

SARAH LAMSTEIN

children's book author

CLASSROOM GUIDE:

Big Night for Salamanders

By Sarah Lamstein

Illustrated by Carol Benioff

About the Book:

During the first warm rainy night of spring—Big Night—spotted salamanders by the hundreds crawl out of the woods and down to a natural pool across the road. There they will breed and lay their eggs.

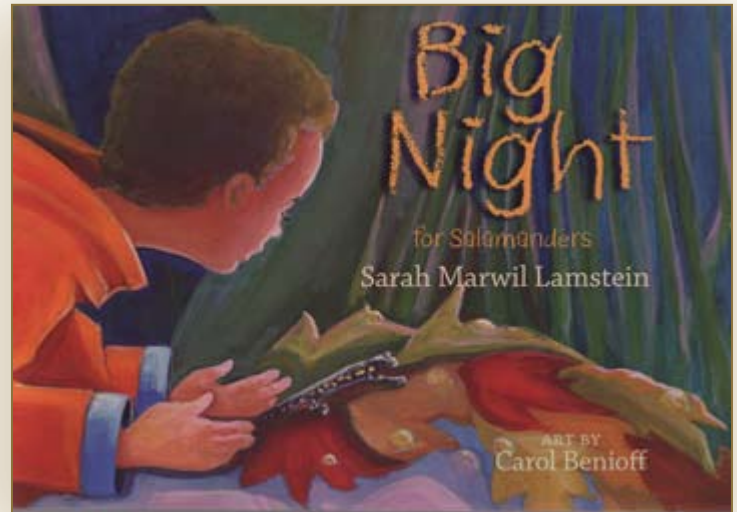
Evan and his parents know the salamanders need their help. Crossing a road at night is dangerous especially for small amphibians. The family slows the traffic. They carry salamanders across the road. But the cars keep coming, and the hour is late. How can the family help these delicate creatures cross the road in safety?

Evan has the solution...

Throughout North America, people help salamanders and other amphibians cross roads during their spring migration. They watch weather forecasts. They call one another by telephone. They announce the event by email. "Here come the spotted salamanders. It's Big Night!"

About the Author:

Sarah Marwil Lamstein's *Letter on the Wind* received the Sydney Tarylor Honor Book Award from the Association of Jewish Libraries and was listed among the best books by the Cooperative Children's Book Council. Her other books for children include *Annie's Shabbat*, which was named to Booklist's Top Ten Religion Books for Youth; *I Like Your Buttons!*; *From the Mango Tree and Other Folktales from Nepal*, co-written by Kavita Ram Shrestha; and *Hunger Moon*, a young adult novel. Sarah received an MFA in writing for children and young adults from Vermont College. She lives with her husband in Newton, Massachusetts and devotedly crosses salamanders on Big Night.



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About the Illustrator:

Carol Benioff is an artist and illustrator whose distinctive work combines printmaking, drawing, painting, and digital imagery. Her work has appeared on numerous book jackets and in magazines and has been exhibited in the United States and Europe. *Big Night for Salamanders* is her third children's book. As a child she was not familiar with salamanders, but she aided dragonflies with broken wings and built indoor homes for snails and caterpillars. A native San Franciscan, Ms. Benioff lives in Berkeley, California, with her partner Heinz, and their cat, Tigs.

Author Interview:

1. Is there a Big Night near your home? Do you help out the salamanders on their migration, too?

Yes, there are a number of vernal pools near my home where one can observe Big Night, the salamanders' annual migration to the pool where they mate and lay their eggs. In fact, one vernal pool is just about a mile away. There are others in neighboring towns, some of which are close by roads that interrupt the salamanders' path.

For a number of years, I've joined Big Night volunteers, young and old, carrying salamanders across these roads so they can continue their journey to the pool in relative safety. It's a thrill to be part of this event, witnessing an ancient ritual, a crucial journey that began before a time of roads or even the idea of them. I feel privileged to have a window into this journey and to feel others' enthusiasm for it, especially the children's.

Our flashlights scanning the road in an early spring rain, we may spy a salamander or frog and carry it across the road, first removing our gloves and wetting our hands. The creatures' sensitive skin must be damp, as salamanders breathe both through their lungs and through their skin. Oxygen passes more easily through wet skin. While we tend to the salamanders, we're mindful of our own safety and watch out for cars. It's the survival of species we're about on Big Night.

2. How do you take a project from the idea to finished book? What is your favorite part?

First there is the excitement an idea generates. My friend Pia told me about appearing and disappearing pools, and I was captivated. Such a phenomenon seemed like magic. I wanted to learn more. I read about vernal pools and the critters in them – salamanders, frogs, fairy shrimp, all sorts of insects and microscopic creatures. Then Pia took me to visit one, and I caught a glimpse of a salamander in the bottom muck. Soon after, I joined the Vernal Pool Association www.vernalpool.org and read with interest all the excited listserv postings leading up to and during Big Night. I contacted some of the listserv members and was able to go out with them on their Big Night expeditions – a wonderful experience! When I saw how involved and excited the kids became, I knew I wanted to write about this happy intersection between children and salamanders.

Then the writing began, the endless drafts, the sharing with my writers group and writer friends, going back to the drawing board again and again, revising, revising. After a number of years, happily, the ms. was accepted by a publisher. I waited eagerly to see the illustrations, still revising the text, but this time with the guidance of my editor, adding life cycle information, creating an index. Several years after the ms. was accepted, I received the completed book. I loved it – its unusual shape, the illustrations, even the color of the endpapers!

My favorite part of the process of writing this book was the research -- reading, talking to experts and enthusiasts alike, and experiencing Big Night. I came to understand the importance of salamanders and vernal pools and learned that scientists consider the health of salamander populations an indicator of the health of an environment.

3. What's the best part of being author?

I love turning my enthusiasms into a form that can be shared with others. If I'm excited by a person, an event, or a natural phenomenon, I work to highlight that thing so that others may learn of it and perhaps experience their own enthusiasm for it.

Questions to consider:

1. During the various seasons, where do spotted salamanders live? What do they eat?
2. Why is Evan excited after school? What is he hoping for?
3. What's happening at the same time that Evan is drinking hot chocolate and having an after-school snack?
4. What is the temperature just right for? When do you know it is spring where you live?
5. Where is the salamanders' destination? What leads them to the location?
6. Just by reading the text, how can you figure out how vernal pools are made?
7. What equipment does Evan need for his salamander expedition?
8. What stuns the salamanders? Why would this be really dangerous for them?
9. Why is the pond so important?
10. How does Evan keep the salamanders safe? What do you do to help creatures in your own neighborhood?

Across the curriculum:

READING:

Good readers don't just let important information slither (like a salamander!) past them while they read! As you read the story, find at least five important facts you think everyone should know about salamanders. (This might be even more fun on a salamander-shaped piece of paper.)

SCIENCE:

Vernal pools are an important environmental feature in a salamander's life. Discover what natural habitats exist in your own community that are essential in supporting the wildlife. Create a poster about what you learned and how you can help protect these natural areas.

MATH/LOGICAL:

Big Night happens when the temperature hovers around 40 degrees. Document the temperature at your home or school for several weeks in late winter and early spring. As the temperature starts to rise make note of any changes you notice in the environment. (This can be done over a longer period of time, even all year, if done once a week. If done daily, students can arrive at the average temperature of each month.) Students can document the environment by studying a small sample area or even a single tree.

ART:

Using two paper plates (with the top one missing a pie-shaped section) and fastened together with a brad, create a piece of art that shows the life cycle of either a salamander or a creature who lives in or near your own backyard.