As long time readers of Language Arts and active members of NCTE, we are honored and very excited to assume the role of editors for this column. And we’d be lying if we didn’t admit that we are just a little nervous, too—nervous because this organization has helped to shape our thinking and has been our professional support when we needed it; nervous because all of you, the educators we respect most, are the readers. We recognize that our role in this column is to read widely, screen carefully, and bring to you the best of what we have available to support the work you and your students will do with literature across the curriculum.

This first column will be a general assortment of books that have made us laugh out loud and shed silent tears, books with characters and events that linger in memory long after they have been closed, books that made us think and challenged us to take action, books that make a difference. Our vision for this column is to bring you books like these in every issue. We will have books tied to the themes of each issue of Language Arts in addition to a few of our new favorites. You’ll probably come to notice that Lester loves those tender stories about family and home, those books that make you laugh out loud, the ones that beg to be read aloud, and books that dare to take on a touchy subject or take the risk to step outside the lines with style. And you will no doubt notice that Barbara loves books that beg to be discussed with others who have read them, books with a lot of action, books that make you laugh and cry, and books that won’t let you close them and go to sleep—books that make you stay up until 3:00 a.m.

So join us now as we celebrate books for children and young adults.

**BEARS, BEARS AND MORE BEARS**

Teddy Bears and Bears have been popular characters in children’s books for decades. This, however, was a special year for Teddy Bears, so here are a few recent titles to add to your collection. You might be wondering why there is all this talk of bears—it just happens to be the 100th birthday of the teddy bear.

**My Favorite Bear**  
*Written and illustrated by Andrea Gabriel*  

Mother bear settles her little cub for a nap as she tells him of all the bears he will meet one day when he goes out into the world on his own. As you read along, you’ll meet eight different species of bears and the many things they do. The last page gives you bear facts on each of the eight species introduced. The illustrations are luscious images that fill each two-page spread supporting the bold and minimal text. *My Favorite Bear* makes a nice introduction to various species of bears in a manner that is very accessible to even the youngest readers.

**Oliver Finds His Way**  
*Written by Phyllis Root*  
*Illustrated by Christopher Denise*  

Oliver, a young cub, is out in the yard with Mama and Papa when a big yellow leaf captures his attention. Oliver chases the drifting leaf past a series of familiar landmarks to the edge of the woods. It is there that Oliver loses sight of the leaf as well as his house and his mama and papa. The inviting illustrations match the text tightly as Oliver runs from place to place finding nothing familiar and finally realizing he is lost. He cries and rubs his nose and thinks and thinks and thinks. Then he lets out a little roar, a bigger one, and yet a bigger one. That’s when Oliver hears mama and papa roaring back and finds his way home again. “All the way to Mama and Papa with tumble-down hugs . . . and a big yellow leaf just for Oliver.”

**Famous Bears and Friends: One Hundred Years of Teddy Bear Stories, Poems, Songs, and Heroics**  
*Written by Janet Wyman Coleman*  
*Illustrated by various artists*  

This beautiful and informative celebration of the beloved teddy bear provides an array of illustration styles and an interesting look at the ways teddy bears have become such a beloved toy. Readers get a look at the stories
behind the first teddy bear and the many story bears we have come to love. It could be interesting to locate all the books alluded to in these references and read the stories once again. So snuggle up and read your favorite bear story.

**The Teddy Bear**  
*Written and illustrated by David McPhail*  

A teddy bear, loved by a little boy, is inadvertently left behind in a diner. The teddy bear ends up in the trash behind the diner where a homeless man rescues him. Tucked safely into a big coat pocket, the teddy bear sleeps in the dumpster with the man and makes daily rounds through the city. Though he misses the teddy bear, the boy thinks of him less and less as time passes. The weather warms, the man puts the old coat away, and carries the teddy bear under his arm until one day he leaves the bear alone on a bench for a moment where the boy gleefully finds and reclaims the bear. As the boy (hugging the bear) walks away with his family, they hear the old man crying about his missing bear. The boy dashes back to the old man and asks if the bear is his. When the old man says yes and adds, “I don’t know what I’d do without him,” the boy hands the bear over and replies, “I know what you mean...I used to have one just like him.” McPhail’s art is appropriately soft, almost cuddly, and is presented in frames and bubbles with ample white space for the text.

**School Picture Day**  
*Written by Lynn Plourde*  
*Illustrated by Thor Wickstrom*  

Everything a teacher ever worried about or even dreamed of going awry on school picture day will pale in comparison to the “highfalutin fidgeting, fiddling, fussing, and flopping” of Josephina Caroleena Wattasheen the First. This delightful little girl is interested in finding out how things work. *Everything* captures her attention, and she wastes no time in finding out what makes things tick. Each of her investigations results in a small situation that delays the class photo. But, when the camera gets stuck, it is Josephina who comes to the rescue. Wickstrom’s active art captures the personalities in this school story and readers will love the final photo.

**Learning to Respect Ourselves and Others**

Books can offer readers an opportunity to examine how we treat others who are different in any way. Read these titles and open the door to reflection and discussion in the classroom.
have power only if we allow it. And as a bonus, this delightful look at perspective is told in first person by Otis. Read along with Madeline L’Engle’s *The Other Dog* (SeaStar, 2001) and Nina Laden’s *The Night I Followed the Dog* (Chronicle Books, 1994) for an interesting focus lesson on perspective.

**The Sissy Duckling**  
*Written by Harvey Fierstein*  
*Illustrated by Henry Cole*  

Elmer was different from other ducks. He preferred to “build things and paint pictures and play make-believe” and so is teased and called a sissy. Elmer is crushed when he hears his father tell his mother, “Elmer is a sissy . . . He’s no son of mine!” Elmer sets off to make a home of his own—away from everyone—alone. As the flock flies south for the winter, Elmer watches quietly from the reeds. When Papa duck is shot by hunters, Elmer risks his life to rescue him and take him to the safety of his new home. Through the winter, Elmer nurses his father back to health, and the two of them come to know one another and grow close once again. As the flock returns, they pause to remember those who didn’t survive the trip. When mama duck reminds them to remember Elmer, there are snickers and giggles and comments about the sissy duck. Just then, to everyone’s surprise, papa steps up to say, “If Elmer is a sissy, then I wish I were a sissy too!” All the ducks are amazed by Elmer’s ability to care for papa and survive the winter. Elmer reminds them that he is the same duck he always was, that he hasn’t changed—they have! Henry Cole’s lively illustrations are a perfect match for the message. Read along with Mary E. Whitcomb’s *Odd Velvet* (Chronicle Books, 1998) and Alexis O’Neil’s *The Recess Queen* (Scholastic, 2002) for a great discussion on how we treat one another and accepting our differences.

**The Shadow Place**  
*Written by Carol M. Tanzman*  

“Nobody knew Rodney Porter better than Melissa Sontag.” Not many people were interested in knowing him either. Being his lifelong neighbor and friend, Melissa (Lissa) knows and understands more about Rodney’s life than anyone. He is alone in the world, with the exception of a few friends at school. His mother is gone, his brother is gone, and his father thinks he is a failure. After much verbal battering, Rodney starts to believe his father. Lissa begins to worry when his obsession for guns grows along with a strong hatred for his father and most of his friends. Strange things start happening at school, and Lissa discovers that Rodney has been having disturbing discussions on the Internet. Lissa cannot fathom Rodney hurting anyone; not even his verbally abusive father or his “friends” who think it is cute to harass and make fun of him. But she wonders exactly how far Rodney will go to settle the score. When she sees his life spiral out of control, Lissa struggles with whom to tell and what to tell them. Lissa has to face the truth. She has to decide what the right thing is, and then do it. This fast-paced story will keep you on the edge of your seat until the very last page.

**FOR THE YOUNG ONES**

These books offer younger readers the support of features such as predictable language, repeated lines, an obvious rhythm and/or strong text and illustration match.

**Baghead**  
*Written and illustrated by Jarrett J. Krosoczka*  

Josh has a problem and a “very big, brown, bag idea.” Readers will chuckle as they follow Josh through the day with a paper bag on his head. But, they will laugh out loud when they find out why. The bold art and playful font are perfect for the events Josh leads us through. One read-aloud and young children will beg to read it again. From the brown bag dust jacket to the last page, the illustrations are a perfect fit. For a laugh out loud celebration of hair, teachers and parents will have fun sharing this, along with Dawn Lesley Stewart’s *Harriet’s Horrible Hair Day* (Peachtree, 2000) and Robert Munsch’s *Stephanie’s Ponytail* (Annick, 1996).

**Love Song for a Baby**  
*Written by Marion Dane Bauer*  
*Illustrated by Dan Andreasen*  

A beautiful and lyrical celebration of a new baby. Told in a slow-paced rhythmic verse, this one is a tender reminder of just how much that baby is loved. One read will strike a chord with every parent, grandparent and caregiver of a young child. And children will delight in the soft, tender art and the gentle flow of the language. An-
dreasen’s illustrations, rendered in oil on gessoed board, feature a cherubic infant in various poses on each spread supporting the tender phrases describing the child. The language is filled with similes and would make an excellent language study. You’ll see this showing up at lots of baby showers and in many nurseries.

The Best Place to Read
Written by Debbie Bertram and Susan Bloom
Illustrated by Michael Garland

A young boy with a brand new book is searching for the best place to read. All the usual spots have some problem—his own little chair is now too small, Grammy’s soft comfy chair has been taken over by old Rover, his brother’s bean bag chair has sprung a leak—and he is ready to give up. There is a problem with every new option until he ends up on mommy’s lap, which is, after all, the best place to read. The bright, crisp, and uncluttered art of Michael Garland brings life to the rhythmic, rhyming language.

Trucks Whizz! Zoom! Rumble!
Written by Patricia Hubbell
Illustrated by Megan Halsey

This book is filled with trucks of every type and every use, introduced through a rhyme pattern that will have readers chanting. A delightful read that will catch the attention of every child who has an interest in trucks. The language is captivating, so this is one you’re likely to hear the kids chanting down the hallways. The illustrations are a lively collage of images from old picture dictionaries, clip art, etchings, original drawings, and maps. Look closely for a little nostalgia and a sense of humor. This one will be a great addition to a collection on transportation for young readers.

Wake Up, Big Barn!
Written and illustrated by Suzanne Tanner Chitwood

Bright illustrations created with collage using torn papers from catalogs and magazines support a minimal text presented in crisp, bold, and enlarged print to create a winning combination for the younger children. Beginning with the rooster’s cock-a-doodle-doo waking up the farm animals in the big barn, we move through to evening and good night. The steady rhythm and rhyme pattern is sure to have young readers chiming in.

ANCHORED IN HISTORY

These books offer readers insights into an earlier time, a time when people were refused equal rights simply because of the color of their skin. Each of these books contributes to a growing body of work that can help readers understand the history of civil rights.

Don’t Say Ain’t
Written by Irene Smalls
Illustrated by Colin Bootman

Dana and her friends, Ellamae and Cindybelle, are jumping double Dutch on the sidewalk when Dana’s Godmother rushes out with the news. Dana has the highest grade on the city test and is going to the advanced school. It’s 1957 and schools in the city are just beginning integration. On the first morning of school, Godmother has Dana in her best dress and rubs petroleum jelly on the scuffed dress shoes to make them shine. Ellamae and Cindybelle tease her, “She thinks she’s better ’n us cause she’s goin’ to that advanced school now.” This new tension in a lifelong friendship, the fact that the other girls at the new school wear pleated skirts and sweater sets, and the new teacher who wears heels, a suit, and white gloves corrects Dana when she says “ain’t,” leaves her feeling all alone. Tension mounts when the teacher announces she’ll be making home visits—and she is starting with Dana. But something changes when Dana discovers that Godmother knew the teacher’s mother back in Charleston, South Carolina. That’s when the “honeychiles” start to flow, and Dana’s teacher says, “Honeychile, I ain’t gonna eat more than one piece of your famous peach cobbler.” Soon after, Dana tells her friends, “I’ve figured out when to say ‘ain’t’ and when to be proper. I’ve gone too far to fall back.” Bootman’s realistic art captures light and shadow, emotion and history, and beautifully supports the text. Read with Jacqueline Woodson’s The Other Side (Putnam, 2001), Deborah Wiles’s Freedom Summer
Talkin’ about Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman
Written by Nikki Grimes
Illustrated by E. B. Lewis
Orchard Books, 2002, 0-43935-243-6
Nikki Grimes presents the life of Bessie Coleman in great detail using multiple narrators. Readers will find themselves among the 20 gathered in a private parlor on the south side of Chicago to mourn the death of Bessie Coleman. The year is 1926, and the time is just past midnight as one after another of those gathered speak memories of Bessie Coleman. Each voice is presented, with a snapshot view of the speaker, on a separate spread with text on one side and the art of E. B. Lewis depicting the spoken memory on the facing page. Lewis, a highly regarded illustrator, won the 2003 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award for the art in this beautifully illustrated biography of the first African American female aviator. Nikki Grimes received a 2003 Coretta Scott King Author Honor Award for the text in this same book. This is a delightfully fresh take on a picture book biography.

All in the Family
These books will help children find comfort and peace in knowing that their experiences are not unique, and that they are not alone in their worries and fears, their celebrations and successes.

Little Rabbit Lost
Written and illustrated by Harry Horse
It’s Little Rabbit’s birthday, and he is sure that this makes him “not such a little rabbit any more!” There are presents and cheers and a big red balloon. Best of all, there are tickets for the whole family to visit Rabbit World. Little Rabbit is so excited and leads the way with his red balloon making him easy to spot on every spread of art. Horse’s rendition of Rabbit World is a visual delight, and readers will enjoy his playfulness with images in the art and will delight in Little Rabbit’s birthday adventure as he discovers himself lost and not feeling so big after all. When his mama finds him, there are hugs and tears and one last birthday surprise.

Messenger
Written by Virginia Frances Schwartz
Frances is born one week after her father dies in a mining accident, one month before she is expected. She explains that her father sent her early as his messenger because her mother needs her at once, since he can stay no longer. We follow her for the next 16 years as her mother struggles to make a life for Frances and her two older brothers. Set in Ontario in the 1920s and 1930s, the reader is given a glimpse of life in mining, logging, and farming communities of the period. Primarily, though, the reader watches Frances grow from a frightened, lost child who looks back with longing at a past “where the spirits swirled” into a confident, vibrant adolescent who looks with hope and assurance toward the future. Schwartz has written a compelling tale about the strength of family and the strength of the human spirit.

What’s That Noise?
Written by Michelle Edwards and Phyllis Root
Illustrated by Paul Meisel
Alex and his little brother Ben share a bedroom. But when mom and dad say goodnight and all is dark and quiet, the night noises begin and the shadows creep up the walls and over the floor. Meisel’s illustrations exaggerate those shadows just enough to let the reader “see” the fears building in the minds of Ben and Alex. Ben is concerned and asks Alex about every noise. Alex, who is older—and oh so brave—just says it is nothing and urges Ben to go to sleep, but Ben insists on just one song. When Alex gives in, Ben insists on having Alex sing in his bed. Alex isn’t keen on walking across the shadowy floor, but Ben tricks Alex into coming over, and the two sing until all the night noises are quiet and the two boys fall asleep—in Ben’s bed. A delightful tale of brothers caring for one another and coping with fears of the night. Readers who take a close look at the art will notice that the end papers are right off the beds of Alex and Ben. Read this with Mercer Mayer’s There’s a Nightmare in My Closet (Dutton, 1992), There’s an Alligator under My Bed (Dutton, 1987), and Jerry Harste’s It Didn’t Frighten Me (Mondo, 1984).

Visiting Day
Written by Jacqueline Woodson
A tender story told in first person by a young girl following the rituals of visiting day, the one day each month when she and her grandma get themselves ready for the
long bus ride to visit her daddy in prison. Jacqueline Woodson balances reality with hope, sadness with celebration, and does so with the beautiful language that we have come to expect of her. This story has special significance as there is so little on this topic, one that touches the lives of many children. James Ransome’s illustrations capture the love in this story and speak a truth of their own. Readers will want to read the detailed author note and illustrator note included on the last page as they bring yet another dimension to the story.

**Shakespeare Bats Cleanup**
*Written by Ron Koertge*

Kevin Borland, MVP on the baseball field, is sidelined by mono. Bored with lying around in bed, Kevin sneaks a poetry book from his dad’s library and starts writing, tentatively, in a journal his dad gave him. Writing mostly in free verse, but also trying out haiku, sonnets, and other forms of poetry, Kevin explores his questions and feelings about middle school romance, playing and not playing baseball, the recent loss of his mother to cancer, how friends treat you when you are sick, and the possibility of a new romance with an up-front Latino girl who thinks writing poetry and being sensitive is cool. As Kevin works through his writing, he also works through some honest, humorous, and sometimes poignant feelings typical of many early teens. Author Ron Koertge has written a short novel that will work well as a literature circle text, as a great read-aloud, or just as a “good read” because of its sure appeal to middle school students.

**AND JUST BECAUSE**

**Billywise**
*Written by Judith Nicholls*
*Illustrated by Jason Cockcroft*

From a mole-black hole in the oldest oak, deep in the heart of a fern-brushed wood…

What reader could resist a lead like that? This lyrical and beautifully written story introduces Billywise, a newly hatched owl as he meets the world. His mother brings food and constant encouragement in the form of a repeated verse until Billywise is old enough and bold enough to dare to heed his mother’s nudging,

Spread your wings to the side, fix your ears on the night, let the stars light your flight and aim for the moon!

The art twinkles with bits of color, like confetti drifting in the night air of the forest, and glows like moonlight in fog. This beautifully told and illustrated story encourages readers to muster their courage and dare to chase their dreams.

**Bob**
*Written and illustrated by Tracey Campbell Pearson*

Bob, a charming rooster, lives with a bunch of chickens who cluck all day long. So does Bob! That is where the problem begins. When the cat, Henrietta, points out that he needs to stop clucking and learn to crow, Bob sets out on a quest. He tries to learn to crow from an assortment of critters and, of course, learns to crow in a most unusual manner. You’ll have great fun sharing this one with children.

**There’s a Frog in My Throat**
*Written by Loreen Leedy and Pat Street*
*Illustrated by Loreen Leedy*

A clever presentation of 440 animal sayings, such as “She pulled the wool over his eyes” and “You can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.” These sayings are paired with colorful and sometimes humorous illustrations along with brief caption-like explanations. The sayings are organized by animal type or habitat into six categories. The 440 sayings (idioms, proverbs, metaphors, and similes) are keyed to an index (by animal) in the back. This one is sure to catch the attention of many readers and will have the kids turning new phrases on the first read. Read this along with an old favorite like *Fred Gwynne’s Chocolate Mouse for Dinner* (Aladdin, 1998), *The King Who Rained* (Aladdin, 1988), and *A Little Pigeon Toad* (Aladdin, 1998).