THE GIRL WHO NAMED PLUTO
The Story of Venetia Burney

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THE GIRL WHO NAMED PLUTO
CLASSROOM ACTIVITY GUIDE

About the Book
When Venetia Burney’s grandfather reads aloud from the newspaper about a new discovery—a “ninth major planet” that has yet to be named—her eleven-year-old mind starts whirling. She is studying the planets in school and loves Roman mythology. “It might be called Pluto,” she says, thinking of the dark underworld. Her grandfather loves the idea and contacts his friend at London’s Royal Astronomical Society, who writes to scientists at the Lowell Observatory in Massachusetts, where Pluto was discovered. After a vote, the scientists agree unanimously: Pluto is the perfect name for the dark, cold planet.

Here is a picture book perfect for STEM units and for all children—particularly girls—who have ever dreamed of becoming a scientist.

About the Author
ALICE B. McGINVY is the award-winning author of over forty books for children, including Darwin, an Orbis Pictus Honor Book and one of Booklist’s Top 10 Biographies for Youth. It received three starred reviews and was called “exquisite and enlightening” by Kirkus Reviews. Her most recent picture book, Robbe: Benjamin’s Buttons, was named a Sydney Taylor Notable Book. She also runs a writing camp for kids, Words on Fire. Visit her on the web at alicebmcginty.com or follow her on Twitter at @AliceBMcGinty.

About the Illustrator
ELIZABETH HAIDLE is the creative director of and a regular contributor to Illustria magazine, as well as a collaborator at Mascot Press, an independent comics press. She has illustrated a graphic novel, I, Parrot, written by Deb Olfin Unferth, and she has several nonfiction comics series in the works. Ms. Haidle received her MA in illustration from Savannah College of Art and Design.

Walking the Solar System
The book opens with Venetia’s class taking a walk to map out part of the solar system. Discuss how the teacher and students figured out the number of paces needed. Then figure out how many more would be needed for Uranus and Neptune. As a class, duplicate the walk using the same pacing and the same or similar objects. If possible, take the walk in a place where the class can also mark Uranus and Neptune. Then discuss the difference between reading about the relative distances between planets and experiencing them in a walk.

See Beyond the Words
In a short book like this, the illustrations provide a lot of details about the time, the place, and the people that aren’t in the text. Ask students to study the pictures and write down ten pieces of information shown in the illustrations but not given in the narrative, such as details about clothing, cars, and so on. Have a class discussion about what pictures add, especially to a historical book.

76 Years Later . . .
As a class, listen to this ten-minute 2006 NASA interview with Venetia Burney Phair. Ask students to discuss the interview and what they learned from it. In one answer, Venetia Burney comments on how much the world has changed since 1930: “It leaves one speechless!” Have students talk about what has changed based on what the book shows and their other knowledge. They can also speculate about what might be different when they are old.

Interview podcast: nasa.gov/multimedia/interview_podcast_the_girl_who_named_pluto.mp3
Transcript of podcast: nasa.gov/multimedia/podcasting/transcript_pluto_naming_podcast.html

NAME A CELESTIAL BODY
Imagine that you can enter a NASA contest to name a newly discovered celestial body, like a planet or moon. Using the graphic organizer below, write a letter to NASA about what you think the name should be.