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This month we're celebrating Sally J. Pla's beautiful debut novel,
THE SOMEDAY BIRDS!

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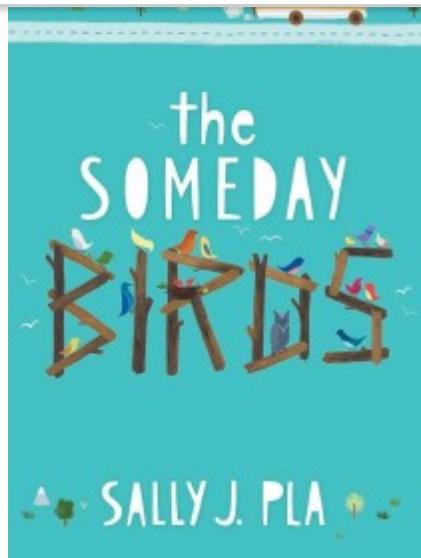
Hello, friends! Welcome to our first issue of Middle Grade At Heart. We're four middle grade authors who are passionate about great middle grade reads. Each month, we'll be sharing a variety of fun content to complement our chosen read, including recipes, activities, discussion questions, and even sometimes author interviews! In honor of road trip season, our very first selection is Sally J. Pla's quirky and heartwarming debut, *The Someday Birds*. We can't wait to have you along for the ride!

[Cindy Baldwin](#)

[Amanda Rawson Hill](#)

[Kit Rosewater](#)

[Julie Artz](#)

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(Click on the image to go to the book's Amazon page!)

what's it about?

The Someday Birds is a debut middle grade novel perfect for fans of *Counting by 7s* and *Fish in a Tree*, filled with humor, heart, and chicken nuggets.

Charlie's perfectly ordinary life has been unraveling ever since his war journalist father was injured in Afghanistan.

When his father heads from California to Virginia for medical treatment, Charlie reluctantly travels cross-country with his boy-crazy sister, unruly brothers, and a mysterious new family friend. He decides that if he can spot all the birds that he and his father were hoping to see someday along the way, then everything might just turn out okay.

Debut author Sally J. Pla has written a tale that is equal parts madcap road trip, coming-of-age story for an autistic boy who feels he doesn't understand the world, and an uplifting portrait of a family overcoming a crisis.

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AUTHOR INTERVIEW



(Click on Sally's picture to visit her website!)

Where did the idea for *The Someday Birds* come from?

When my middle son (who's autistic) was around five, he was totally into birds. He drew hundreds of beautiful bird drawings, copying them out of an Audubon book we kept on the coffee table. So the idea for Charlie, in the book, to love birds -- but to hate nature, getting dirty -- that comes from my son.

The conflict of whether or not to join in, it's central for Charlie. The world is messy, so if he is going to engage with what he loves -- birds, his dad, his family -- then he is going to have to get out there in the mess. It's a little like that for all of us, I think. Living means taking risks.

What's your favorite book (and why)?

Impossible question! Here are a few of my favorite characters, though: Jane Eyre. Austen's Emma. DuMaurier's Rebecca. Sydney Carton, from *A Tale of Two Cities*. Raymie Nightingale. Anne Shirley. Scout. Angie Carter's Starr. Opal Buloni. Miranda of *When You Reach Me*. Wendy Mass's Jeremy Fink. Harriet the Spy. Judy Blume's Margaret.

What's your favorite thing about writing?

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somewhere new! That sure doesn't happen every day, though!

What's your favorite thing about *The Someday Birds*?

The letters I am getting from kids. Some of the letters from kids just obliterate me with joy.

Two of Charlie's favorite things are bird-watching and chicken nuggets. Do you love birds and chicken nuggets as much as Charlie does?

I do love birds -- after learning so much about them, researching the book, I am fascinated by their behavior. Read about crows and corvids, sometime. It will blow you away, how smart they are. As for chicken nuggets, who doesn't like those? (Although I am mostly vegetarian, I have been known to cheat now and then.) I don't line them up, though. My quality control is far less rigorous than Charlie.

Lots of writers face rejection on their way to success. Had you ever been rejected before writing *The Someday Birds*? What tips or advice do you have for young aspiring writers?

It took me nine months to write *The Someday Birds*. But it also took me around 30 years. A lot of life experience and writing-experience preceded its creation. A lot of ups and downs. I spent four years writing a novel I never finished. But I learned a lot. None of that time was really wasted.

It helps to keep learning. Take classes, read. Dissect and analyze the books out there that you love -- figure out why.

Nothing worthwhile comes easy. So I think you have to learn to just enjoy the process -- let the sheer act of writing be the goal. Don't get caught up on what could happen or not happen once you have a manuscript. Don't craft your story thinking about what others might or might not want to hear. Just tell the story that moves you inside the most deeply. The one from your soul. Focus on the joy you get from trying to tell the best story you can.

And then what happens, happens.

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What are you working on next?

My next middle grade book is called JOHN LOCKDOWN IS IN THE BUILDING!, and pubs Feb 6, 2018, with HarperCollins. (Nervous Stanley Fortinbras enters a mega comics-trivia-treasure-hunt to try to win back his ex-best friend. Plus he accidentally invents this school-safety superhero named John Lockdown. Comics ensue!)

I also have a picture book that will be released in 2018 called Benny, The Bad Day, & Me, with Lee &Low, illustrated by the marvelous Ken Min!

Thanks so much for doing an interview with us, Sally!

discussion questions

1. Describe Charlie. What is he like? What did you like about him? Are there any ways that you are like Charlie?
2. Charlie has some autistic and OCD disabilities, but this is never mentioned outright in the story. Why do you think the author chose not to label Charlie?
3. When Ludmila is telling Charlie her story about Sarajevo, Charlie keeps thinking about hummingbirds. Why? What is he trying to tell Ludmila with the hummingbirds?
4. What was your favorite bird that Charlie saw and why? What birds would you put on a "Someday" list?
5. After Charlie gets hurt on the water slide, he says that getting hurt wasn't as bad as the fear of getting hurt. What does he mean? Have you ever experienced something like that?
6. How did Charlie's relationship with his family members change over the course of the book? Do you think the changes were because Charlie changed, or because his family changed, or both?
7. Social Studies Extension: Using a map of the US and the landmarks Charlie visited, map out the route he must have taken to get from San Diego to Virginia. Using the map scale, determine how many miles it is. Map out a road trip you would like to go on. How many miles is it?

recipe

Make Your Own Baked Chicken Nuggets!

"I've figured out that no matter where you get dragged in this world, you can usually survive by ordering the chicken nuggets."



Ingredients

- 1 lb chicken breasts, defrosted and sliced into 1"x2" slices (1"x4" is also fine for a tender instead of a nugget!)
- 2 egg whites, lightly beaten with a pinch of salt
- 1 c almond meal, or 3/4c wheat flour plus 1/4c panko or bread crumbs (can also substitute cornflakes)
- 1 t salt
- 1/2 t pepper
- 1 t mixed Italian herbs
- 1 t smoked paprika

Preparation:

Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Line a cookie sheet with parchment paper. Mix almond meal or flour/panko with herbs and seasonings in a shallow dish.

In a separate dish, beat egg whites with a pinch of salt.

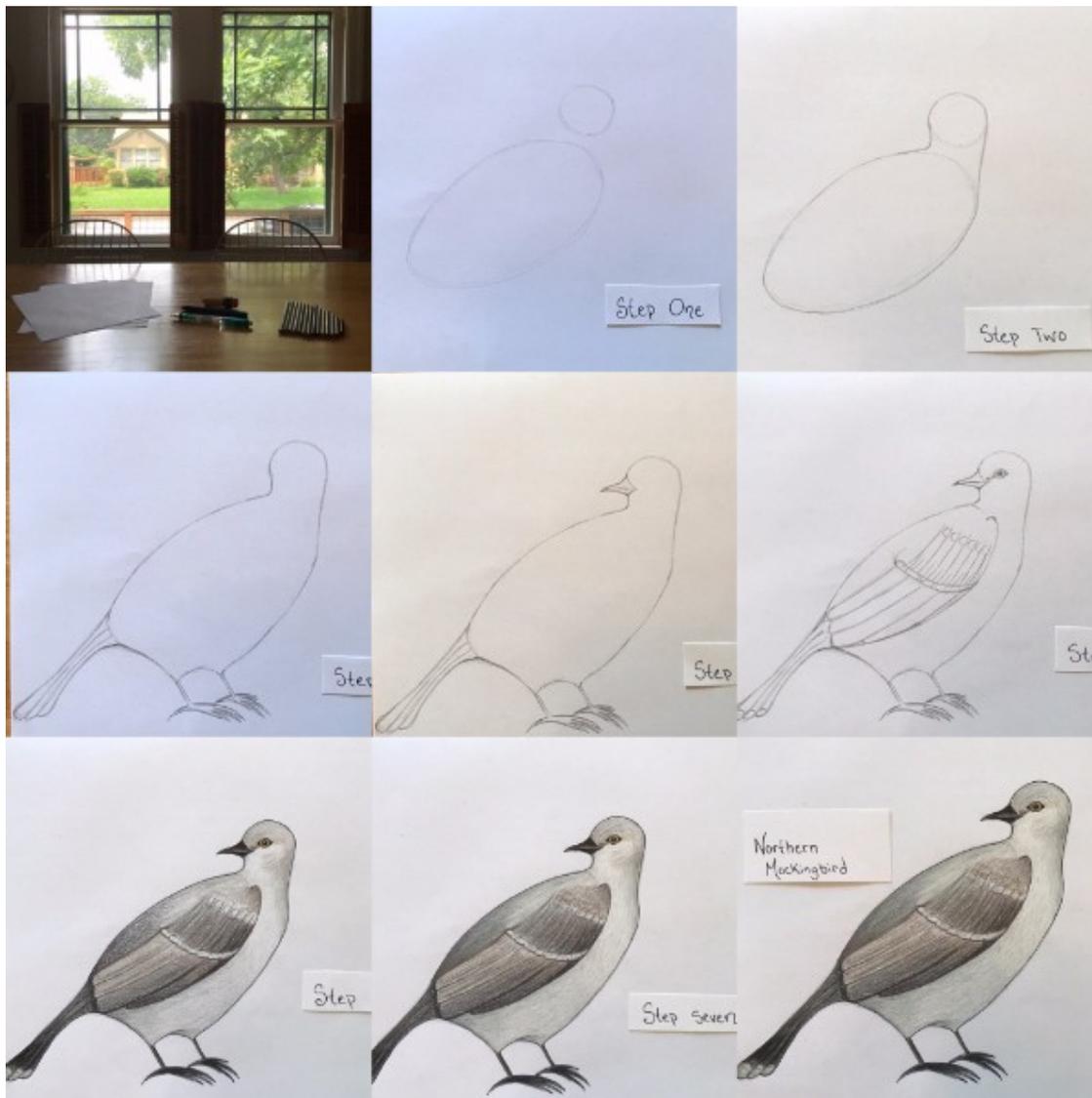
Dip each piece of chicken in egg whites, then roll in flour mixture to coat. Arrange on parchment paper. Bake for 15-20 minutes or until golden brown.

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BBQ sauce, Ranch dressing, honey, or ketchup. (Or, if you're a purist like Charlie, plain and unadorned!)

activity



How To: Draw Birds

Every fledgling birder needs to be able to sketch their finds!

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moving to drawing from real life. Find a picture of a bird you like and give it a try. You can also find these same instructions and pictures on our Instagram account.

1. Every bird is made up of two circular shapes. One for the body and one for the head.

Study your bird and look at the size and shape of the circle/oval that makes the head. Now look at the size and shape of the circle/oval that makes the body. Notice how close the head is to the body. A bird with a long neck (like a flamingo) will have the head circle far away from the body circle. A bird with no neck at all (like an owl) will actually have the head circle intersect with the body oval. Now very lightly draw the basic circle shapes of the head and body in the correct positions. (If you are drawing from nature, your bird might fly away before you are done with your picture. They might move after all you've done is draw the head and body circles. That's okay! Nature journalers use this as an excuse to study bird body positions and just draw a series of these light circles with just a few details to show how birds bodies and heads move.)

2. Draw the lines showing how the head connects to the body.

Does this bird have a short or a long neck? Fat or skinny? Curved or straight?

3. Draw the parts of the bird that jut out past the circle body shape.

What is the shape of the tail past the circle? Rectangular or triangular? Do any feathers from the wing go past the circle base you created? Draw the legs and feet where they come off the body. Remember to use light strokes and focus on the basic shapes before the details.

4. Do the same for the head.

How is the beak shaped and where does it come off the head? Is it long or short? Narrow or wide? If your bird has a crown of feathers on its head, add the shape of that now, as well.

5. Draw the shape of the eye and fill it in. Draw the line of the wing.

6. Color in the markings of the bird.

7. Add some lines to show how the feathers look and lay.

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Science Extension: Birds can have all sorts of differently shaped beaks. Why do you think this is? What is the relationship between what a bird eats and what kind of beak they have?

more fun stuff

Get ready for your own family road trip—just like Charlie! Then share it with us!

Announcing our summer photo contest!

Are you going on a road trip this summer? Short or long, it doesn't matter. Snap a photo and tag it with #mgroadtrip2017 on Instagram or Twitter by August 31 to enter our drawing for a nature journaling kit. (Perfect for beginning birders!)

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ROAD TRIP!

Whether it's an hour or two or a multi-state expedition, a road trip can either inspire excitement or dread. But now the bags and snacks are packed and it's time to buckle up and head out. Here are our top tips for making sure your road trip is a great experience for the whole family.

- TIP #1**
Give your schedule some wiggle room! More time means more opportunities to detour for random roadside attractions.
- TIP #2**
Pick a family-friendly audiobook! It will give you something to talk about all together and a great memory.
- TIP #3**
Make a soundtrack! Contribute to a playlist or take turns playing DJ. You'll need some tunes to make it through.
- TIP #4**
License plate bingo! There are lots of different car games to choose from, but this one is a classic.
- TIP #5**
Pit stops! Aside from meals and bathroom breaks, making stops to move and burn off energy is good for everyone!

Looking for the perfect road trip book?
We recommend *The Someday Birds* by Sally J. Pla.

Equal parts madcap road trip, coming-of-age story for a boy who feels like he doesn't understand the world, and an uplifting portrait of a family overcoming a crisis.

For more information about *The Someday Birds* and other great books, visit harpercollinschildrens.com

Cover art © 2017, Mike McLaughlin

If you liked *The Someday Birds*, check out these great road trip books next!

Walk Two Moons by Sharon Creech
Drive Me Crazy by Terra Elan McVoy
Savvy by Ingrid Law
Sisters by Raina Telgemeir

Do you have a middle grade road trip book you love? Tweet us @mgatheart, or tag us on instagram @mgatheart!

Next Month's Book Is:

[Midnight Without a Moon](#) by Linda Jackson

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Cindy Baldwin is getting everything finalized for her jacket copy. There will be a cover reveal this fall for her middle grade debut, [WHERE THE WATERMELONS GROW](#). Be sure to add it on Goodreads!



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