A Splash of Books for Reading and Sharing with Students in Grades K–8

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We have enjoyed putting together this column of what we consider notable children’s books spanning a number of genres and subgenres (e.g., wordless books, graphic novels). There are varied topics addressed in this column, including geographical discoveries, Horace Pippin, Elizabeth Blackwell, friendship, and even bubble gum. Perhaps reading some of these titles will add a splash of excitement and wonder for teachers, librarians, and students while cultivating a passion for books.

A Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin
Written by Jen Bryant
Illustrated by Melissa Sweet

“On February 22, 1888, the town of West Chester, Pennsylvania, celebrated a holiday. That day in that same town, Daniel and Christine Pippin celebrated the birth of their son, Horace.” And so begins this biography of a famous and inspiring American artist. Jen Bryant tells the story of Horace Pippin’s life by focusing on his love of drawing as a child, his time in the military and its impact on his art, and his adult life as a well-respected artist with paintings in the homes of movie stars and museums. “Pictures just come to my mind . . . and I tell my heart to go ahead.” This is one of the many quotes from Horace Pippin embedded throughout the illustrations in the biography. Another reads, “If a man knows nothing but hard times, he will paint them, for he must be true to himself . . . .”

Melissa Sweet’s illustrations complement the story by mimicking Pippin’s style. For instance, when the text reads, “He painted the mailman and his wagon, women working in the kitchen, children playing games in the yard, cotton fields and log cabins . . . .,” there are small replicas by Melissa Sweet of some of Pippin’s famous paintings on these topics. The back endpapers feature a map highlighting places around the United States where Horace Pippin’s paintings are located along with images of some of his well-known pieces, including “Saying Prayers,” “Self Portrait,” and “Cabin in the Cotton 1.” There are also notes from the author and illustrator, a section titled “Historical Note,” and resources for further reading. I highly recommend this outstanding biography. (JCM)

Hello, My Name Is Ruby
Written and illustrated by Philip C. Stead

“Ruby introduced herself. ‘Hello, my name is Ruby.’”

So starts this heartwarming story of a small yellow bird—short of stature but possessing an expansive spirit and open mind. Ruby’s winsome ways and extroverted nature pay off when she meets a tall white bird with
rainbow-colored feathers and experiences flying with a friend for the first time. Next, she discovers new pleasures on the ground by walking with a bright green flightless bird. In conversation with a giraffe, who listens with curiosity and concern showing clearly in its eyes, Ruby acknowledges some fear due to her size but quickly demonstrates how she literally rises above it. She flies in formation with other birds in an aerial image that seems to pay homage to Leo Lionni’s exquisite underwater choreography in *Swimmy* (1963). Stead’s delicate pencil, pastel, and watercolor illustrations extend Ruby’s free-spirited charm.

The central pages of the book depict Ruby’s continuing journey as she seeks friendship and adventure in her gentle and joyful way. With markedly spare text here, Stead depicts Ruby offering various versions of her welcoming self-introduction to four new birds. Stead’s illustrations of expressive animals in delightful surroundings continue to engage with their understated exuberance. However, the comforting light blue background shifts to purple and then grey as Ruby’s greeting of a large brown bird with brilliant purple tail feathers and an exaggerated, platypus-type beak leads to flat-out rejection. Grey turns to rainy on a double-paged spread showing Ruby’s initial dejection. True to her sunny personality, however, Ruby moves forward to the book’s gratifying conclusion. Stead cleverly avoids a uniformly positive experience for Ruby, showing realistically that while not everyone will be open to friendship unreservedly offered, the rewards for such a demeanor are enormous nonetheless. (KJM)

### Odd Duck

*Odd Duck*

**Written by**

Cecil Castellucci

**Illustrated by Sara Varon**


This beginning graphic novel with six short chapters describes Theodora as a perfectly normal duck who likes predictable routines—exercising in the morning, shopping in the afternoon, and gazing at the stars in the evening. She enjoys a solitary life until Chad moves in next door. Theodora immediately realizes they will never become friends because he displays bizarre art in his yard, dyes his feathers weird colors, and talks nonsense. She looks forward to the day when he flies south for the winter. The cold and snow come, but Chad stays put. Eventually Chad invites Theodora to look at the stars through his telescope, and they begin to talk. They recognize that they may be different ducks, but they feel the same way about astronomy. Soon they become inseparable, doing everything together.

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*One Gorilla: A Counting Book*

**Written and illustrated by Anthony Browne**


*One Gorilla* is a visual masterpiece that is sure to offer young children much to savor and talk about. Each page introduces a member of the primate family (e.g., 1 gorilla, 2 orangutans, 3 chimpanzees, 4 mandrills, 5 baboons) followed by a self-portrait of the illustrator along with the words, “All primates. / All one family. / All my family . . . .” The book concludes with a photograph of numerous individuals with varied facial expressions. The illustrations are the real highlight here. Colors that are normally associated with the primates featured are accentuated in breathtaking ways. For example, the image of the orangutans depicts a mother holding her baby and the orange color of their fur is accentuated in an unusual, almost surrealistic, manner. This book is a special gem. (JCM)
When the other ducks return in the spring, they laugh at the “odd duck.” Is Chad the odd one? Or is it Theodora? Chad and Theodora assume the other is the “odd duck” and disagree. Their fallout drives them back to their respective homes and appears to terminate their friendship. Later, they agree that they both are a little odd, and nothing is wrong with being different when you have a friend. This quirky book will charm readers as they think about forming their own first impressions, accepting differences, and solving problems. Varon’s bright colors and detailed pictures invite children to linger on each page, and Castellucci’s story will prove that there is nothing wrong with being the “odd duck.” (DD)

**Benjamin Bear in Bright Ideas!**
Written and illustrated by Philippe Coudray

*Benjamin Bear in Bright Ideas!* allows emergent readers to enjoy the graphic novel format. The entire story (told solely with speech bubbles) is composed of brief adventures between Benjamin Bear and his friend Rabbit. Each adventure has its own title. Some of the titles include “Good Catch,” “Sharing,” “Follow the Leader,” “Too Smart for His Own Good,” and “Treetop.” Treetop is my favorite story. In this one, Benjamin Bear and Rabbit decide that the first one who reaches the top of the tree is the winner. Benjamin reaches the top first and yells, “I won!” but his weight causes him to drop down so that Rabbit is at the top, and he then yells, “No, I did!” (p. 5). The illustrations add to the humor and gracefully guide young readers through the use of frames that help pace the stories and accentuate the minimal text. (JCM)

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**Flora and the Flamingo**
Written and illustrated by Molly Idle

This completely wordless picturebook showcases an improbable friendship between Flora and an elegant flamingo. The flamingo stands erect and tall. Flora—a little girl in a pink bathing suit and black flippers—mimics with her head held high and one leg bent. Flamingo slowly moves his head and Flora copies. Flamingo extends one leg and Flora does the same. The movable flaps help them gracefully travel across the pages with outstretched arms and pointed toes. Small hands will enjoy lengthening the movement by opening and closing the flaps. When flamingo and Flora bend down to touch the ground, flamingo squawks, causing Flora to tumble across the page. They shyly look at each other and extend a wing or hand in forgiveness. As the friendship blossoms, the two characters perform classical moves such as plié and jeté. The synchronized partnership then shows the friends supporting and helping each other as they dance in rhythm. On a final double-page spread that folds out, the pair leap across the page and jump into a pool of blossoms.

This brilliant book is simple in color and story. The clean white backgrounds and pale pink blossom borders emphasize the main characters. Flora’s yellow swim cap is accentuated in the yellow end pages. This splendid story will encourage young children to use their imaginations and discover dance for themselves. (DD)
Who Says Women Can’t Be Doctors?  
The Story of Elizabeth Blackwell  
Written by Tanya Lee Stone  
Illustrated by Marjorie Priceman  

The premise of this informative book is refreshing and appealing: “Well, you might find this hard to believe, but . . . .” Stone continues, letting readers in on a surprising secret: “. . . there once was a time when girls weren’t allowed to become doctors.” Stone expects such woefully unenlightened thinking to surprise her reader. And it does. Then, she introduces a young Blackwell who, though a “tiny wisp,” stands up to challenges, fights with her brother, sleeps on the floor to “toughen herself up,” and is queasy at the sight of blood. Blackwell’s antics are depicted with bold energy in both text and image as she climbs, swings, stomps, and spies through her childhood. Quickly, Stone has pulled readers into this story of high-spirited determination, thoughtful reflection, familial support in the face of societal oppressiveness, and success despite significant obstacles and ridicule—all couched in the reality that while one woman doctor opened doors, she did not open all closed minds overnight.

Stone’s text, with its ironic statements, lyrical repetition, and emphatic pronouncements, offers an energy that is reflected beautifully in Priceman’s use of strong black-ink lines and colorful gouache and by her skillful depiction of emotion through vivid facial expressions. Urgency, perplexity, elation, and humor as well as shock, disapproval, condescension, and mockery come across clearly in text and image. As Blackwell faces scornful laughter and frustrating rejection, taunting “ha, ha, ha’s” and “no, no, no’s” are emblazoned artistically across the white background—until the final “Yes!” of acceptance into a medical school arrives. Stone shows that once Blackwell had decided to become a doctor, the obstacles did not simply disappear. She persevered—drawing on intelligence, hard work, humor, charm, determination, and the opportunities provided her by mentors, family, and a little bit of luck. What a wonderful role model for us all! (KJM)

The Matchbox Diary  
Written by Paul Fleischman  
Illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline  

“Pick whatever you like the most.” In an expansive room full of books and collections, a little girl finds a cigar box filled with small matchboxes. The great grandfather, an immigrant, explains that there is not just one story inside, but many stories, because the boxes are his diary. In chronological order, from Italy to America, the great-grandfather opens each box, shares the tiny object, and reveals the hidden memory inside. The first box contains an olive pit. He grew up in Italy where there were many olive trees, but life was hard. When he was hungry, his mother gave him an olive pit to suck on to curb his hunger. The brown sepia-toned illustrations will take readers back in time. Only the present-day pictures of the great-grandfather and child are in bright colors. Some of the other boxes contain dried fish bones that represent how hard his family worked in the canneries, a ticket stub from his first baseball game, and small lead letters that helped him become a typesetter. At the close of the book, the great grandfather explains that he still looks for stories—whether in books, newspaper articles, or old things. In addition, he encourages his great-granddaughter to begin collecting objects and creating her own diary. This is a remarkable
Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns: A Muslim Book of Colors
Written by Hena Khan
Illustrated by Mehrdokht Amini

Pakistani American author Khan and London-based, Iranian-born illustrator Amini have created an elegant concept book that embodies the seamless union of the verbal and the visual expected from the best picturebooks. Using attention to basic colors as an underlying scheme, they offer a rich celebration of Islamic traditions. Khan’s main character shares aspects of her life as a young Muslim girl. The importance of family and of religious and cultural traditions are emphasized as she faces Mecca and prays with her father, walks hand-in-hand through town with her mother, visits the mosque with her parents, gazes lovingly at her grandfather wearing his white kufi, reads the Quran with her grandmother, eats brown dates as Ramadan treats, gives and receives gifts in celebration of Eid, and holds a silver fanoos (lantern) in the night.

Amini has incorporated key elements of classical Islamic ornamentation into this exquisite book. The book’s endpapers offer examples of visually stunning vegetal and geometric patterns, two of the four basic components of Islamic ornamentation. This graceful beauty is carried throughout the book in patterns depicted on red prayer rugs, golden mosque domes, orange henna designs, a green Quran cover, a yellow box for zakat (alms) and clothing, including the mother’s blue hijab. The last two basic components—calligraphy and stylized figures—are included in the black-inked Arabic letters the main character

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The exotic paintings and indomitable spirit of Henri Rousseau are mirrored beautifully in this upbeat story about the joy of artistic innovation and the inexhaustibility of one man’s creative force. At the age of 40, the career French toll collector began painting. Before he was 50, he retired to paint full time. His work included lush landscapes rendered in rich tones, with jungle scenes and animals he had never seen directly, and atypical portraits with cityscapes and natural backdrops. Having no money to travel, Rousseau studied photographs, illustration, paintings, anatomy, and nature in many forms and attended the 1889 World’s Fair in Paris. Despite repeated harsh reviews by contemporary art critics, Rousseau, famous for innovating in naïve style, “knows his shapes are simpler and flatter than everyone else’s, but he thinks that makes them lovely.”

This picturebook biography offers a child-friendly introduction to a man with a unique talent and soaring imagination who was truly “one of the most gifted self-taught artists in history.” Through using third-person narration, Markel brings her reader deep into Rousseau’s life and thoughts as he experiences bliss in the natural world and in the ways it is translated through his research and inventive vision. Hall strikingly captures Rousseau’s artistic style with its flat, often slightly disproportionate images and vibrant use of color. She incorporates his diverse influences, images, and foci engagingly into her watercolor and acrylic illustrations. The biography highlights Rousseau’s enthusiastic talent and eventual acceptance into a modern world of major artists. It is equally important for young readers to appreciate Rousseau’s position as a leader in modern art. In challenging traditional artistic perspectives and spatial relationships, and in his intellectual life, he was neither naïve nor unpolished. The author’s note helps readers see that Rousseau was no accidental artist. (KJM)
With the help of bioluminescent plankton, Whale twists and turns in the water to arrange star-like designs that shimmer in the backdrop of the evening sky. The collaborative ocean designs will surely delight readers again and again. Robinson crafts full-page illustrations and remixes features from both graphic novel and traditional picturebook formats to offer multiple points of entry within each opening for the reader. In particular, both the written and pictorial narratives charm readers with humor and playfulness. Like Robinson’s previous picturebook What Animals Really Like (2011), Whale’s story reminds readers that art is one pathway to express the beauty observed in the world each day. Whale Shines would pair nicely with either informational texts about creatures of the ocean and their adaptations or other tales of unexpected partnerships. (AZ)

The World Is Waiting for You
Written by Barbara Kerley
National Geographic Society, 2013, unpaged,
ISBN 978-1-4263-1114-7

This book features text by Barbara Kerley and photographs of numerous National Geographic explorers around the world. It is a tribute to exploration and encourages young children to discover the world. The first few pages read, “Right outside your window there’s a world to explore. Ready?” Among the many images included, there is one of oceanographer Sylvia Earle diving with dolphins in the Atlantic Ocean, one of paleontologist Paul Sereno unearthing the remains of a fossil in the Sahara in Niger, and another of biologist Anand Varma riding in a paraglider over wet meadows taking pictures in Patagonia, Argentina. My favorite image is of a team of scientists exploring the Cave of Crystals in Naica, Chihuahua, Mexico.

There are captions (along with a small version of the photograph that appears in the book) at the end, along with additional information about each explorer. For example, the caption related to the explorers in the Cave of Crystals conveys that they had to wear special vests filled with ice packs to be able to withstand the 112-degree-Fahrenheit temperature. In a section titled “Note from National Geographic,” the CEO and Chairman of the organization, John M. Fahey, Jr., writes, “The world is filled with incredible sights, grand adventures, and new things to learn every day. We want to bring you around the world, showing you endless possibilities and all that your future has to offer. The explorers you’ve met on these pages were once kids, just like you—kids who stayed curious and followed their dreams. We hope that you will keep on exploring this amazing planet we all share.” (JCM)

The Gumazing Gum Girl! Chews Your Destiny
Written and illustrated by Rhode Montijo

“Gabby Gomez should have seen it coming. She had been chewing gum for as long as anyone could remember, and it was bound to blow up in her face sooner or later” (p. 6). One night after Gabby goes to bed chewing gum, she wakes up to discover that her hair is filled with gum and that her head is stuck to her pillow. Her mother then tells her that she is no longer allowed to chew gum. On the way to school, Gabby gives in to temptation and pulls out a piece of “limited-edition Mighty-Mega Ultra-Stretchy Super-Duper Extenda-Bubble Bubble Gum” (p. 25), which leads to her being covered with gum. However, Gabby soon discovers that being covered in gum gives her special powers to help people in need—even a plane that is about to crash! She becomes Gum Girl! But readers are introduced to a villain at the very end of this graphic novel who is plotting to
destroy Gum Girl, which hopefully means we can look forward to another book about this likeable character. The comic-book-like illustrations in black, white, and lots of pink complement the story by conveying its humor. (JCM)

Same Sun Here
Written by Silas House & Neela Vaswani

Meena hails from the mountains of India; River comes from the mountaintops of Appalachia. Despite the physical and metaphorical distance, the two young writers find they have more in common than they could have imagined. This stunning novel in letters depicts one Indian immigrant girl in New York City and a Kentucky coal miner’s son as they write their “true selves” under the same sun. Both Meena and River choose to communicate by means of handwritten letters in lieu of social media like their classmates. Their two unique voices narrate the novel and offer intimate, refreshing, and candid conversations about the important issues affecting their lives, including immigration, activism, citizenship, and deforestation. Despite their unique differences, through sensitive and honest exchanges, the two pen pals challenge one another’s misconceptions and teach one another about true friendship and shared humanity.

Readers will be taken with Meena and River’s distinct voices and worlds, thoughtfully crafted by authors Silas House and Neela Vaswani. Since its publication, Same Sun Here has won numerous book awards, and its audio book, narrated by the authors themselves, has been most recently recognized on the 2013 ALSC Notable Children’s Recordings list. Vaswani offers supplemental artifacts on her website (http://neelavaswani.com/?p=Same-Sun-Here) for readers to explore and stretch their responses. This beautiful chapter book is a perfect read-aloud for teachers and families to share as it opens its readers to important discussions of cultural diversity and social justice. (AZ)

Chengli and the Silk Road Caravan
Written by Hildi Kang

Readers seeking tales of young, heroic characters living in lands of long ago will find Chengli and the Silk Road Caravan to be a perfect fit. In this historical fiction novel, Chengli is an orphaned errand boy living in Chang’an China in 630 A.D. Adventures ensue as 13-year-old Chengli decides to travel the desert as a member of a caravan. The allure of the desert beckons Chengli to uncover more about the fabled merchant trade route known as the Silk Road and about his father—who he was and how he died. His journey is riddled with mystery, danger, and unexpected friendships. The harshness of Chengli’s travels along the barren roads is further complicated by the threats of bandits searching for the royal company who are a part of his camel caravan.

Hildi Kang vividly crafts Chengli’s expedition across the flat and desolate stretches of land with historical and cultural details so that readers can easily step into this unique time and place. The quick pace and action of Chengli’s fascinating story also convey messages of perseverance, strength of character, and true friendship. Chengli and the Silk Road Caravan has most recently been recognized as a winner of the Asian Pacific American Librarian Association’s 2013 award for its literary and artistic merit among children’s literature for and about Asian/Pacific Americans and their heritage. This book can easily be featured as a touchstone text in a historical fiction unit of study or be paired with informational texts about merchant routes like the Silk Road. (AZ)