

In the **Spotlight**

Grades
K-3

by | Sharron L. McElmeel

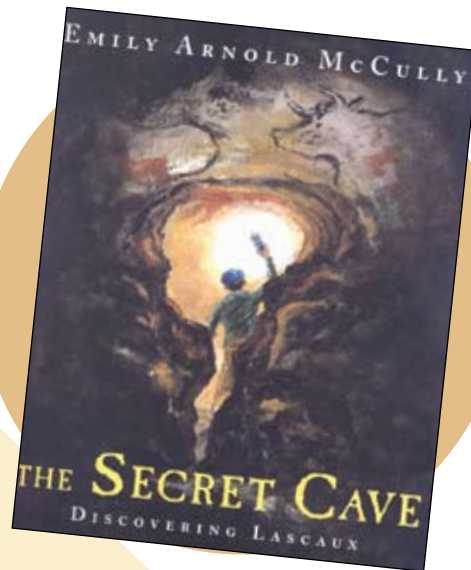
The Secret Cave: Discovering Lascaux by Emily Arnold McCully. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.

Curiosity Brings New Discoveries

Curiosity lies at the root of many marvelous discoveries, and on a late summer day in 1940, it was that very sentiment that led Jacques Marsal, Georges Agnel, and Simon Coencas to follow their friend, Marcel Ravidat, to the opening of a cave that Ravidat's dog had uncovered. The entrance was clogged with twigs and brush, but the boys' curiosity lured them through it to the tunnel beyond . . . and into the chambers of a cave that would prove to be one of the greatest and best-preserved canvases of ancient cave paintings ever discovered. Emily Arnold McCully bases her compelling tale on the recollections of Marsal, Ravidat, and the teacher and art expert who helped the boys and validated their discovery.

The Secret Cave begins in Jacques Marsal's schoolroom on the eve of World War II, when Marsal's teacher, Monsieur Laval, introduces Jacques and his classmates to information about prehistoric caves that lie in the surrounding French countryside. Jacques's curiosity is piqued by what he sees when the class is permitted to explore Font de Gaume, a cave that was found in 1901. Because no one protected and monitored Font de Gaume, Marsal and his fellow students see firsthand the disrespectful desecration that followed its discovery.

On September 12, 1940, a few short years after that inspiring field trip, Jacques is playing war games with two friends visiting from Paris, Georges Agnel and Simon Coencas. War is on everyone's mind—the Germans have invaded and captured Paris—but the boys are in an area of France not yet occupied by the Nazis. As they play, the three



friends come upon an older boy, Marcel Ravidat, who reports that his dog, Robot, found a strange opening in the ground the day before. The boys are keen to explore the opening; they have all heard the local legend of hidden treasure lying somewhere nearby in a tunnel built by a nobleman. Together, they clear away the vegetation surrounding the entrance, scramble through the hole, make their way down a shaft—and suddenly, they find themselves face-to-face with a hidden treasure of a much different sort: a menagerie of ancient animal paintings decorate the cave walls around them.

Jacques immediately recognizes the value of the drawings he sees on the walls. The colorful drawings are perfectly preserved. And although the boys vow to keep their discovery a secret, the news is soon out among the children of the community.

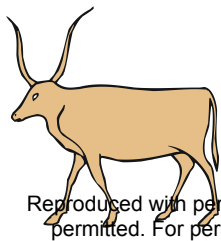
By September 16, the boys decide they must confide in Jacques's former teacher, Monsieur Laval. The educator initially believes the boys' story is a joke, and he sends an older former student to investigate. But when his charge reports back with drawings of the artwork in the cave, Laval is convinced that the boys have made an important discovery.

After the investigation of an art expert, the cave is opened for visitors under Jacques and Marcel's careful protection. Georges and Simon return to Paris. With World War II raging in France, the cave is closed, but it is reopened at war's end and millions of visitors come to see the caves and the marvelous paintings on the walls.

In an informative afterword, McCully writes that Simon Coencas survived World War II, but his parents perished in a concentration camp. During the war, Jacques Marsal was sent to a work camp in occupied France. Marcel Ravidat joined the French Resistance and used the cave as a secret storehouse for munitions. After the war, in 1948, Jacques and Marcel once again helped to open Lascaux to visitors. Tourism took a toll on the paintings, however; moisture and microorganisms brought in by visitors began to eat away at the paintings. The cave was later closed to everyone but researchers. However, an exact replica of the Great Hall of the Bulls and the Painted Gallery of Lascaux was created as Lascaux II in 1963 for all to enjoy.

The Secret Cave is told in a spare but informative narrative that will likely lead many inquisitive readers to seek more information about the Lascaux discovery. What do we know about the Font de Graume that inspired Jacques Marsal's interest in the protection of cave paintings? How did a cave that the whole community knew about become a secret place to stash munitions during World War II? Did no one tell the Nazis that the cave existed? Why did the colors of the drawings, brilliant and preserved for 17,000 years, begin to deteriorate in the few decades after the cave was opened?

Arnold states that photographs and modern drawings cannot do justice to the actual paintings in Lascaux. However, her beautiful illustrations for this book are breathtaking, themselves. Her careful use of light and dark make the cave appropriately spooky during its early stages of exploration, and the surrounding countryside lush and bright. McCully's sketchy but realistic watercolors are just right to convey the excitement of the discovery and the beauty of the prehistoric art. Endpapers show a map of the cave and samples of the drawings that populate the cave walls.



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More to Explore: Further Reading about Discoveries Made by Young People

- *Great Discoveries & Amazing Adventures: The Stories of Hidden Marvels and Lost Treasures* by Claire Llewellyn. Kingfisher, 2004.
- *Mary Anning: Fossil Hunter (On My Own Biography)* by Sally Walker. First Avenue, 2007.
- *With a Little Luck: Surprising Stories of Amazing Discoveries* by Dennis Fradin. Dutton, 2006.

For Older Readers: Investigating Connections

Cave Painting

With older students, explore beautiful art from pre-historic times to the work of modern masters with *Cave Paintings to Picasso: The Inside Scoop on 50 Art Masterpieces* by Henry M. Sayre (Chronicle Books, 2004). Also investigate cave paintings throughout the world using the Bradshaw Foundation website at www.bradshawfoundation.com.

Literary Connections: The Resistance in World War II

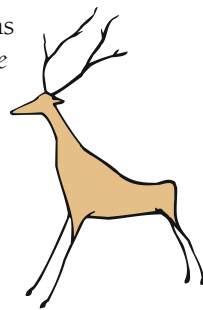
Investigate what the “resistance” was during World War II. Get a sense of the actions taken by youths in the Resistance by reading Mary Casanova's *The Klipfish Code* (Houghton Mifflin, 2007), which is set in Norway. Another story that details the involvement of young people in the Resistance is Mary McSwigan's fictional story, *Snow Treasure* (Puffin, 2006).

Rock Painting and Petroglyphs

While the paintings in the caves of France are most often referred to as cave or rock paintings, there are many drawings on rock and canyon walls in the Southwestern United States and elsewhere that are known as petroglyphs. Native Americans are thought to have been the artists who created these works. See examples of petroglyphs in the United States on the website created by Don Austin at www.petroglyphs.us.

Inventors to Investigate

Have students investigate inventors whose curiosity led them to create new products and make new discoveries. Use these stories to inspire young learners to look around their own surroundings more carefully, and to explore and develop their



own ideas. Consider holding a “curiosity fair” in which young learners showcase ideas they have tried, no matter whether they have been successful or not. Here are several ideas:

- Grayson Rosenberger, a fifteen year-old from Tennessee, invented an inexpensive artificial limb covering for amputees.
- Ana Lingenfelder, an eighth grader from Pennsylvania, invented an electronic hand-clap device to allow one person to have a partner for hand-clap games.
- Andrew Sutherland, a California high school student, developed an online memorization computer program to help others memorize vocabulary terms and related information. He has posted the program on the Web at quizlet.com. It's free so students can try it out.
- Ben Gulak created a unicycle-like motorcycle.
- Rich Stachowski invented the Water Talkie.
- Shannon Crabill dreamed up the “Create-your-own-message alarm clock.” (Talk Time)
- Tessanie Marek developed a crutch with a rest for the injured leg.
- Chester Greenwood invented ear muffs.
- George Nissen is responsible for the trampoline.
- Philo T. Farnsworth helped refine the concept of television.

Read more about these inventors and others in Paul Neimann and Kevin Cordtz's *More Invention Mysteries: 52 Little-Known True Stories*

Behind Well-Known Inventions (Invention Mysteries Books, 2006), and visit the National Museum of Education's website to read more about inventors young and old at www.nmoe.org.

Promoting Curiosity

To foster curiosity, encourage students to keep a Question Journal. An inexpensive spiral notebook, small enough to fit into a pocket, can be decorated and personalized, or a few folded sheets of paper can be cut and stapled to create a small booklet. Each day students should jot down at least one topic for possible investigation. Topics can be something that intrigues the writer from any area of the curriculum, personal reading, personal experiences, etc., and can be used for further research projects. For example, “After reading Emily Arnold McCully's *The Secret Cave*, I was curious to know if my state had any rock paintings or petroglyphs. I'm busy researching that possibility right now.”



Sharron L. McElmeel is the director of *McBookwords*, a literacy organization, and an instructor of children's and young adult literature at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. Her latest book is *Picture That! From Mendel to Normandy: Picture Books and Ideas, Curriculum and Connections— for Tweens and Teens*. (*Libraries Unlimited*, 2009). Visit her website at www.mcelmeel.com.

About the Author/Illustrator: Emily Arnold McCully

Emily Arnold McCully made her mark in the world of children's literature decades ago. Among her most popular early books are those about Little Bitty Mouse, who debuted in *Picnic* (HarperCollins, 1984). In more recent years, she wrote and illustrated the Caldecott-winning *Mirette on the High Wire* (Putnam, 1992), which initially began as a biography of a real-life daredevil, the “Great Blondin,” who walked along a tightrope suspended above the rapids of Niagara Falls. However, she changed the focus from Charles Blondin to a child more like her own youthful self: a tree-climbing, rock-scrambling girl. Later, she did turn to biography when she wrote *Marvelous Mattie: How Margaret E. Knight Became an Inventor* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), *Manjiro* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), and her latest title, *Wonder Horse: The True Story of the World's Smartest Horse* (Henry Holt, 2010). *Wonder Horse* focuses on former slave Bill “Doc” Keys who taught a horse to recognize colors, numbers, and much more. It is a story for every reader who loves animals. Emily Arnold McCully has illustrated more than ninety books and authored many of them. She has two sons, and she divides her time between New York City and upstate New York. Learn more about Emily and her work at www.emilyarnoldmccully.com.