



Educators' Guide for

# The Year of Billy Miller Billy Miller Makes a Wish and Oh, Sal

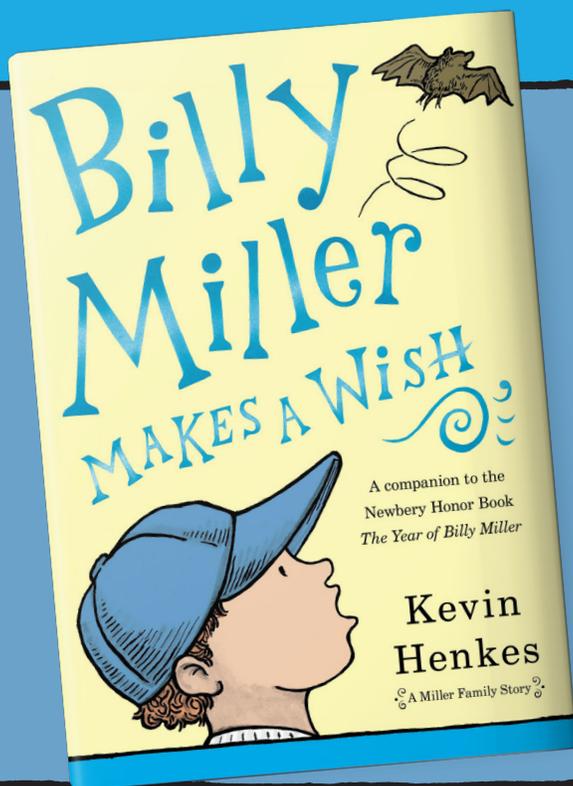
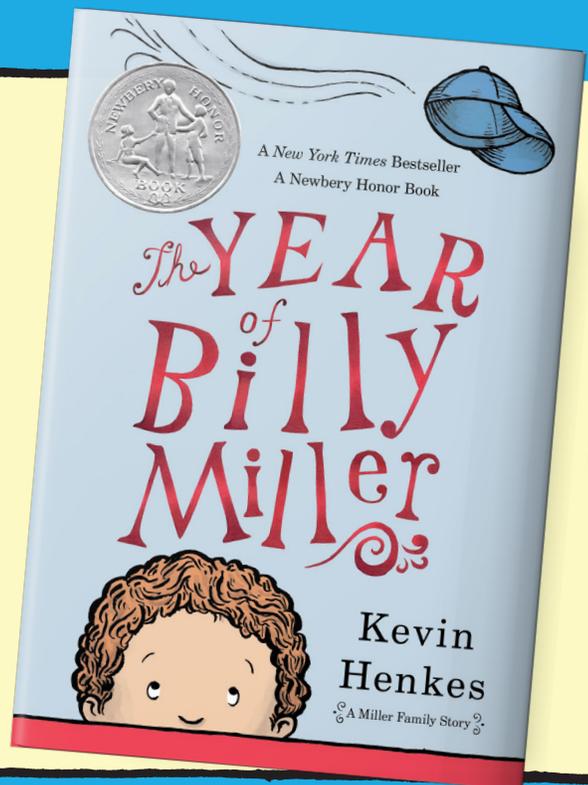


The Miller Family Stories

## About the Books



**B**illy's mom is a teacher and his dad works at home as an artist, spending his days finding objects he can use for his found-art sculptures. When Billy begins second grade, he is scared and unsure of how he will perform in school. To make matters worse, there is a new girl who sits at his table, and she constantly criticizes him. As the school year progresses, Billy Miller does well and overcomes his insecurities. He helps his dad with a unique found-art idea, he makes a true-to-life bat cave diorama, and he writes his mom the perfect poem. *The Year of Billy Miller* proves to be the best year Billy could have hoped for.



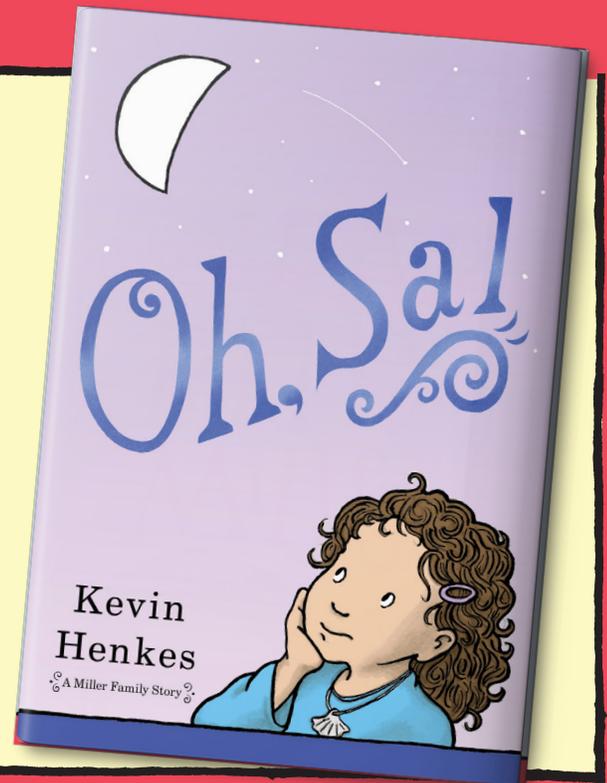
**B**illy Miller has a long summer ahead of him before he starts a new school year, and the vacation begins on his eighth birthday. Blowing out the candles, he makes a wish that something exciting will happen. And immediately exciting things *do* begin to happen . . . not always for the best. Did Billy's wish create all the drama of the week after his birthday—sirens, ambulances, a critter in the basement, misplaced love letters, chimney fires—or did those things just happen because his father went to camp for a week? Read this funny and accessible story to find out how Billy's family copes with extraordinary problems in the best way possible and how Billy's wish has a very happy ending.



## About the Books



**S**al is not having a happy holiday season. The new baby, born on Christmas Eve, does nothing but sleep or cry and takes too much of her mother's attention. Uncle Jake, who is visiting, teases her by calling her "Salamander," which she absolutely hates. Her older brother Billy loves doing things with their uncle, and Sal feels left out of their fun. And now part of her favorite Christmas present is missing. Sal has cried every day of this holiday week, but maybe, just maybe, she will find a way to feel better by the end of New Year's Day.



## About the Author



Photo by Michelle Corpora

**KEVIN HENKES** is the author and illustrator of more than fifty critically acclaimed and award-winning picture books, beginning readers, and novels. He is the winner of the American Library Association's 2020 Children's Literature Legacy Award; he received the Caldecott Medal for *Kitten's First Full Moon* in 2005; and *Waiting* won a Caldecott Honor and Geisel Honor in 2016. Kevin Henkes is also the creator of a number of picture books featuring his mouse characters, including the #1 *New York Times* bestsellers *Lilly's Big Day* and *Wemberly Worried*, the Caldecott Honor Book *Owen*, and the beloved *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*. His most recent mouse character, Penny, was introduced in *Penny and Her Song*; her story continued in *Penny and Her Doll*, *Penny and Her Marble* (a Geisel Honor Book), and *Penny and Her Sled*. Bruce Handy, in a *New York Times Book Review* piece about *A Good Day*, wrote, "It should be said: Kevin Henkes is a genius." Kevin Henkes received two Newbery Honors for novels—one for *The Year of Billy Miller* and the other for *Olive's Ocean*. Also among

his fiction for older readers are the novels *Junonia*, *Bird Lake Moon*, *The Birthday Room*, *Sun & Spoon*, and *Sweeping Up the Heart*. Kevin Henkes has been published by Greenwillow Books since the release of his first book, *All Alone*, in 1981. His fiftieth book, the picture book *Egg*, was published in January 2017. Most recently, he is the author of *Summer Song*, *Sun Flower Lion*, *Billy Miller Makes a Wish*, *A House*, and *Little Houses*.

He lives with his family in Madison, Wisconsin. You can visit him online at [www.kevinhenkes.com](http://www.kevinhenkes.com).



# The Year of Billy Miller



## Questions for Group Discussion

1. How does Billy's father support and encourage him when he is fearful or troubled?
2. What are some of the situations Billy worries about? How does Billy's worrying affect his actions?
3. How does Billy feel when Ms. Silver tells him he is smart? Why is it such a relief for him to hear praise from his teacher?
4. How does Billy treat Sal? Why does she irritate him so much? Do Billy's feelings toward his sister change?
5. Why does Billy want to call his father Dad instead of "Papa"? How do his parents react to their new names?
6. What does Billy's dad mean when he talks about something "shredding his heart"? How does Billy react to his father when he hears this phrase?
7. How does Billy feel when his attempt to stay awake all night fails? Why was it so important to him to achieve his goal of staying up all night?
8. Throughout the book, Emma says unpleasant things to Billy, and her comments motivate him to action. What does Billy accomplish because of Emma's remarks?
9. How does Billy decide whom to write his poem about? Why does he choose his mother?
10. On page 10, Billy's papa encourages him with the thought that his second-grade year will be "the Year of Billy Miller." Then on page 229, Billy tells his mother, "This is the Year of Billy Miller." What lessons does Billy learn throughout the book that help him grow from a scared second grader to a confident boy?

## Extension Activities

1. **Chinese New Year.** Ms. Silver teaches her students about Chinese New Year. Ask each of your students to select one of the animals in the traditional twelve-year lunar cycle. Have students draw a picture of the animal and write a short explanation of its meaning.

2. **Found-Art Sculpture.** Ask students to bring small items from home that they find interesting and unique. They can ask their parents to help them look in the garage, attic, or drawers. Once the objects are collected, supply the students with glue, cardboard, string, and other art supplies so they can make a found-art sculpture. Students can present their sculptures to the class and discuss the meaning behind them. Display the sculptures in the school library.
3. **Diorama-Rama.** Ask students to create a diorama of one of their favorite rooms. It could be a room in their home or a room in a place they enjoy visiting: the zoo, museum, or Grandma's house. Students can share their dioramas by telling the class where the room is located and what it means to them.
4. **Found Family Poetry.** Ms. Silver asked her students to write a poem about a family member. In turn, ask your students to write a "found" poem. Each student can select one family member and write a poem about that person by "finding" at least ten phrases or parts of sentences from anywhere in *The Year of Billy Miller* and using those phrases as a starting point for their found poem. Students can revise and add to their phrases so that they're relevant to their family member. Then plan a poetry slam for your class to read their poems for their classmates and families.
5. **Dialogue with a Difference.** Have students read the conversation between Ms. Silver and Billy on pages 45–50 and discuss the fact that the scene is written from Billy's point of view. Then, as a class, rewrite the scene from Ms. Silver's point of view, to demonstrate how meaning can change depending on point of view. Then ask students, with a partner, to select a scene in the book where Billy has a conversation with one of the other characters. Ask students to rewrite the dialogue from the other character's point of view. Have students perform the "new" scene for their classmates.

Guide prepared by Susan Geye, Coordinator of Library Services, Everman Independent School District, Everman, Texas.



# Billy Miller Makes a Wish



## Questions for Group Discussion

1. Why do you think Billy is having a hard time calling his father Dad rather than Papa? Does it make a difference to his parents what he calls them? Does it make a difference to him?
2. What is the best birthday present Billy receives? What is the worst? Why is Billy afraid that his birthday wish has made bad things happen? How does Papa make him feel better?
3. Compare Billy and his sister Sal. Besides their difference in age, how are their personalities the same and how are they different? Are there any ways in which Billy and Sal are similar?
4. How do Billy, Sal, and Mama each react to Papa going away during the week? How does his absence affect each member of the family? Why does Billy feel at the end of the week as if Papa has been gone “forever” (p. 110)?
5. Why does Billy’s mother decide to clean the basement while Papa is away? What makes her say, “Sometimes I wish I could see the world through your eyes, Billy Miller”(p. 53)? Why do you think she later changes her mind about cleaning the basement?
6. What is it about the basement of their house that reminds Billy of a bat cave? Why does he think it is his fault when an actual bat flies around the basement? How does Billy react to that event?
7. Why does Billy feel responsible when Sal uses his markers on her legs? What does he mean when he says that this happened “on his watch” (p. 101)? How does Mama make him feel better? How does a bad situation turn into a funny and interesting one later?
8. Why is Billy so embarrassed by the “mail” that Sal delivers in the neighborhood? Is he more embarrassed by Sal’s behavior or by the content of the letters? Why didn’t he pay more attention to what Sal was doing?
9. How do the firefighters turn Billy’s fear of the fire into a good feeling? What is Papa’s reaction to learning about the fire? Why is Billy’s Welcome Home sign for Papa so appropriate?

10. Describe the “kind of excitement Billy liked” (p. 170). What kind of excitement do you like to have in your life? How did Billy’s birthday wish come true “in the best possible way” (p. 179).

## Extension Activities:

1. **Bat Man.** Billy hears some new facts about bats from Nate, the Bat Man who helps to remove the bat from the basement. Find out for yourself more about bats and why Nate and Billy both like them. Make a list of the things you learned about bats that you didn’t know before. <https://animals.sandiegozoo.org/animals/bat>
2. **Helpers Make a Difference.** Billy thinks it would be good to be a paramedic (also called an Emergency Medical Technician, or EMT) when he grows up. Look up what you would need to do to become one of these helpers. What special skills would you need to learn? What if you wanted to be a firefighter, like the ones who help at the end of this story? What skills would you need to learn? What kind of equipment would you have to use? Write or draw a description of one of these helpers.
3. **What Is Time . . . Really?** Billy says that “the day had been a long one—it felt like a year” (p. 110). Later he dreams about a water slide that would leave him airborne for ten seconds—“a very long time if you actually timed it” (p. 119). Read about the different ways we experience the passage of time: <https://www.exactlywhatistime.com/psychology-of-time/time-perception>. Think of a period in your life when time seemed to be longer or shorter than if you measured by the clock. What was happening that might give you a different sense of time?
4. **Wishes That Come True.** Billy worries that his birthday wish has made bad things happen, but there are people in the world who are dedicated to the best kind of wish fulfillment. For children who are faced with life-threatening illnesses, the Make-a-Wish Foundation helps make their greatest wishes come true. Find a story about one of those children and write about the difference the wish made in their life. <https://wish.org/about-us>



Guide prepared by Connie Rockman, Youth Literature Consultant.



# Oh, Sal

## Questions for Group Discussion

1. Describe Sal's feelings about the new baby when she first sees her. How would you describe a feeling "as if a tiny bell in Sal's heart had started to ring" (p. 2)? How do her feelings about the baby change after that first reaction?
2. What does Uncle Jake do that annoys Sal so much? How do her feelings about Uncle Jake change by the end of the week he spends with them? Does Uncle Jake remind you of relatives in your own family?
3. Why do you think it bothers Sal so much that the baby still doesn't have a name a week after she was born? Why do you think her parents are taking so long to name the new baby? If you could pick a name for a new sibling, what would it be?
4. How does Mama make Sal feel better about losing her favorite present? Why does Sal like to hear "stories in which Mama or Papa cried" (p. 31)? What is the effect on her of learning about Mama's silver seashell necklace and what happened to it?
5. What does Papa do to distract Sal from her worries after more snow falls? How does he help her feel better about her snow star? How does she feel after Billy and Uncle Jake race around the yard?
6. Why is Sal surprised to learn that Uncle Jake had a big brother, just like she does? How does it help her to know what life was like for her Papa and her uncle when they were kids? Discuss the importance of family stories and how they can help us understand ourselves better.
7. How does Sal feel about taking down the Christmas tree? Why does she have mixed feelings about it? Describe a favorite ornament or ornaments that are on your family tree, or a favorite holiday ritual that your family does together.
8. Discuss Sal's mixed feelings when she finally realizes where her missing underpants are. Why doesn't she want Billy and Uncle Jake to know after she finds them? How does she get distracted from worrying about who will find out?
9. Discuss the importance of the whole family making pizza together. How does the group activity help Sal with all her mixed-up feelings of the day? What does Uncle Jake do to make Sal feel better about him being there?

10. How does the new baby finally get a name? Describe Sal's feelings when her mother tells her that her letter seemed to be a sign. How does that change Sal's attitude toward the baby and her own place in the family?

## Extension Activities:

1. **Naming the Baby.** Did you know there is a list of all the names given to babies born in the United States every year? Check the decade when you were born to find out if yours is one of the popular names or whether it is unique. Do you know the story behind your name—why and how it was chosen? <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/index.html>
2. **Best Gift Ever.** Much of the plot of this book revolves around Sal's feelings about her favorite Christmas gift. Write a short story about one of your favorite gifts—for a holiday, a birthday, or a surprise. How did it make you feel to receive that gift? What was special to you about the gift? Have you given a gift to someone else that made them feel special?
3. **Drawing a Happy Anchor.** "Sal always liked having one thing that she loved best. A happy anchor in her life" (p. 8-9). Think of something in your life that is a "happy anchor" for you—a special possession, a toy, a piece of clothing, even a delightful memory. Draw a picture of the object or memory that brings you pleasure and makes you feel "anchored."
4. **Knowing Yourself.** Billy works on a homework assignment in which he must finish sentences that describe himself (p. 50-51). Pretend that is your assignment during a school break. How would you answer those questions? What other questions do you think would be part of that homework, and how would you answer them? Think of questions that would help your friends and family understand you better.
5. **Flower Family.** Sal's favorite present, underpants for every day of the week, are each decorated with a different flower—tulip, daisy, rose, poppy, pansy, zinnia, marigold. Make a drawing of each of these flowers—or work with a group of six other people and each draw a different flower. Look up information about that flower—when it blooms, what color it might be, how the petals are shaped, where it grows—and write a paragraph about the flower to go with your drawing. What flower would be your favorite? Which of these flowers could be a child's name?

Guide prepared by Connie Rockman, Youth Literature Consultant

