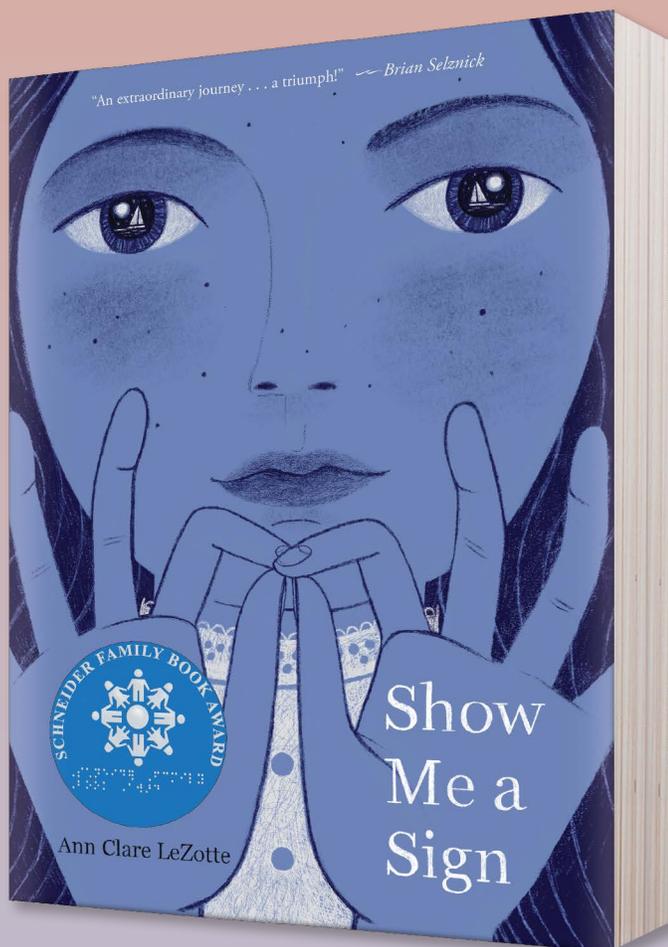
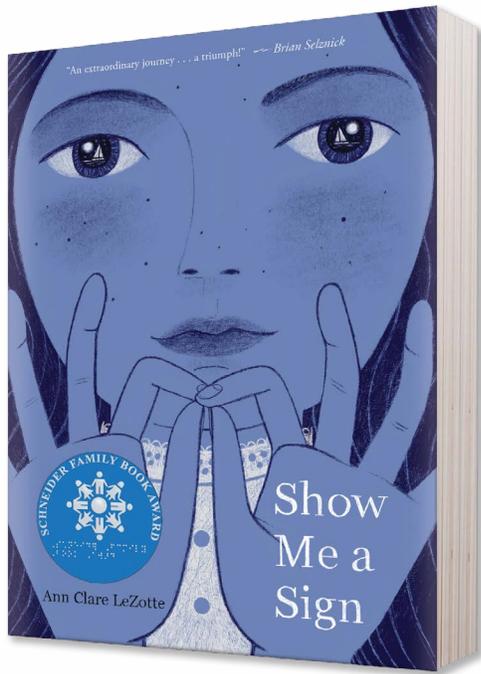


DISCUSSION GUIDE

AGES 8–12
GRADES 3–7

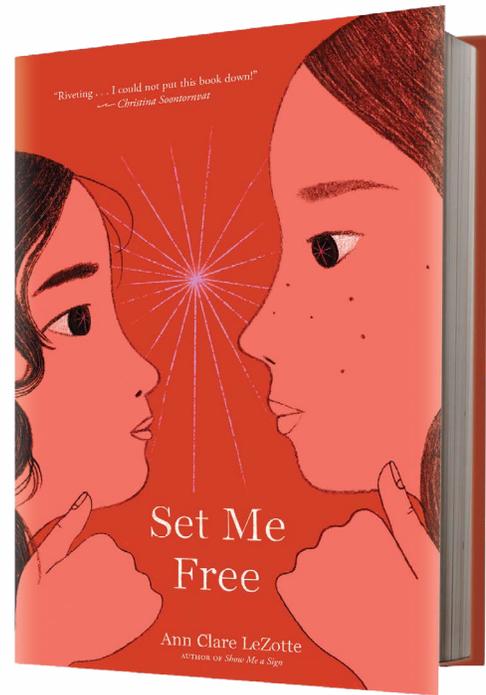
History, Perception, and Community in the Middle Grade Novels of Ann Clare LeZotte





About *Show Me a Sign*

Mary Lambert has always felt safe and protected on her beloved island of Martha's Vineyard. Her great-great-grandfather was an early English settler and the first deaf islander. Now, over a hundred years later, many people there—including Mary—are deaf, and nearly everyone can communicate in sign language. Mary has never felt isolated. She is proud of her lineage. But recent events have delivered winds of change. Mary's brother died, leaving her family shattered. Tensions over land disputes are mounting between English settlers and the Wampanoag people. And a cunning young scientist has arrived, hoping to discover the origin of the island's prevalent deafness. His maniacal drive to find answers soon renders Mary a "live specimen" in a cruel experiment. Her struggle to save herself is at the core of this penetrating and poignant novel that probes our perceptions of ability and disability.



About *Set Me Free*

Three years after being kidnapped as a "live specimen" in a cruel experiment to determine the cause of her deafness, Mary Lambert has grown weary of domestic life on Martha's Vineyard, and even of her once beloved writing. So when an old acquaintance summons her to an isolated manor house outside Boston to teach a young deaf girl to communicate, Mary agrees. But can a child of eight with no prior language be taught? And is Mary up to the task? With newfound purpose, Mary arrives only to discover that there is much more to the girl's story—and the circumstances of her confinement—than she ever could have imagined. Suddenly, teaching her and freeing her from the prison of her isolation, takes on much greater meaning, and peril.

About the Author



Photo credit: Elaine Needelman

A passionate advocate for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, as well as underserved youth from marginalized communities, Ann Clare LeZotte worked for many years as a youth librarian in Gainesville, Florida. Ann says, "During the pandemic, I've kept in touch with Deaf library youth learning at home with families who don't sign. The isolation is real—there will be a long-lasting gap. It's getting harder to tell them all their dreams can come true. But continuing Mary Lambert's story, the darkness and the light, shows them that they're still counted in." In her free time, Ann enjoys yoga and walking her dog, Perkins.

Discussion Questions for *Show Me a Sign*

1. When we first meet Mary, she is using her “birch stick to poke at curious things on the ground, like the tunnels made by moles.” (p. 5) What does this immediately tell us about her personality? How does the author use Mary’s actions throughout the story to tell us about her character?
2. In Chapter 1, Mary describes the dead whale on the beach being harvested for meat, oil, and baleen as “flensed, cut, and taken away, piece by piece.” (p. 6) How does this image foreshadow what will happen in the story?
3. George’s death is not mentioned outright until page 10, but his loss hangs over Mary and her family. How does the author tell us about his death and the effect it has had on the family? How do Mary, Mama, and Papa each deal with their grief?
4. The islanders push back against Andrew’s view that deafness is a disease or infirmity. How do the islanders view deafness? Do they consider being deaf to be a disability? Why do you think that many deaf people dislike terms like “hearing impaired,” “deaf and dumb,” or “deaf-mute”?
5. In her book, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha’s Vineyard*, anthropologist Nora Ellen Groce says of the islanders: “There was no language barrier and, by extension, there seems to have been no social barrier.” (p. 75) Give examples from *Show Me a Sign* of how the deaf and hearing islanders were completely integrated.
6. In 1975, Deaf scholar Tom L. Humphries coined the term “audism” to refer to the idea that those who can hear are superior to those who cannot and the discrimination that results. Give examples of the audism that Mary experiences in the story. What examples of audism have you witnessed in your life?
7. While audism refers to discrimination based on hearing status, there are several other kinds of prejudice and discrimination that come up in the story. Who experiences discrimination? On what basis? How are they treated differently? What do you think about this? What are some ways that someone might respond to unfair treatment? What can you do if you see someone being treated unfairly?
8. Thomas explains to Mary that his place is with the Aquinnah Wampanoag Tribe even though he is not related to them by blood. What, other than blood relations, might create a family or community bond? What do you think are the most important factors in holding a community together?
9. Before Andrew kidnaps Mary, what does his behavior show about his feelings toward deaf people?
10. Mary remembers George crying when he realized that Mary and Papa would never be able to hear the ocean inside a seashell. Do you think that Mary and Papa were upset about this? Why or why not?
11. Ann Clare LeZotte based the description of Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language in part on American Sign Language. (p. 171) She sometimes uses signing word order, especially when Mary is signing with her parents. Give examples of signing word order from the dialogue and how the author might have written out the sentences in English. Why do you think she chose to use signing word order in the places where she did?
12. When Mary is kidnapped and taken to Boston, she is cut off from most communication. What strategies does she use to understand what’s going on around her? How does she attempt to communicate with people there? Of the communication methods she tries, which are successful?

Extension Activities for *Show Me a Sign*

1. From the time that the first United States residential school for the Deaf opened in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817, almost all Deaf children on Martha’s Vineyard attended. They brought Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language with them, and it mixed with the French Sign Language used by teacher Laurent Clerc and other Indigenous sign languages and homemade gesture systems to become what we know today as American Sign Language (ASL). Though the last speaker of Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL) died in 1952, researcher Joan Nash has preserved some MVSL signs. Watch a comparison of MVSL and ASL vocabulary here: [youtube.com/watch?v=EzZsZrtdIIA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzZsZrtdIIA). Think about the vocabulary that researchers have been able to find. Why do you think these signs were important on the island? How are the MVSL and ASL signs similar and different?
2. Mary says that “our New World is someone’s old world.” (p. 256) Find out about the native people who lived on the land where you live at [native-land.ca](https://www.native-land.ca), then use the resources there to learn more about the history and modern-day presence of these tribes. What did you learn? Why is it important to know this history?
3. Andrew Noble, like many researchers in the 1800s, is unable to find a pattern in the distribution of deafness on Martha’s Vineyard. It wasn’t until Gregor Mendel established the science of genetics in the mid-1800s that scientists began to understand how genes affecting different traits are passed down. Do some research on Mendelian inheritance and Punnett squares (a tool for predicting how genes are passed down). How does Mendelian inheritance relate to the fact that one in four residents of Chilmark was deaf? Knowing that Mary is deaf and George was hearing, can you figure out which two genes each of her parents carry? Why would island deafness seem to skip some generations?
4. When searching George’s room, Mary finds the special map he made for her and Nancy: “Not the kind cartographers make, but a map with all the places that are important to us . . . It is a map of memories.” (p. 51) Choose a place that is important to you and draw your own “memory map.” Like George’s map, it may include references to special people and events.

Discussion Questions for *Set Me Free*

1. In Chapter 5, Mary looks to four sources of advice about whether she should take the position at the Vale. Who does she consult and why? Why do you think she chooses these four people instead of others who are important to her, such as her parents, Ezra, and Sally? How do their responses contribute to her decision?
2. Mary's expectations and understanding of her role at the Vale dramatically shift over the course of the book, but what do you think Beatrice expects when Mary first arrives? What goals do you think Beatrice has when she interacts with Mary? What methods of communication does Beatrice find most effective when she interacts with Mary? What textual clues can you find that support your analysis?
3. Mary communicates with hearing people off-island by "cobbling together methods of communication." (p. 81) What techniques does she use throughout the story to communicate with those who are not fluent in Martha's Vineyard Sign Language? How can you communicate with someone who does not know your language?
4. Though Nancy is devoted to the cause of women's rights, she expresses prejudice toward the Wampanoag, people of African descent, and Beatrice. What social or cultural factors might lead Nancy to think this way? Who or what social groups do you think might benefit from this prejudice? What might you say to someone who excluded certain women from a women's rights movement?
5. Mary worries that she has become too settled, but Mama wants her to settle down and stay on the island. Why do you think Mama wants Mary to be more like her? How does Mary feel about this? How would you react in her situation?
6. Papa toasts Mary by signing, "To our Mary, in all her beautiful contradictions." (p.16) What contradictions do you see in her character? Why do you think Papa calls these contradictions beautiful? What "beautiful contradictions" exist in your life?
7. Why does Mary go out on the mud flats at low tide, even though it is dangerous? Is this choice brave or reckless? How would you define the difference between the two? How does this relate to Mrs. Pye's statement that "Youth leap fearlessly, which is foolhardy—but it can also be marvelous"? (p. 45)
8. Sally faces discrimination in both Chilmark and Aquinnah because of her mixed Wampanoag, African, and European heritage. This is an example of intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to indicate how a person's social and political identities overlap and create different degrees of oppression or privilege. Choose another character in *Set Me Free* and identify examples of intersectionality in their life, including race, hearing status, gender, language fluency, economic status, social class, and other factors. How does the intersection of those identities affect how that character engages with the world and with other people in the book?
9. Sally tells Mary, "There are different ways to be bold as we grow." (p. 27) How does Mary demonstrate boldness throughout the story? How do her later actions show growth or maturity compared to her earlier actions?
10. The term "Deaf Gain," coined by Deaf artist Aaron Williamson, reframes the idea of hearing loss by focusing instead on the unique benefits of Deaf peoples' experience and perspective, and how they contribute to the greater good of all humanity. One example of Deaf Gain in *Set Me Free* is the joke Mary shares with Mr. Butler after a night of thunderstorms: "I slept without interruption. You?" (p. 36) What other examples of Deaf Gain can you find in the story?
11. As she is leaving Martha's Vineyard to go to the Vale, Mary notes that she is "looking toward the future, but unable to free myself from the past." (p. 56) How does she resolve this conflict by the end of the story?
12. Though many islanders insist that Mary's ancestor Jonathan Lambert returned prisoners to America, Mary faces the ugly truth that he was actually selling freedmen back into enslavement. Why do you think so many of the townsfolk are unwilling to face the truth? Why is Mary determined to do so? What makes it so difficult to face unpleasant or disturbing truths about our history? What can we do to make it easier to face and address uncomfortable truths?
13. Though Mary sees Nancy's prejudice, she resolves to be patient with her. How does Mary challenge Nancy to look outside of her own perspective, while still maintaining their friendship?
14. As Mary leaves the Vale, she observes that "forsaking Beatrice means abandoning myself." (p. 175) What does she mean by this? Why can't she just walk away?
15. At the end of the book, Mary notes, "The difference between victims and survivors is whether you're found in time. We cannot swim while the other sinks." (p. 265) Do you agree with this statement? In what ways do you see this play out in the story?
16. The last line of the book reads, "This island will no longer hold me." (p. 265) Based on this statement, what do you think Mary will do next?

Extension Activities for *Set Me Free*

1. Though Martha's Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL) was one of the building blocks of modern-day American Sign Language (ASL), the manual alphabets used in each language are totally different. The two-handed manual alphabet Mary uses derives from British Sign Language, while American Sign Language uses a one-handed manual alphabet derived from French Sign Language. Learn and practice the two manual alphabets at the links below and practice fingerspelling your name in each language.

British Manual Alphabet:
 - Printable: storiesbyhand.files.wordpress.com/2021/06/british-sign-language-manual-alphabet-handout.pdf
 - Video (The Deaf Academy): youtube.com/watch?v=DglvXXdwjvwAmerican Manual Alphabet:
 - Printable: storiesbyhand.files.wordpress.com/2020/10/american-manual-alphabet.pdf
 - Video (ASL That): youtube.com/watch?v=tkMg8g8vUo
2. Thomas says, "The attainment of a purity that's never existed poisons the people and land we share." (p. 253) Beginning in the late 1800s, the eugenics movement took hold, spreading ideas about "improving" the human race by eliminating "undesirable" genetic traits. These ideas were used to justify discrimination, prejudice, and even killing of people who were thought to be "inferior." Inventor Alexander Graham Bell was a prominent proponent of eugenics, and even used research he had done on deafness on Martha's Vineyard in his theories. Do some research on Bell's involvement in eugenics. What do you think of his theories?
3. After discussing the ways Mary communicates with non-signers, designate a period of time where no one can use their standard method of communication. If you are in a speaking environment, consider implementing silent time and practice communication through signs, gestures, writing, and other means. Once you return to your typical communication method, discuss the ways you communicated. How did it feel when you couldn't use your typical method to share what you wanted to communicate? Were you able to find a new or different way to share it and be understood?
4. Play "Who's the Leader?" This silent game develops visual awareness. Players stand in a circle. Choose a guesser, who steps outside the circle and covers their eyes. Then silently choose one person in the circle to be the leader. The leader begins an action, such as tapping their head or swaying their arms. The other players must copy the leader. Tap the guesser on the shoulder to let them know it's time to stand at the center of the circle. The guesser must try to figure out who is the leader. The leader must change the motion every thirty seconds or so, and the other players should try not to watch the leader too obviously. Once the guesser gets the answer, the leader becomes the guesser, and the group chooses a new leader.

Curriculum Resources and Further Reading

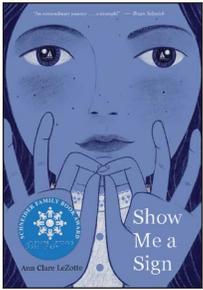
Articles and Websites

- "The Hidden History of Martha's Vineyard Sign Language: How a deaf utopia was uncovered in the 1970s" by Natalie Zarrelli: atlasobscura.com/articles/the-hidden-history-of-marthas-vineyard-sign-language
- "The Island that Spoke by Hand—Uncovering the history of Deaf culture on Martha's Vineyard" by Shelley Quezada: mbc.state.ma.us/mbc_blog/2017/06/22/the-island-that-spoke-by-hand/
- "Martha's Vineyard Island and Sign Language": handspeak.com/learn/index.php?id=366
- "Martha's Vineyard" by Edmund West: britishdeafnews.co.uk/marthas-vineyard/
- "Throwback Thursday: When Martha's Vineyard Had Its Own Sign Language" by Madeline Bilis: bostonmagazine.com/news/2016/07/21/marthas-vineyard-sign-language/
- "The Deaf Vineyarders Who Talked with Their Hands": newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/deaf-vineyarders-talked-hands/
- "Deaf Culture on Martha's Vineyard": npr.org/transcripts/6254177
- "The Life and Death of Martha's Vineyard Sign Language" by Cari Romm: theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/09/marthas-vineyard-sign-language-asl/407191/
- "How the Wampanoag Indians Took Back Gay Head": newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/wampanoag-indians-took-back-gay-head/
- "Still Where They 'Belong': Aquinnah Wampanoag Tribe Tells Its Story with New Cultural District": wbur.org/artery/2016/08/09/aquinnah-wampanoag-cultural-district/
- "Deaf: Cultures and Communication, 1600 to the Present": onlineexhibits.library.yale.edu/s/deaf-culture/page/home
- "Deaf-gain: A Hearing Person's Loss": handspeak.com/learn/index.php?id=340
- "Mendelian Inheritance": genome.gov/genetics-glossary/Mendelian-Inheritance
- "Introduction to Heredity": khanacademy.org/science/high-school-biology/hs-classical-genetics/hs-introduction-to-heredity/v/introduction-to-heredity
- "She Coined the Term 'Intersectionality' Over 30 Years Ago. Here's What It Means to Her Today": time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/

African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard: mvafricanamericanheritagetrail.org
Aquinnah Wampanoag Indian Museum: aquinnah.org
Martha's Vineyard Museum: mvmuseum.org/exhibitions/online/
National Association of the Deaf: nad.org
Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head: wampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/

Books

Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard by Nora Ellen Groce
My Heart Glow: Alice Cogswell, Thomas Gallaudet, and the Birth of American Sign Language by Emily Arnold McCully



HC: 9781338255812 • \$18.99
PB: 9781338255829 • \$7.99
Also available as an ebook and audiobook

Praise for *Show Me a Sign*

Winner of the 2021 Schneider Family Book Award • NPR Best Books of 2020
Kirkus Reviews Best Books of 2020 • School Library Journal Best Books of 2020
New York Public Library Best Books of 2020 • Chicago Public Library Best Books of 2020
American Indians in Children's Literature Best Books of 2020
Bank Street Best Children's Books of 2021
2020 Jane Addams Children's Book Award Finalist
2020 New England Independent Booksellers Award Finalist

"LeZotte's novel is more than just a page-turner. Well researched and spare, it's a sensitive portrayal of a young girl's fight for respect and human dignity."—*New York Times Book Review*

★ "LeZotte weaves threads of adventure, family tragedy, community, racism, and hearing people's negative assumptions about Deaf people into a beautiful and complex whole. Mary overcomes her own ordeal with the support of her community, but in the process she discovers that there is no silver bullet for the problems and prejudices of the world . . . LeZotte acknowledges the racial tensions among the English, Black, Irish, and Wampanoag residents of Martha's Vineyard, creating a dynamic that Mary interacts within but cannot fix . . . A vivid depiction of Deaf community along with an exciting plot and beautiful prose make this a must-read."—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

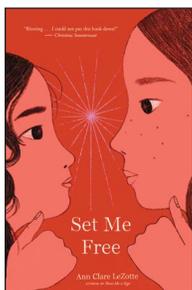
★ "Everything about this novel is nuanced, from the syntax of the sign language to the discussions of island politics and history. Mary's dramatic adventure will enthrall readers, but her internal journey—from being an uncomfortable witness to prejudice, to experiencing it herself, to determining to oppose it by leading by example—is equally important, and profound."—*Horn Book*, starred review

"Precise and thoughtful . . . LeZotte, who is Deaf, makes the point that nothing should stand in the way of building community and seeking equality, a sentiment that resonates today."—*Booklist*

★ "LeZotte crafts a moving tale of 1805 Martha's Vineyard that highlights issues still relevant more than 200 years later, including racism, ableism, and prejudice . . . these themes add nuance to the expertly crafted story of Mary, her response to her situations, her courage, and her hope that she will reunite with the community she loves. Exceptionally written, paced, and full of topics that will inspire deep discussion. A valuable addition to secondary elementary or middle school collections."—*School Library Journal*, starred review

★ "LeZotte's engrossing historical novel explores prejudice and racism through the eyes of 11-year-old Mary Lambert, who is deaf . . . LeZotte, who is deaf, deftly connects the islanders' prejudice against the Wampanoag to the mainlanders' view of deaf individuals as lesser; Mary's progressive attitudes feel modern while aligning with her character's sensibilities."—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"An interesting and very enjoyable work of historical fiction about a time period and topic that has rarely been written about . . . LeZotte's writing is fresh, crisp, and exciting. The way she portrays the deaf community and the nuances of sign language make the story all the more informative and readable . . . The information in her [back matter] notes is so intriguing."—*School Library Connection*, highly recommended



HC: 9781338742497 • \$18.99
Also available as an ebook and audiobook

Praise for *Set Me Free*

"Mary and her world are instantly captivating, and her daring rescue mission will keep readers hooked until the very end. In addition to the central themes of ableism and language deprivation, LeZotte naturally weaves in social issues of the time that still resonate today, including racism, colorism, feminism, and colonialism . . . A simultaneously touching and gripping adventure."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"LeZotte never shies away from addressing racism, ableism, or sexism . . . many of the book's themes resonate today, as Mary fights for the rights of all people and offers hope to readers facing challenges."—*Booklist*

"Mary seems set to become a true hero-adventurer, an almost larger-than-life sleuth, teacher, and woman of action."—*Horn Book*

Discussion guide written by Kathy MacMillan, author, librarian, and nationally certified American Sign Language interpreter. Kathy is the author of nineteen books for children and adults, including the Little Hands Signing series from Familius Press. She presents storytelling programs that introduce basic American Sign Language for all ages as well as trainings for librarians and educators to better serve the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. She maintains an extensive ASL resource listing at StoriesByHand.com.



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