



THE PEOPLE'S PAINTER

HOW BEN SHAHN FOUGHT FOR JUSTICE WITH ART

BY CYNTHIA LEVINSON PICTURES BY EVAN TURK

ABOUT THE BOOK

A lyrically told, exquisitely illustrated biography of influential Jewish artist and activist Ben Shahn

“The first thing I can remember,” Ben said, “I drew.”

As an observant child growing up in Lithuania, Ben Shahn yearns to draw everything he sees—and, after seeing his father banished by the Czar for demanding workers’ rights, he develops a keen sense of justice, too.

So when Ben and the rest of his family make their way to America, Ben brings both his sharp artistic eye and his desire to fight for what’s right. As he grows, he speaks for justice through his art—by disarming classmates who bully him because he’s Jewish, by defying his teachers’ insistence that he paint beautiful landscapes rather than true stories, and by urging the U.S. government to pass Depression-era laws to help people find food and jobs.

In this moving and timely portrait, award-winning author Cynthia Levinson and illustrator Evan Turk honor an artist, immigrant, and activist whose work still resonates today—a true painter for the people.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

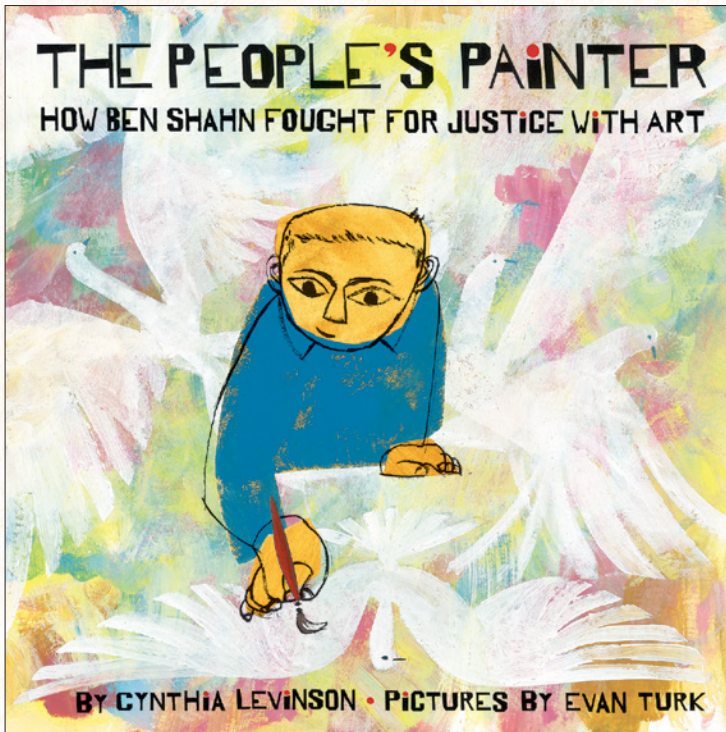
Since she doesn’t draw or paint, **Cynthia Levinson** tells true stories about brave people like Ben Shahn and the injustices they’ve faced through words. She loves doing research, which has allowed her not only to visit Shahn’s studio but also to walk with soldiers of the civil rights movement, fall off a tightwire, and read letters in a condemned building surrounded by police tape. Cynthia’s books for young readers have won many awards. She lives in Austin, Texas and Boston, Massachusetts.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Evan Turk is an Ezra Jack Keats Book Award–winning illustrator, author, and animator. He is the author-illustrator of *The Storyteller*, *You Are Home: An Ode to the National Parks*, and *A Thousand Glass Flowers*. He also illustrated *Grandfather Gandhi* and *Muddy: The Story of Blues Legend Muddy Waters*, a *New York Times* Best Illustrated Children’s Book. Originally from Colorado, Evan now lives in the Hudson River Valley of New York with his husband and two cats. He is a graduate of Parsons School of Design and continues his studies through Dalvero Academy.

THE PEOPLE'S PAINTER: HOW BEN SHAHN FOUGHT FOR JUSTICE WITH ART

by Cynthia Levinson, illustrated by Evan Turk



**PRAISE FOR
THE PEOPLE'S PAINTER:**

**A 2022 Robert F. Sibert Informational
Book Medal Winner**

**A 2022 Association of Jewish
Libraries Sydney Taylor Book Award
Notable Picture Book**

ISBN: 9781419741302

Ages 4-8

★★★★★ 5 STARRED REVIEWS!

★ *"A thoughtful introduction to this social justice artist."*

—*Booklist, starred review*

★ *"A marvelous spur to kids beginning to consider the way art can be political."*

—*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, starred review*

★ *"[Levinson's] celebratory text is well-complemented by Turk's strong and distinctively bold, colorful, mixed-media art... Excellent."*

—*Horn Book Magazine, starred review*

★ *"Bold, richly layered multimedia illustrations by Turk feature abstracted characters in Shahn's style, while Levinson's smooth, well-researched narrative provides a comprehensive introduction to a justice-minded painter."*

—*Publishers Weekly, starred review*

★ *"Well-researched and-sourced, this is a valuable addition to the canon of artist biographies."*

—*Kirkus Reviews, starred review*



ABRAMS

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

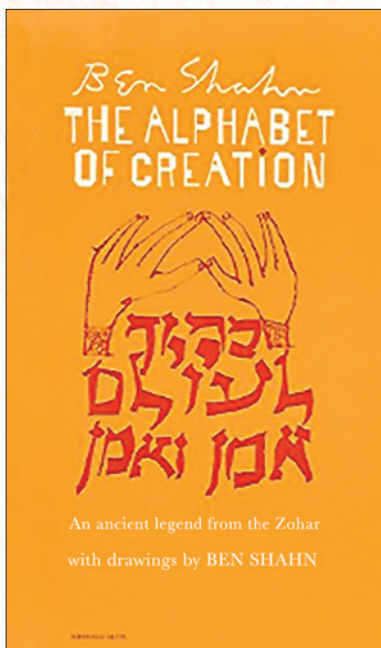
USING THE PEOPLE'S PAINTER IN YOUR CLASSROOM:

Use the discussion questions and activities below to introduce Ben Shahn and *The People's Painter* to your students. These prompts will help them think critically about the book's text, illustrations, and subjects including immigration, art appreciation, and social justice.

NEW LANGUAGE, NEW LETTERS

Shahn had a rich relationship with letter forms. It's amazing to think that Shahn, who only started to learn English as an eight-year-old, got to know the English alphabet so intimately during his sign-making apprenticeship as a teen. He often incorporated words into his artwork.

Here is the cover of his book *The Alphabet of Creation*. Notice how his Hebrew letters playfully dance across the page (from right to left, since that is how you read Hebrew).



• Discussion Question #1

Can words in English suggest movement and emotions too? The letters in the word *ball* might be bouncy, *water* might be wavy, etc. Can letters look happy or sad? Does adding color make a difference?

• Classroom Activity #1

Choose any subject. Have some fun drawing or painting words from English or your home language in a style that makes you think of what the words mean.

In his illustrations for *The People's Painter*, Evan Turk included Hebrew and English letters. He has said that he also included images that were more curved—like Hebrew letters—in the first part of the book, when Shahn is still in Lithuania. Once in the United States, some of the images reflect the straighter lines of English letters. The Hebrew alphabet is also known as the alef-bet (for the first two letters); you can see an example at jewfaq.org/hebrew_alphabet

• Classroom Activity #2

Look at the scenes in *The People's Painter* with Hebrew and English letters. Can you find images that remind you of Hebrew letters? Can you find images that remind you of English letters?

• Classroom Activity #3

Like Ben, many immigrants have struggled to learn a new language and culture when arriving from another country. Interview someone you know who has moved to a new country. Ask them what their experience was like moving to a new home and learning a new language. When they arrived, what did they discover that they liked? What did they dislike? (Young Ben Shahn hated tomatoes!) What do they miss about their homeland? If you have immigrated yourself, you can also speak from your own experience.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

ART APPRECIATION

Above all, Shahn was a storyteller. His art is meant to be accessible and often has a child-like feel to it. Turk uses a lot of the same techniques, such as distortion—changing the size of a person or thing—to make you feel different emotions.



• Discussion Question #1

Look at the illustration of the bullies looming over Ben as he draws their portraits. How does it make you feel? Why do you think the chalk hands are there? Who is big, and who is little? Who is powerful, and who is weak? What is the story that this picture tells you?

Younger students are not likely to know about the Sacco and Vanzetti case, which was one of Shahn’s most famous subjects, so it will require an introduction. In the 1920s Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were accused of murder and robbery in a controversial case that became famous around the world. They were eventually convicted and executed, but many people, including Shahn, believed that they did not get a fair trial due to anti-immigrant and anti-leftist feelings.

Shahn painted pictures and made murals about Sacco and Vanzetti. You can zoom in to see the detail in “The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti,” a mosaic mural created at Syracuse University in 1967. You can view it at bit.ly/sacco_vanzetti_mural. Notice the text on either side of the mural.

Lara Kuykendall’s Khan Academy essay provides background information about this piece. The essay is available at bit.ly/sacco_vanzetti_essay

• Discussion Question #2

Use the prompts below to guide a classroom or group discussion:

- Why are certain figures larger and others smaller?
- What emotions do the people show?
- How does this work of art make you feel about Sacco and Vanzetti?

Turk references actual work by Shahn in his illustrations. For example, in the double-page spread about Shahn’s documentary photography work, the black-and-white image of a woman with her arms crossed is likely based on a 1935 photo titled *Destitute*. View the photo at sfmoma.org/artwork/71.71.27

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Look at the second-last double-page spread of the story. The text begins, “For the next sixteen years, Ben continued to portray stories of people clamoring for their rights.” We see Shahn contemplating his paintbrush—and perhaps his next subject?—surrounded by some of the people he has painted. The portrait of Martin Luther King Jr. is from the March 19, 1965, cover of *Time* magazine. The image of Gandhi appears to be from a 1964 drawing.



• Discussion Question #3

Compare the original pieces (*Destitute*, the *Time* cover, and the Gandhi drawing) with the illustrations in the book. How do they differ? How are they the same?

On the double-page spread of a museum during Shahn’s travels to Europe and North Africa, there are six images that reference works by famous painters of the time. From left to right, they are paintings by Georges Rouault, Pablo Picasso, George Grosz, Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, and Joan Miró.



CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

• Discussion Question #4

Look at your chosen painting and get to know it. Does it tell a story? How do the colors make you feel? Look up the artist to find out when and where they lived and worked. Was their art part of an artistic movement, and if so, what was it called? Now when you see this painting in *The People's Painter*, it will seem like an old friend!

According to the Tate Modern museum in London, motifs are “a recurring fragment, theme or pattern that appears in a work of art” ([source](#)).

• Discussion Question #5

Talk about the motifs that you see in the book’s illustrations. Why do you think there are so many doves? And hands?

In his role as the 2020–2022 National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, Jason Reynolds created the “Write. Right. Rite.” series of short videos. In the fifth video, he challenges viewers to respond to a piece of art. [Watch the two-minute video here.](#)

Now it’s your turn to respond to some of the art in *The People’s Painter*!



• Discussion Question #6

Look carefully at the wordless triptych (three-part artwork) showing Ben’s family’s arrival in New York. Think about this double-page spread, and write down your thoughts. What do you see? What is happening? How does it make you feel? How does the illustrator’s use of color affect the mood? How can you recognize Ben’s family in the crowd? Why do you think there aren’t any words? If you prefer, you can share what you think in another way – through art, dance, storytelling, etc.

SIX-WORD MEMOIR

The Six-Word Memoir project, an activity launched by Larry Smith in 2006, provides an easy entrée for students to distill and share their thoughts about themselves and others. See [this brief article](#) for the method and steps. Here’s the first step: *Introduce the Six-Word Memoir concept as a way students can describe their life using just two rules: one, they must use six words exactly; and two, they should be words that the students believe to be true and are exclusively their own.*

• Classroom Activity #1

Invite students to write a Six-Word Memoir from Ben’s point of view. Here are a few examples:

- + “Draw in the margins without fear!”
- + “Artists should help heal the world.”
- + “Outrage at injustice fuels my art!”

EXPLORING MOTIVATION

The story begins and ends with the idea of drawing in the margins. Often students are horrified at the idea of drawing in a published book!

Discussion Questions #1–3

- + Why would young Ben do such a thing?
- + Why, as a grandfather, did he still encourage children to draw in the margins?
- + What does this tell you about how he thought artists should act?

Shahn defies authority in a number of ways when he sees people being mistreated. He stands up to a teacher who is being unfair, and even to a soldier in the street!

Discussion Questions 4–5

- + Is this being brave or foolish? Or both? Why?
- + Can you think of a time when you have spoken up because someone is not treating you or others fairly? How did the people around you react to what you said or did? Would you do the same thing now, or do something different?

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

FROM READING TO ACTION

There is a Jewish concept called *tikkun olam*—“repair the world”—that enjoins people to actively work for a better world. Shahn was drawn to socialist political causes, as when he championed Sacco and Vanzetti by painting pictures that helped bring attention to their plight. His documentary photography also served this larger purpose of placing social injustice in the public eye in order to advocate for change.

Classroom Activity Ideas

- ✦ You can make the world a better place in small ways as well as big ones. Draw or paint a picture, or take a photo to highlight a situation that needs improvement. How can you help?
- ✦ Volunteer at a food bank, help clean up litter, or participate in another activity where you can help other people or the planet.
- ✦ Are there people that you admire—living or dead, famous or not—because of what they do, or did, to help make the world a better place? Write a letter to thank them. Or write a poem to share your feelings about them.

BACKMATTER

Nonfiction books often have wonderful extras in the back of the book— in this case, notes from the author and illustrator, a timeline, selected bibliography, and source notes. We also see a photo of Shahn at work. Here are a few ways to use the back matter when introducing this book to students.

Classroom Activity #1 — Author and Illustrator Notes

- ✦ Read the author and illustrator notes to find out more about Shahn and why Cynthia Levinson and Evan Turk were drawn to his work.
- ✦ Think of someone who has had a strong influence on your life—a relative, a friend, a mentor, a role model—and pretend you’ve written or illustrated a book about that person. Now write your author or illustrator note to talk about why you wanted to share that person’s story.

Classroom Activity #2 – Timeline

- ✦ Timelines are a great way to summarize information. The timeline in *The People’s Painter* even tells you what is happening in the wider world during Ben’s lifetime.
- ✦ Create a timeline about something you know well – for example, what happened in your life last week. Then look at print or online news sources to add what was going on in the world at the same time. Do you see any connection between what you were doing and what was happening in the news?

Classroom Activity #3 – Selected Bibliography

- ✦ Backmatter often gives insight into how an author went about doing their research. The selected bibliography shows the extent of Levinson’s research for this book. She went beyond reading books and websites to conduct several personal interviews, and she even made visits to places important in Shahn’s life.
- ✦ If you were going to tell the story of someone’s life, where would you look for information? Choose someone from the past as the subject of your pretend biography. Think about where they lived, when they lived, what kind of work they did, what they did for fun, who their friends were.... Then make a list of the kinds of sources that you would want to consult for further research. If you need help, ask your librarian!

USING ART TO FIGHT FOR JUSTICE

Here are a few recent picture book biographies of artists, writers, musicians, and storytellers who, like Shahn, used their particular talents to highlight injustice and uplift marginalized communities. You could pair any of these books with *The People's Painter* and talk about how the subjects are similar to and different from Shahn.

Amescua, Gloria. *Child of the Flower-Song People: Luz Jiménez, Daughter of the Nahua*. Illustrated by Duncan Tona-tiuh. New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2021.

Broyles, Ann. *I'm Gonna Paint: Ralph Fasanella, Artist of the People*. Illustrated by Victoria Tentler-Krylov. New York: Holiday House, 2023.

Burgess, Matthew. *Make Meatballs Sing: The Life and Art of Corita Kent*. Illustrated by Kara Kramer. New York: Enchanted Lion Books, 2021.

Costanza, Stephen. *King of Ragtime: The Story of Scott Joplin*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2021.

Pimental, Annette Bay. *Pura's Cuentos: How Pura Belpré Reshaped Libraries with Her Stories*. Illustrated by Magaly Morales. New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2021.

Scott, Joyce, with Brie Spangler and Melissa Sweet. *Unbound: The Life and Art of Judith Scott*. Illustrated by Melissa Sweet. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021.

Tate, Don. *Pigskins to Paintbrushes: The Story of Football-Playing Artist Ernie Barnes*. New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2021.

Todd, Traci N. *Nina: A Story of Nina Simone*. Illustrated by Christian Robinson. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2021.

Williams, Alicia D. *Jump at the Sun: The True Life Tale of Unstoppable Storycatcher Zora Neale Hurston*. Illustrated by Jacqueline Alcántara. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2021.

AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR INTERVIEWS

Learn about how Levinson and Turk collaborated on this book and find out more about the art – both Turk's and Shahn's!

[Cynthia Levinson and Evan Turk Talk with Roger \[Sutton\]](#). (Horn Book, April 28, 2021)

[Beyond the Book with Evan Turk](#) (Abrams Books Youtube, January 26, 2021)

[The People's Painter: Resources for Teachers](#) at CynthiaLevinson.com (author's website)

This teaching guide was written by Annette Y. Goldsmith, Ph.D., Part-Time Faculty in the School of Information at Kent State University, where she teaches online graduate courses in children's literature and librarianship from her home in Los Angeles. Dr. Goldsmith is also Librarian at the Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel. She was a member of the 2022 Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award Committee that chose *The People's Painter* as their winner, though her work on the guide is independent of the committee. Special thanks to fellow committee members, especially Dr. Stan Steiner, Joe Prince, and Ellen Bunn, for looking over the draft and contributing their ideas.