

"An extraordinary journey . . . a triumph!" —*Brian Selznick*



Ann Clare LeZotte

Show Me a Sign



Show
Me a
Sign

Ann
Clare
LeZotte

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-25581-2
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 20 21 22 23 24
Printed in the U.S.A. 23
First edition, March 2020

DEDICATED TO

THE MEMORY OF

MY BROTHER,

PETER GEORGE LE ZOTTE (1968–2016),

AND TO

THE FELLOW DREAMERS

AND ADVENTURERS

OF OUR YOUTH

The Deaf . . . are everywhere . . .

They existed before you spoke of them

and before you saw them.

— LAURENT CLERC,
DEAF FRENCHMAN, AND THE FIRST
DEAF TEACHER IN AMERICA

PROLOGUE

If you are reading this, I suppose you want to know more about the terrible events of last year—which I almost didn't survive—and the community where I live.

Every small village must think itself perfectly unique. I now know there was not another like ours in America, in the Year of Our Lord, 1805. For those who take hearing and speaking for granted, our way of life may be hard to understand.

You may be fooled into believing that Chilmark, on Martha's Vineyard—an island south of Boston—is a fancy of my imagination. Or the lost paradise that the English captain who named the land after his daughter was seeking long ago.

I've tried to be true to every detail and do justice not only to my friends and family, but also to my enemies. It was the stranger invited to our shores who changed my view forever.

I warn you, there are accounts of great wickedness along with hope in these pages.

As for my mastery of the language, I will remind you that not every writer comes to English from the same direction.

My story is built not with brick and mortar, but by finding the right words and making events come to life. If it were a palace, it would have many windows and doors—to see your reflection, peer into, and walk through. I hope you will be brave enough to enter.

Mary Elizabeth Lambert

Part One

Chapter

One

I like to walk early in the morning, before I begin my chores, even in this crisp November weather. I use my birch stick to poke at curious things on the ground, like the tunnels made by moles. They go so deep, they churn up the sand below the soil.

When I leave home early enough, I can see bright flashes from the Gay Head Light in the distance. But today the sun is up.

I run my stick across the top of the mossy stone wall that frames the high road and watch the sea glitter behind gabled houses with sloping yards. Sea grass borders the sand, blowing lightly in the cool breeze. Blue crabs burrow into the mud near the shore, where they'll lay dormant for the winter.

On the beach, there's little left of the humpback whale that washed upon our shores four days ago, delivered by the Almighty.

My closest friend, Nancy Skiffe, and I discovered the whale while playing. It was already dead when we

found it, but its smell was not yet putrid. Small seabirds pecked at its carcass. Its sea-worn, mottled black skin was covered in humps and bumps. We were awestruck by its massive bulk.

Nancy and I walked a large circle around it. I collected scallop shells, moon shells, and quahog shells and put them next to the whale, as a final offering from a human friend. Nancy took a recorder out of her cloak and played a song to guide the beast to its end.

When Nancy and I ran to get her father, my papa, and the other men, they came with spades, knives, rope, and wheelbarrows.

As they made plans to dispose of the whale, Papa, sensing my sadness, signed to me assuredly, “Not one piece shall go unused. Meat for the whole town, oil for our lamps, and baleen in the beast’s mouth for brushes.”

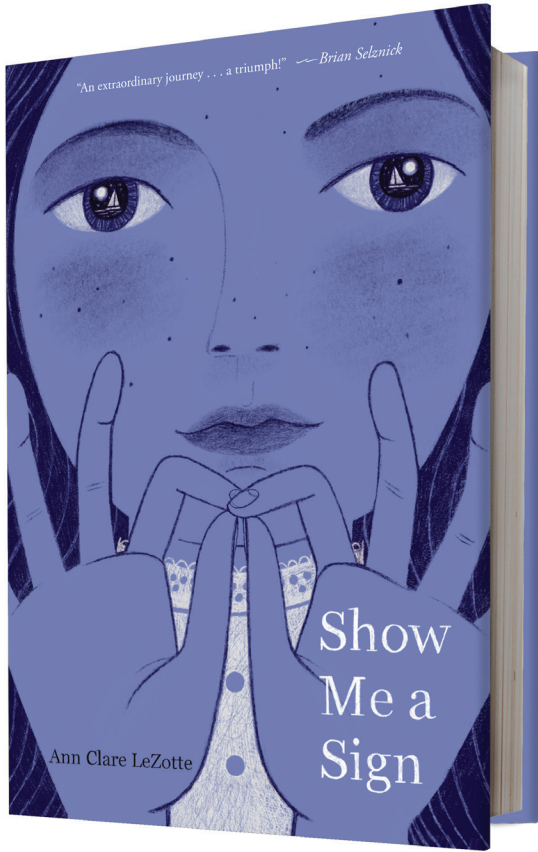
I couldn’t watch as our treasure was flensed, cut, and taken away, piece by piece.

I stop and write *whale* in the sand with my stick. I love words, but they confound me too. The way my mind thinks is not just in signs or English words and sentences, but in images and a flow of feeling that I imagine resembles the music I’ve never heard.

I watch the tide leaping in and out.

I pass a stretch of high road that I have come to avoid. I circle around it as if it is hallowed ground and head back home. Leaves jump and twirl ahead of me; the wind beckons me toward a small graveyard. I choose to ignore its silent whispers.

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