

## **BOARD BOOKS (Birth to Age 2)**

**Carle, Eric. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. New York: Penguin Young Readers Group, 1994.**

This story follows a young and hungry caterpillar that eats his way through a new selection of fruit each day of the week. Die-cut holes where the caterpillar “eats” encourages interactivity for young audiences. Carle uses a repetitive format to showcase the text of his story, incorporating the days of the week and counting while he introduces the concept of metamorphosis. Brightly colored and texturally rich artwork, in Carle’s signature cut-work style, enlivens the easy text.

**Mr. Gumpy’s Outing by John Burningham:** In step by step adding of characters and their inherent traits, “chickens who flap”, “sheep who bleats”, etc. to ride in a boat with Mr. Gumpy gives a sense of tension and impending doom. At first all the passengers “went along happily but then...” the inevitable happens, they capsize. The reader expects Mr. Gumpy to be angry, but in an unexpected twist, he isn’t. Instead he gives everyone tea then invites them, “Come for a ride another day.” The play on the word grumpy with his name, Mr. Gumpy, struck me, also.

## **PICTURE BOOKS (Age 2 to 8)**

**Gág, Wanda. *Millions of Cats*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1928.**

An old couple wants to adopt a cat to assuage their loneliness. The husband finds trillions of pretty cats and can’t decide on just one, so he brings them all home. When the wife says that can keep just one, the cats fight to be selected until only one scrawny kitten is left. The narrative style recalls folk tales in its tone. Repetition in the story’s text, especially the counting of the cats, rhythmically enhances the visual descriptions. Brief dialog weaves in and out of the story, adding momentum to the pacing. The classic “ugly duckling” lesson – the prettiest cat grew from the scrawniest kitty –

**Henkes, Kevin. *Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1996.**

Henkes uses lively, rhythmic text to mimic the bubbly and enthusiastic personality of his protagonist, Lilly. Use of adult humor (about the mind-numbing perseverance of a spirited child) along with adult words (e.g. “jaunty”), evidences Henke’s attempt to connect with adults, as well as children.

**Leaf, Munro. *The Story of Ferdinand*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1936.**

Ferdinand prefers a gentle life and pretty flowers. A bee sting makes him appear fierce, and men choose him to fight in a bullfight in Madrid. Ferdinand refused to fight despite the angry crowd. Second-person narrative attempts to engage the audience, asking questions and making comments; otherwise the narrative lacks dialog. The black-and-white illustrations capture Ferdinand’s strength and gentle demeanor. The story, which offers tidbits about Spain’s popular sport, affirms that it’s OK to be different. It also speaks to the politics of the day; many countries, but particularly Germany, seeking to show-off their warriors and paraded like matadors in their streets. Perhaps this was a hopeful note that not all should aspire to join the fighters – that there are other ways to show strength than fighting.

**Potter, Beatrix, *The Tales of Peter Rabbit***

How lovely to read *Peter Rabbit* again, and another treat to read it with a writer's eye. Potter's writing is filled with pleasure and joy. Are those craft tools, pleasure and joy? Her stories bubble with it. What I didn't notice as a child, or as a mother reading to her children, was the tightness of the story structure. The story begins with the essential facts: setting, character, plot, tension and fear of turning into rabbit pie. Peter, (and all we need to know is that he is "very naughty") heads straight to Mr. McGregor's garden and into the classic tale. On this last reading, I paid attention to the voice of the narrator. Omniscient Potter tells the tale in a light but straightforward patter, moving the story along from scene to scene. But then there are Miss Potter's side comments, a remark or extraneous detail that changes the flow and shifts the voice. For example, when Peter snags himself on the gooseberry net and hangs from a button, Beatrix adds: "It was a blue jacket with brass buttons, quite new." She steps out of the omniscient narrator's stance at the end of the story and shifts into first person, "I am sorry to say that Peter was not very well during the evening." It's just one sentence and then Potter's back to omniscient narrator, finishing the story with milk and blackberries for Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cottontail, but none for Peter.

**Tar Beach by Faith Ringgold:** The first person narration sets up who the protagonist is, (Cassie Louis Lightfoot), the year (1939) the place (New York) and relationships (Be- Be, Mr. and Mrs. Honey, Grandpa, Mommy and Daddy) by imbedding it in the context of the story – her declaration of flying, year she was born and her age, all the places in the city, and then all the people in her life. She tells of her "Tar Beach" which is the tar rooftop of her apartment high-rise building where she "flies". I believe her "flying" is her sense of freedom and entitlement that transcends race, poverty, and hardship.

**BOOKS FOR BEGINNING READERS (Age 5 to 7)**

**The Cat in the Hat by Dr. Seuss:** From the beginning the fish in the bowl is the voice of conscience, the voice of responsibility and reason about the fact that the children's mother is not home. The narrator is speaking in first person but never gives much of a clue to what he is thinking until p.45 when he finally uses dialogue to express his disapproval of the Cat in the Hat. As an early reader that uses the same words over and over, Dr. Seuss does a brilliant job of keeping the reader engaged with his clever rhymes and repetition. Several words: rake, cake, gown, milk, fish, etc., are introduced throughout the first half of the story. When Cat in the Hat picks up at the end of the story, all those same words are listed again in amazing pattern and rhyme. Asking the reader, "What would YOU do if your mother asked YOU?" at the end of the text allows for children to ponder honesty and full disclosure.

**BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS (Age 7 to 9)**

**Gardiner, John Reynolds. (1980). *Stone Fox*. New York: Harper & Row. Illustrator: Sewall, Marcia.**

1. P. 67 Author shows people waiting: Miss Williams clenched her hand together until her knuckles turned white. Lester's mouth hung open, hip lips went. Mr. Foster began

chewing his cigar. Hank stared without blinking. Doc Smith held her hand up proudly. Dusty took a powerful swig from his whiskey bottle. Clifford Snyder removed a gold watch from his vest and checked the time.

2. Clear crisp language. Fast paced. Author doesn't back away from violence. Grandfather is depressed. Tax collector threatens to shoot Searchlight (dog). Stone Fox slaps Willy and his eye swells shut. Searchlight drops dead during the race.
3. Nice surprise. The doctor was a woman and author paced it so her picture was on page after reader read her name.

***Sarah, Plain and Tall, Patricia MacLachlan, 1985.***

Similar in simplicity and strength to *What Jamie Saw*, both slender novels are tightly focused about a theme, in this case acceptance of change and the trust required to handle change. I am especially fond of the evocative language that reflects the landscape and that people. These are lean, plain times and people with real needs. I enjoyed the parallel self-talk of the boy as he evaluated step-by-step for himself the meaning of each milestone. Scenes are few and exacting – the tension builds with the storm, ending with Sarah's mysterious trip to town. I liked how the author ended on this note rather than a wedding scene as it spoke of values rather than institutions.

**BOOKS FOR MIDDLE-GRADE READERS (Age 8 to 11)**

***Skellig, David Almond, 1998.***

First-person narrative that reflects magical realism while dealing with themes of healing, wholeness, faith, hope, and love – all told from a pre-teen boy's point of view. The framework of mystery and sleuth balance the spiritual themes. The prose is lyrical, almost code-like in places: 27 and 53 are Chinese take-out numbers but also food of the gods, nectar; Whisper is a cat but a wise one; the owls hoot mystically; the baby and Skellig share qualities of rebirth, death, and angelic strength and frailty – all reflective of the human condition. Scenes range from dreamlike to football, male breakdowns over emotions to the poetics of Blake.

**Skellig by David Almond:** Written in first person in the character Michael's voice. He moves to a new house where he makes a startling discovery of being living in his dilapidated garage. The language in the book is very English: Mum, tea, blinking, knocky down...but they story is riveting. At times it is scary, outlandish, yet it transfixed me. The short chapters, almost single scenes, loaded with dialogue helped the story move along at a rapid clip. The parallel between Skellig and the baby was intense, as you couldn't help but root for both of them. The sidekick character of Mina was a good foil to reflect the changes and shifts going on inside and out of Michael. The ending was very satisfying with the family finally naming the baby Joy.

***Hamilton, Virginia, The People Could Fly***

In this collection of American Black Folktales, the category of folktale drives the voice of the story. For example, the animal tales of He Lion, Bruh Bear, and Bruh Rabbit are told with an African American dialect. The John and the Devil's Daughter are told with a voice one finds in European tales. Each type of tale has its own internal structure, which in a less sophisticated way, mirrors epic fantasies. As Hamilton reveals in her paragraphs of background research,

there is something innately and organically human about this folktale genre fulfilling a genuine human need for story. Studying folktales may be an essential activity for a writer. Since folktales are such natural stories, understanding their structure and character may lead to a greater understanding of the raw elements of the story's soul. How do those visceral electrical currents of the brain connect with the atomistic elements of a satisfying story? Internalizing the magic of organic story has to help any writer trying to write any genre.

### **Sachar, Louis, *Holes***

Edgy *Holes* is wholly hilarious. Good writing is happening on all levels. Past and present do a spiral dance that unravels a curse that follows Stanley's family from one generation to the next. The intersection of the curse's stories make for a unfolding parallel plots that keep the reader entranced. Sachar's imagination pushes the envelope when it comes to character and setting. There are the boys sentenced to Camp Green Lake: Zero, Magnet, Armpit, ZigZag. (Great names.) There's the warden with her poisonous snake venom nail polish. (A brilliant idea.) There's Camp Green Lake itself, in the middle of the desert and full of holes dug by the boys. (The greatest misnomer invented.) And there's the creative and funny dialog. "I see you're looking at my gun. Don't worry. I'm not going to shoot." He taped his holster. "This is for yellow-spotted lizards. I wouldn't waste a bullet on you." Any kid reading *Holes* is hooked by page three. No wonder it won the Newberry.

### **Bridge to Terabithia by Katharine Paterson**

It was interesting to me how Paterson was able to characterize the members of Jess's family with so few details, but still provide the reader with a strong sense of who they are. For example, his older sister, Brenda, manipulates their mother and is vain. We see this when she shirks her chores and buys a blouse that is much too old for her. His mother is very unhappy, and we see this in the way that she sits in her rocking chair and watches TV all day long.

### **The Birchbark House by Louise Erdrich**

This book reminded me of Linda Sue Park's lecture on the Moebius Strip: in historical fiction you move from the familiar to the unfamiliar and then back to the familiar again. In this novel, there is much historical detail about the everyday lives of the Ojibwa tribe among whom the story is set, but this only adds to the more familiar story of family ties that makes up the main part of the narrative. Any historical detail serves to either characterize or further the plot.

### **Byars, Betsy. (1970). *The Summer of the Swans*. New York: Penguin Books. Illustrator: CoConis, Ted. Newberry Medal Winner.**

1. Double Duty Detail: As they walked down the hill, his feet made a continuous scratchy sound on the concrete – retarded, slow.
2. Shows time is around 1960's: They walked past the Tennents' house just as someone turned on the television, and they heard Eddie Albert singing, "Greeeeen Acres is..." before it was turned down. Also, Mary was carrying a transistor radio and she held it up between them.
3. p. 112 Shows emotions through physical action: She suddenly wanted to see her brother so badly that her throat began to close. It was a tight feeling she got sometimes when she wanted something, like the time she had had the measles and had wanted to see her father so much she couldn't even swallow.

4. p. 142 Shows change in the character: Slowly she slipped off her tennis shoes and looked down at her feet, which were dyed blue. Then she got up quickly and went to get ready for the party. Before this would have bothered her. No reaction show big growth – seeds were planted earlier.

## **BOOKS FOR OLDER READERS (Age 12 and up)**

### ***Out of the Dust*, Karen Hesse, 1999.**

Free verse poems of intensely spare language reflect the stripped down nature of the narrative, a story of brutal personal hardship during the Dust Bowl. There are very few similes, alliteration and yet the poems are poetic in their carriage. This reminds me of Gary Snyder's poetry – stripped down to what is tangible, real, but allowing emotional resonance through everyday, concrete details. The poems open a new channel in storytelling from a first person point of view – it's not just her tale, but it is the view of someone who experiences life through considerable emotional depth.

### ***The Outsiders*, by S.E. Hilton**

The author does so many smart things, among them: (1) echoing the subject of sunsets – discussed by Ponyboy and Cherry fairly early – in later chapters; (2) keeping the heat on Ponyboy, forcing action (his friend kills, is killed, and another Greaser gang member also dies); (3) boys are allowed to cry.

### **Yolen, Jane. *The Devil's Arithmetic*. New York: Puffin Books, 1990.**

Dual world creation. In eighteen pages Yolen is able to create believable characters in a believable world, especially her protagonist and her wants, fears. Then for most of the book we follow the protagonist into another time and place – even more developed than the first; yet with the world in the intro we are grounded in something we know (or expect) we will come back to, and we do.

### ***The Book Thief*, by Markus Zusak**

The author plays with time, and fumbles: flash forward two years, he writes, and suddenly, in explicably, Sophie, the protagonist, is fourteen. Zusak also gives away that her best friend's will die in an allied bombing of Munich is the not-too-distant future. No dramatic buildup to this huge event in her life. The result? I lost interest in him, or caring about him. But Zusak's language is worth reading for the cracking whip of language ("bones like smoke", minutes that "soaked by", etc.).

### **Ketchum, Liza. (2005). *Where the Great Hawk Flies*. New York: Clarion Books.**

1. The book is written in first person with two different points of view. Each point of view is a different chapter.
2. A poem is used at the beginning of the book, like a prolog, showing a hawk's view of a raid by the Redcoats and Indians that affected both families although they were many miles apart. In the story reference is often made to his raid and the reader understands what is going on. The book is divided into 4 parts, each opening with a poem.
3. Many of the chapters end with a question which makes reader want to turn the page.

4. There is an author's note at the end and more information about the Pequot Indians and their language. Ketchum uses Pequot words throughout the story and they are italicized.
5. To enhance POV and set us in the time, Ketchum uses a smattering of the language: chimibly, Injun, durst not complain, near dark.
6. Page 137 the language reflects the panic: Run to the timber. Run through the rain. Into the woods. Dodge the trees, duck from that hawk, find the rotten log. The log you can hide under. Scuttle in. Hold still. Stop your bawling. Don't breathe. Don't scream. Freeze while they run over the top of you, footsteps pounding. Don't cry out, don't shake, don't flinch. Hide. Hide. Hide.

**LaFaye, Alexandria. (1993). *The Year of The Sawdust Man*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.**

1. Good example of transition to backstory. "Mama knew what to do about bad people. When I was five, our milkman moved away. The man who took his place was Mr. Rainey."
2. Texture: "Nothing is a heavy thing to be. Your muscles don't work, so your body weighs more than your blood and bones. Your thoughts get to thin to put together. You can't do. You can't think. You're nothing."
3. Unique strong active verbs: "Fire danced in the garden. Fire swept up to the top of the dried sunflower stalks, then lept onto the tangled remains of the ivy on the wall. Sparks flew, Mama teased the flames, skirts blow upward.
4. Metaphor: So, I saw there and stared at the back porch, watching the red-and-white checkered tablecloths blowing in the wind like they were listening to a tune I couldn't hear.

**LaFaye, Alexandria. (2004). *Worth*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.**

1. Texture: The pain came with the rain. So white-hot and sudden, I thought the lightning struck me. That pain yanked me clean out of here and now to a place that stretched me out until I was thin enough to cover a prairie mile, each an aching so sharp I would've died to make it stop.
2. Author worked in some history: "Couldn't imagine spending all my days inside. Just a few hours in that soddie made me see how folks go crazed and run out into the freezing cold of the Nebraska Prairie. I'd heard folks who'd met their death that way."
3. Irony: "Pa just needs another set of hands around the place. This is the only way he could afford it. Funny. A steer you'd have to pay for, but a boy you could adopt for free. Not worth much. Worth. That was his name. John Worth."

**O'Brien, Robert C. *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*. New York: Anthem, 1972.**

Anthropomorphism to its highest degree. This group of rats uses tools, thinks, loves, learns just like humans. So much so that as the reader we forget early on that we are reading about rats and not people. Smart use of long flash backs where Nicodemus tells the NIMH tale to Mrs. Frisby. Good dose of adventure and danger that kids love.