

Children's Literature Reviews



Great Books for Sharing and Reading with Children in Grades K–8

Jonda C. McNair, Alan R. Bailey, Lesley Colabucci, and Deanna Day

This column features a selection of great books for reading and sharing with children in grades K–8 about a wide range of topics, including Bollywood movies, submersibles, Diego Rivera, a job construction site, and the confrontation between Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth and Eugene “Bull” Connor. We took care, too, to include books written by authors from diverse racial backgrounds in the hopes of making readers familiar with children’s literature that is representative of the multicultural world in which we live. Watch for multiple genres and sub-genres, too, including non-fiction, contemporary realistic fiction, transitional chapter books, alphabet books, and graphic novels.



Beautiful Oops!

Written and illustrated by Barney Saltzberg
Workman Publishing, 2010, unpagged, ISBN 978-0-7611-5728-1

In a society where individuals strive for perfection and mistakes are viewed as

unpleasant, *Beautiful Oops!* offers an alternative perspective to the countless blunders made by children and adults daily. When imagination and creativity unite, the torn pages, bent paper, scraps of paper, and holes adorning the sturdy pages of this interactive toy and moveable book artistically become an alligator’s smile, a penguin’s bill, a loveable dog, and an accordion-style telescope

with a friendly insect at the end. In this celebration of imperfections, children ages three and up will marvel as an “oops” instantly becomes something beautiful. Saltzberg has created a dazzling book children will cherish for many years. A read-along video, video clips featuring the author, and additional *Beautiful Oops!* resources can be accessed at www.beautifuloops.com. (AB)



Aggie the Brave

Written by Lori Ries
Illustrated by Frank W. Dormer
Charlesbridge, 2010, 48 pp., ISBN 978-1-57091-635-9

Aggie has an appointment to be spayed at the veterinarian. Although young Ben tries to convince Aggie to

be brave, she runs and hides when they reach the vet’s office. Out of concern for his beloved pet, Ben has many questions for the veterinarian, and she graciously answers each of them, assuring Ben she will take good care of Aggie. During their conversation, Ben is told something he was not expecting to hear—Aggie will have to spend the night at the vet’s office. A night without Aggie? Now Ben is forced to be the brave one!

With the help of his mother, Ben survives the long night without Aggie, but is anxious to

pick her up the next day. When Ben returns to the veterinarian's office, Aggie is fatigued and wearing a huge lampshade on her head. Although Ben is instructed that Aggie is actually wearing a protective collar to prevent her from scratching and biting her stitches, he still thinks it looks more like a large lampshade than a collar. The veterinarian also informs Ben that Aggie must rest and wear the collar for two weeks. During her recovery period, Ben becomes a compassionate companion who takes first-rate care of his dog. He rests with Aggie, pets and comforts her, and stops calling her names like "Cone Head" and "Aggie the clown." After 14 days have passed, Aggie returns to the vet and has both her stitches and collar removed. Within hours, Aggie is able to run, jump, circle Ben's legs, and enjoy a long evening of their favorite game—catch.

In three short chapters, Ries has created a genuine and delightful story perfect for beginning readers. Other beginning readers featuring these two loveable characters are *Aggie and Ben* and *Good Dog, Aggie*. (AB)



Job Site

Written and illustrated by Nathan Clement
Boyd's Mills Press, 2011,
unpaged, ISBN 978-1-
59078-769-4

In straightforward language, Boss says, "Level that pile!" The next page depicts a bulldozer lowering its blade

and leveling the pile of gravel. Boss continues to tell different equipment to dig holes, scoop rock, dump gravel, pour a slab, or lift stone. From close up perspectives, children will notice the machines' enormous strength. Finally, Boss says, "This job is done!" The bulldozer, excavator, loader, dump truck, compactor, mixer, and crane roll away to a different job site. The book closes with a double-page spread showcasing what the machinery

created—a community park with a pond, baseball field, walkway, and tower. Young children will notice that boss has returned to the park to play with his family. The copyright page explains that Clement began with pencil drawings before the computer magic happened. *Job Site* is for all who love heavy machinery. (DD)



Paul Thurlby's Alphabet

Written and illustrated by Paul Thurlby
Templar Books/
Candlewick Press, 2011,
unpaged, ISBN 978-0-
7636-5565-5

In this energetic and eclectic ABC book, every letter takes on the form of its subject, making character-

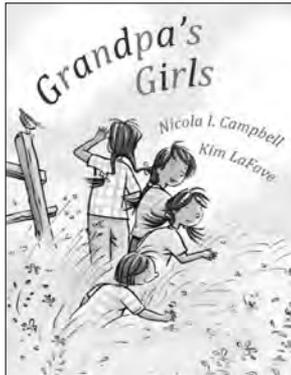
shapes. For example, the letter J becomes a jazz saxophone. The letter S is an international space station. U represents an underground subway train in the shape of the letter. And Y is a man stretching in a yoga stance. In the artist's note, readers learn how Thurlby created each letter and then posted them individually online. The Internet helped spread his retro-modern alphabet that contains scratches, marks, and smears. Children will want to collect old books, postcards, and recycled pieces of paper to create their own ABC books. A foldout poster is included with the book jacket. This ABC book is awesome, just like the letter A proclaims. (DD)



All the Water in the World

Written by George Ella Lyon
Illustrated by Katherine Tillotson
Atheneum Books,
2011, unpaged, ISBN
978-1-4169-7130-6

In elegant and eye catching digital illustrations, children will be introduced to the water cycle. The poetic prose flows from a water hose, wobbles in a blue pool, and fills up a cup. The narrator asks where water comes from and explains, "Water doesn't come. It goes. Around." In the middle of the book, a vertical page displays different fonts cascading down like rain. Next, the drips, drops, and drumming are described as tap dance, avalanche, and stampede. Later, readers learn that far away, it's a different day. In a dry and dusty place, a little girl and animals await a rain cloud. We are reminded that all living things need water. The book closes with, "All so precious—do not waste it. And delicious—we can taste it. Keep it clear, keep it clean . . . keep Earth green!" The design layout artfully blends text and drawings together like the movement of water. This rhythmic picturebook is meant to be read aloud multiple times with children chiming in. (DD)



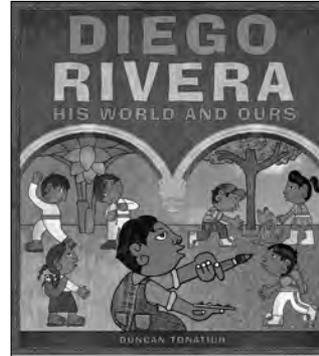
Grandpa's Girls

Written by Nicola I. Campbell
Illustrated by Kim LaFave
Groundwood Books, 2011, unpagged, ISBN 978-1-55498-084-0

Grandpa's Girls focuses on a universal experience that is sure to resonate with many young readers—a visit to

see a grandparent. A young girl and her cousins explore their Grandpa's house and surrounding structures, such as a "yuxkn," a storage shed where their grand-auntie used to live, Grandpa's barn, and the root cellar where there are "dust-covered jars of tomatoes, cherries, huckleberries, and sockeye salmon on shelves." Their favorite place to look, however, is inside an old wooden trunk—in a secret room in grandpa's house—that contains black-and-white photographs of

him. One such photograph depicts Grandpa in an army uniform in 1942. The text at the end of the book reads, "Once a soldier, now a veteran, Grandpa is our everything—elder, gardener, chef, businessman, rancher, cowboy . . . But best of all, he's Grandpa." LaFave's illustrations, which were created digitally, convey the excitement and sense of happiness the children experience while visiting Grandpa. (JM)



Diego Rivera: His World and Ours

Written and illustrated by Duncan Tonatiuh
Abrams Books, 2011, 32 pp., ISBN 978-0-8109-9731-8

"Diego Rivera was born in Mexico in a city called

Guanajuato, which means 'land of frogs.' As a boy Diego enjoyed playing with his trains, but more than anything he liked to draw." And so begins this engaging biography of a renowned twentieth-century artist. The book provides information about his travels across Europe to study and learn from renowned painters, the different styles in which he painted, such as Cubism, and his interest in murals, his country, and common people. The book ends with questions for readers to ponder about what Diego Rivera might paint if he were alive today. For example, two questions read, "Would he paint the way we dress and live? Would he paint the way we play?" The illustrations are rich with cultural details related to Mexican culture and history that complement the text, which focuses on the significance of these topics in Diego Rivera's murals. The book concludes with an extensive glossary defining numerous terms (e.g., cubism, mural, apprentice, and Aztecs) referenced throughout the book, an author's note, a listing of places where readers can find the work of Diego Rivera, and a bibliography. (JM)



***A Zeal of Zebras:
An Alphabet of
Collective Nouns***

*Written and illustrated by
Woop Studios*
Chronicle Books, 2011,
unpaged, ISBN 978-1-
4521-0492-8

This is the kind of book that defies categorization. Is it an alphabet book?

The art is certainly noteworthy enough to call it a picturebook. Maybe it's a grammar lesson in the form of a picturebook. Perhaps it's a piece of nonfiction about animals of all sorts (from polar bears to porcupines to parrots). All these ways of thinking about and experiencing *A Zeal of Zebras* are available to readers—and the book will appeal to readers of any age. The book is arranged in alphabetical order by the collective noun, starting with *aurora* and ending with *zeal*. The animals featured vary from commonplace, like goldfish, to unusual, such as larks and gnus. The book is credited to Woop Studios, but four creators are named in the end matter: Miraphora Mina, Eduardo Lima, Harriet Logan, and Mark Faulkner. These four friends and colleagues began with a website (woopstudios.com) that features limited edition original prints of collective noun posters like the ones on each page of the book. The book expands on the project by complementing each poster with text describing the animal whose collective noun is portrayed in the art. The illustrations were rendered using Adobe Photoshop but have an antique rather than modern feel to them. Text is incorporated into the art in each poster so that the collective pronoun is reinforced on both sides of the page. The lettering may form a nest (for crocodiles), leap off the page (for leopards), or move (for moles). Teachers could incorporate the book by sharing a poster a day with students as part of a language arts lesson;

young readers might explore the book as a piece of art by focusing on the posters; parents could learn alongside their children by sharing this book together and discovering both the nouns and the animal facts. (LC)



***Big Wig: A Little
History of Hair***

*Written by Kathleen Krull
Illustrated by Peter
Malone*

Arthur A. Levine
Books/Scholastic,
2011, unpaged, ISBN
978-0-439-67640-3

This piece of nonfiction by a well-known favorite

is chocked full of unusual facts about hair. The price of the most expensive hair cut on record, \$16,300.00, is both quirky and astonishing. The stories of attempts to cure baldness are intriguing. Readers will find themselves wondering why and how as they make their way through this picturebook. The book's subtitle, "A Little History of Hair," does not do justice to the broad survey provided within the pages and pictures. While the chronological format creates an obvious path through the book, there are also lots of built-in opportunities for interaction as readers notice the silliness within the pictures. From a teaching perspective, connections to science and social studies abound. This book could be the inspiration for a wide range of science fair projects for upper elementary students. Social studies lessons could involve comparing grooming habits across times and places. Brief source notes called "Hair Extensions" close the book. Readers may want to pair this title with additional books on the subject to compare facts. The comedic illustrations and global perspective make this a worthwhile offering. (LC)



The Grand Plan to Fix Everything

Written by Uma Krishnaswami
Illustrated by Abigail Halpin

Atheneum Books, 2011,
266 pp., ISBN 978-1-4169-9589-0

Eleven-year-old Dini absolutely loves watching and reading about Bollywood movies from India,

especially those starring her favorite actress, the amazing Dolly Singh. “Dini is a Dolly fan. She has been forever, from the time she discovered that Dolly’s first movie, in which she was just a kid, came out the day—the very day!—that Dini was born. You can’t be more closely connected than that” (p. 1). Dini and her best friend Maddie share this obsession with movies and Dolly Singh. Both are planning to attend a Bollywood dance camp for two whole weeks, but these plans abruptly change when Dini discovers that her mother has received a grant to work at a women’s clinic in a town called Swapnagiri in India. Dini is upset about her family moving—especially to a small town like Swapnagiri instead of Bombay, where Bollywood movies are made. Bombay also happens to be the place where Dolly Singh lives. But the town of Swapnagiri is full of surprises, and Dini eventually gets to meet Dolly Singh while there. Although the book is somewhat predictable, there is still much about this engaging middle grade novel that children will enjoy. (JM)



The Fantastic Secret of Owen Jester

Written by Barbara O'Connor
Frances Foster Books/
Farrar Straus Giroux,
2010, 168 pp., ISBN 978-0-374-36850-0

One of the catalog subject headings for

this book is “submersibles.” To some extent, that tag gives away the “fantastic secret” of the title, but readers will not be disappointed because it’s not simply the secret that makes this an engaging read for upper elementary and middle grade students. O’Connor has created a memorable and authentic southern setting in Carter, Georgia, and populated it with realistic and likeable characters. Even the protagonist’s nemesis, Viola, turns out to be more than just a busybody to be avoided. Owen and his friends have to learn to work together and think creatively to make use of the submersible they discover. This makes for an excellent adventure involving friendship, trust, and a bullfrog named “Tooley Graham.” *The Fantastic Secret of Owen Jester* feels old-fashioned in some ways because of how small-town dynamics, traditional rivalries, and the freedom of summer play out. What makes this book stand out is how these familiar motifs are blended with extraordinary elements and powerful character arcs; Owen Jester will not quickly be forgotten. (LC)



Black and White: The Confrontation of Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth and Eugene “Bull” Connor

Written by Larry Dane Brimmer
Calkins Creek/Boyd's Mill Press, 2011,
111 pp., ISBN 978-1-59078-766-3

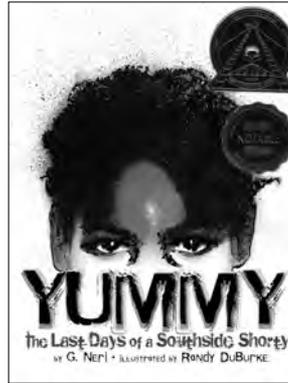
This nonfiction book is about Fred L. Shuttlesworth, Eugene “Bull” Connor, and the confrontation that took place between the two in Birmingham, Alabama, during the 1950s and 1960s. Shuttlesworth was the pastor of Bethel Baptist Church as well and a civil rights activist who vehemently protested against segregation and racial inequality. Eugene “Bull” Connor was the Commissioner of Public Safety for the

city of Birmingham and a staunch segregationist infamously known for directing the use of attack dogs and water hoses against civil rights demonstrators.

The book is divided into three main sections: (a) biographical information about Shuttlesworth; (b) biographical information about Connor; and (c) a description of the confrontation between these two key figures. It opens with a brief reference to the bombing of Shuttlesworth's house by the Ku Klux Klan on Christmas day in 1956. The book features a number of black-and-white photographs, images from newspapers and actual handwritten letters, and quotes from both Shuttlesworth and Connor. For example, after one protest in which Shuttlesworth was injured and taken away on a stretcher to an ambulance, Connor is quoted as saying, "I waited a week to see Shuttlesworth get hit with a hose. I'm sorry I missed it" (p. 50).

According to Brimmer, the confrontation, detailed in the third section of this book, was precipitated by a meeting between city commissioners and several ministers, including Shuttlesworth, about the hiring of Black policemen. Connor became angry when challenged by Shuttlesworth and ordered the police department to make him "take a lie detector test with regard to the unsolved Christmas-night bombing of his home in 1956" (p. 49). Shuttlesworth agreed to take one if Connor would take one as well and answer questions related to "whether Bull was a Klansman or had Klan sympathies, [and] whether he had ever participated in any bombings in the city" (p. 49). Bull quickly backed off, but "wanted to rid himself and Birmingham of the pesky preacher from Bethel Baptist Church at any cost" (p. 49). Shuttlesworth used Connor's propensity for violent tactics to support his own cause; by drawing media attention to the images that were captured in Birmingham (such as children being attacked by dogs) and broadcast around the world, he correctly anticipated negative public reaction, which ultimately played a role in the passage of civil

rights legislation. This book deserves a place in all middle and high school libraries. (JM)



Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty

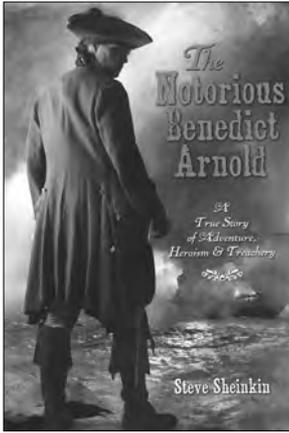
Written by G. Neri
Illustrated by Randy DuBurke

Lee & Low Books, 2010,
94 pp., ISBN 978-1-58430-267-4

Robert "Yummy" Sandifer had accumulated more than 20 felonies and

earned a reputation for being a bully, thief, and arsonist by the age of 11. The 4-foot tall youngster, weighing approximately 60 pounds, received his nickname because of his love for candy and cookies. Living in Roseland, a Chicago area well-known for gang-related activities, Yummy's childhood was heavily influenced by the Black Disciple Nation, the gang that accepted him as a member when he was only 11 years old. One fall day, Yummy shot and killed 14-year-old Shavon Dean, an innocent bystander who was unfortunately in the path of a bullet intended for a member of a rival gang. As the manhunt for Yummy commenced and national media tagged him "Little Killer," Yummy's life, and the lives of many Roseland residents, were changed forever.

Told through the eyes of Roger, one of Yummy's classmates, this graphic novel addresses gang life, the events surrounding the unnecessary shooting, and the myriad social influences that made Yummy the person he became. Was Yummy a killer or victim? Which was worse, the way he lived, or the way he died? Based on a true story, this Coretta Scott King Honor Award-winning novel portrays gangs, abuse, and murder in a style that is captivating, realistic, and appropriate for children in upper elementary and middle school grades. Right vs. wrong and good vs. evil are merely two of the many ideologies young readers will ponder after reading this emotional and tragic book. (AB)



The Notorious Benedict Arnold: A True Story of Adventure, Heroism, & Treachery

Written by Steven Sheinkin
Roaring Brook Press,
2010, 344 pp., ISBN 978-1-59643-486-8

This accessible and dynamic biography will lead readers to new understandings of one of American history's most negative characters. Sheinkin offers a unique perspective on Benedict Arnold, one that will have even avid history buffs turning to the source

notes to check the facts and find out more. Few readers will know much more about Arnold than that he is considered a traitor. *The Notorious Benedict Arnold* provides insight into how and why he became one. Utilizing journals, letters, and historical documents, Sheinkin creates brief chapters that capture key moments in chronological order and maintain a quick pace for teen readers. This is a valuable piece of nonfiction because it is well researched, engaging, and invites readers to get the whole story behind symbolic heroes and villains. Sheinkin's passion for his subject comes through on every page, yet his portrayal of Benedict Arnold, both before and after the war, seems most notably balanced and thorough. Accordingly, it was awarded a 2011 Boston Globe–Horn Book Award for Nonfiction. (LC)

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