

TWENTY-ONE ELEPHANTS BY PHIL BILDNER



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From School Library Journal

Kindergarten-Grade 2—From toddlerhood on, Hannah has watched the building of the Brooklyn Bridge and cannot wait to walk across it into Manhattan. Her father does not trust the structure and refuses to allow her to cross it. They attend the opening ceremony with President Chester A. Arthur, the mayor of New York, and Mrs. Emily Roebling (the chief engineer), but nothing will convince the man that the architectural marvel is safe. To cheer her up, her father takes her to the circus, where she shares an idea with P. T. Barnum. He shows her a flyer (that readers do not see) advertising a circus parade with the famous Jumbo in the lead. A few days later, 21 elephants cross the bridge and Hannah's father is convinced that it is secure. While the realistically rendered watercolors give a reasonably accurate view of life during the period, Hannah seems to grow very little. It took about eight years to complete the project and the child never looks older than five or six. The author's note indicates that P. T. Barnum actually did parade his elephants over the Brooklyn Bridge in 1884. This title would add a little something to a unit on transportation or New York City history, but it doesn't capture the real excitement the bridge held for many people at that time.—Susan Lissim, Dwight School, New York City

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From Booklist

Gr. 1-3. In this neatly told story based in fact, Hannah grows up watching the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge, the world's first steel suspension bridge; but when it's finally completed, her father is afraid to let her walk across it to Manhattan. Others repeatedly echo his fears, but Hannah knows every little thing about the bridge and attempts to reassure naysayers with facts about the 14,680-ton modern marvel. Finally, during a trip to the circus, she asks P. T. Barnum if his 21 elephants could parade across the bridge to prove its safety once and for all. Proclaiming, "Great minds think alike," Barnum proceeds with the stunt he had already planned, and the elephants change her father's mind. Though Hannah is Bildner's invention, a note explains that Barnum did, indeed, march Jumbo and company across the bridge on May 17, 1884. Expressive, warm-hued paintings featuring apple-cheeked characters, capture nineteenth-century Brooklyn as well as Hannah's bright-eyed enthusiasm for the "metal monster." A bibliography is appended. Karin Snelson

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About the Author

Phil Bildner is a former New York City public school teacher who lives in Newburgh, New York. He spends much of his year visiting schools and libraries around the country and world. He is the author of over twenty books including the middle grade novel *A Whole New Ballgame* and picture books *Marvelous Cornelius*,

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LeUyen Pham is the acclaimed illustrator of a number of books. She lives, works, and teaches in San Francisco, California.

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TWENTY-ONE ELEPHANTS BY PHIL BILDNER PDF

Step right up, ladies and gents.

Believe the unbelievable and dream the impossible because Hannah, the little girl with big dreams, is coming your way.

Come and see for yourself her bold acts of bravery, her courageous conviction as she proves to the world that the Brooklyn Bridge is safe to cross.

But she can't do it alone.

P. T. Barnum and his parade of twenty-one elephants provide a spectacular show that will save the day!

Impossible, you say?

Then you'll have to look inside.

You won't want to miss this, the greatest show on earth.

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- Brand: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers
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LeUyen Pham is the acclaimed illustrator of a number of books. She lives, works, and teaches in San Francisco, California.

Most helpful customer reviews

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Mr. Barnum say you'll go with us

By E. R. Bird

Phil had to be at least slightly peeved. In 2004 he wrote and published the amusing little book, "Twenty-One Elephants". It was an amusing and slightly fictionalized retelling of that magnificent publicity stunt P.T. Barnum engineered with his pachyderm crew over the newly finished bridge across the boroughs. Then, in 2005, out comes "Twenty-One Elephants and Still Standing" by April Jones Prince. Same story but without the adorable little girl story Bildner had added to his tale. Compare the two and you'll find that Prince is all-facts all-the-time while Bildner uses the already existing facts to make a cute l'il ole story. Bildner might have ended up with the less popular of the two titles had he not been paired with illustrator extraordinaire, LeUyen Pham. I've recently converted into a Pham fan myself, and to my mind she can do very little wrong. Though "Twenty-One Elephants" will not provide you with as factual a book as its more recent successor, it's a story that's bound to appeal to kids from Brooklyn and beyond.

When the Brooklyn Bridge was first built in 1884 it was considered to be an architectural marvel by the critics. By the people who'd actually have to travel over it, however, it looked dangerous. For young Hannah, the bridge has been slowly going up her entire life. Now that it is finished, however, Hannah's father considers the structure too flimsy to risk his only daughter on. Determined to convince her papa that it is safe, Hannah appeals first to her immediate family, then her schoolmates, and finally her neighbors. No one can believe that the Brooklyn Bridge is safe, though. In an attempt to cheer his little girl up, Hannah's father takes her to the Barnum and Bailey Circus. Once there, she hatches a plan and gets the attention of Mr. P.T. Barnum himself. Soon thereafter, P.T. Barnum and all twenty-one of his elephants traipse across the Brooklyn Bridge and Hannah's father is at last convinced that the structure really is safe. An Author's Note gives us the facts of the matter and there is a helpful bibliography that provides more information on the event.

Of course there was no little girl named Hannah. Mr. Barnum was perfectly capable of thinking up publicity stunts on his own without any outside preschooler intervention. Author Phil Bildner acknowledges this fact in his Author's Note with the statement that, "Surely, somewhere in Brooklyn, there must have been a little

girl who saw the bridge as her opportunity. And who's to say that some little girl - some little Hannah - wasn't the source of his [P.T. Barnum's] inspiration?". Who indeed? I remember being in elementary school as a child and learning about the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge. At the time, I didn't quite understand why a Michigan kid should have to learn about a bridge that was so very far away from Kalamazoo. Looking at this book, the appeal of the process is now greater. Bildner, who until now has limited himself to nostalgic baseball picture books, slips true-to-life facts into this book via Hannah's mouth. He also does nice things with repetition and having a little girl character who knows better than her peers but not in a pesky or annoying way.

As I mentioned before, I'm a big big LeUyen Pham fan. If you get a chance, definitely seek out her webpage for glimpses into her other work. In this particular book, Ms. Pham gives us a rather bright and cheery look at 1880's Brooklyn. Costumes, ethnicities, tenements, and cobblestone streets are all brought to bright and sparkling life. Ms. Pham gives Hannah a particularly apple-cheeked shiny look, one that doesn't necessarily suit her at times. There's an illustration of Hannah in the schoolroom where the other girls laughing behind her look like nothing so much as three-dimensional Campbell Soup kids, all missing teeth and sporting near-identical faces. Still, it's this very rounded quality that makes the book so doggone appealing. I also loved the fact that Hannah had scribbled facts about the Brooklyn Bridge, including a graphed drawing of it, on her slate at her desk in school. It's enough to make me forgive the completely stereotyped school librarian included as well.

The book's a beaut, no question. If you don't mind indulging your kids in a little Brooklyn-centered historical fiction, then I do indeed recommend this tale. A fun story that takes some small liberties with an amusing late 19th-century spectacle.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Deft blend of fact and fiction

By E. S. Will

This review first appeared in the "Ephrata (PA) Review":

The author, a middle-school teacher, has spun a captivating story around a historical event-the building of the Brooklyn Bridge in the late 1800s, and the initial hesitation of many residents to trust in it and use it.

Little Hannah's father is one of the doubters. Although Hannah grows up watching the bridge go up, and exhibits ceaseless fascination for the huge structure, her father "always clutched her hand a little tighter and drew in his breath a little deeper whenever she peered out at the modern marvel."

When they attend the circus, the herd of 21 elephants, Jumbo at the lead, gives Hannah an idea. She approaches P.T. Barnum to ask to borrow the elephants, but the great showman has already thought of the idea himself. "Great minds think alike, little lady," he tells Hannah.

The rest, of course, is verifiable history. Jumbo did indeed lead the herd across the Brooklyn Bridge on May 17, 1884, putting to rest doubts about the structure's safety and strength.

Bildner has engineered a deft blending of fiction and fact to construct a tender story, and Pham has illuminated it in golden tones, imparting an old-fashioned feel, and warmth between the doting father and his darling Hannah.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Twenty-One Elephants is the Best Book!

By Anu O. Okuyemi

This is why I think Twenty-One Elephants is a great book. Because, it will tell about a girl who wanted to cross the Brooklyn Bridge but her dad said it would collapse. And the girl thought of something great that would make her dad and the whole city think the Brooklyn Bridge is safe. that's why I think the Twenty-One Elephants is a great book!

- Rowan, age 7 from Brooklyn, NY

I really liked the book Twenty-One Elephants. I think it was interesting when a young girl asks the circus owner a question to show people that the bridge is safe so people can walk across the bridge. I think Twenty-One Elephants is great for all ages. Also I like the climax when the young girl asked the circus owner her question and you didn't know if he would say yes or no.

- Sebastien, age 8 from Brooklyn, NY

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