensory/Descriptive: Vividly describe how Crickwing must have felt when he was tied up and ants were walking past him talking to each other. Use your five senses.

Imaginative/Narrative: Write a sequel to Crickwing. What happens after Crickwing joins the leafcutter ant colony? How does his life change?

Analytical/Persuasive: Write a paragraph persuading the army ants to work with others rather than fight them.

Practical/Informative: Look for books at the library or find information online about cockroaches. Write a report about what you learn. Be sure to include at least five interesting facts to share with your classmates.

## **Pinduli**

### PREPARING TO READ

- Share the front of the book jacket and ask the children what kind of animal they think is depicted. If they think it might be some kind of dog, share the back of the jacket. What clues are there? Can they identify the other animals pictured? Considering this information, where do they think this animal lives? If no one knows the animal's name, tell the children this is a hyena. Ask if they have heard that name before, or if they know anything about this animal.
- Make a T-chart on chart paper or on the chalkboard. Head the left column: What We Already Know, and the right column: What We Learned. Fill in the first column with information from the children or from the book jacket. Encourage the children to observe details carefully, such as the ears and the coat of the hyena.
- Discuss the concept that people with good manners do not make personal comments about others. For instance, the fact that a person has unusually large ears, or wears clothes that are not considered "in style," does not call for a comment.
- A familiar children's rhyme says: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never harm me." Discuss this saying. Is it true?

### AFTER READING

- Have the children discuss the things they learned. Do they need to change or correct any of the items in the What We Learned column? Are there things they still want to know about hyenas? Discuss how they can find more information.
- Each animal said it had said something mean because someone else had said something mean first. Is this how the children feel when someone is mean to them?

- Discuss Pinduli's decision to give a task to the other animals. Why did she include the part about leaving behind part of every meal? Was this a fair decision?
- Ask the children if they think that the teasing stopped after the visit of the Great Spirit? Why or why not?
- Read aloud *I Wish I Were A Butterfly* by James Howe, illustrated by Ed Young. Have the children compare the "lessons" to be learned from each book.

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