Children’s Literature Reviews

The 2014 Notable Children’s Books in the Language Arts

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It is with pleasure that committee members present the 2014 Notable Children’s Books in the Language Arts. Each book presented here meets expectations in terms of quality for the genre in which it is written, has an appealing format, and possesses enduring characteristics. However, it is the language of the book that sets it apart. Committee members carefully evaluate each book based on the following criteria. Each title must:

- deal explicitly with language, such as play on words, word origins, or the history of language;
- demonstrate uniqueness in the use of language or style;
- invite child response or participation.

With this list, committee members recognize and celebrate the sights, sounds, smells, and responses evoked when books come to life in the hands of a reader. In the words of Louise Rosenblatt (2005), “Books do not simply happen to people. People also happen to books” (p. 62). As you read, we are certain you will find cause to join in the celebration. (PEB)

Fictional Picturebooks

Knock, Knock: My Dad’s Dream for Me
Written by Daniel Beaty
Illustrated by Bryan Collier

Each morning an African American father plays a game of “Knock Knock” with his young son. But one day, the game stops. The boy hopes for his father’s return; he pleads, “Papa, come home, ’cause there are things I don’t know, and when I get older I thought you could teach me. . . .” As young people confront the loss of a loved one through death, divorce, or incarceration, they, like the narrator, will ask, “Why?” Although the answer does not come, the father reminds, “Knock knock for me, for as long as you become your best, the best of me still lives in you.” Poet Daniel Beaty’s words create a soul-stirring experience, and Bryan Collier’s collages demand that the reader pause and breathe in the power of the book. (SPC)

Journey
Written and illustrated by Aaron Becker

A little girl sits on her front stoop, bored. Her family too busy to play with her, she retreats to her room where a red crayon sparks her imagination. She draws and enters a magical world. Aaron Becker, the creator of this wordless picture book, uses watercolor, pen, and ink to tell this adventurous tale. Reminiscent of the classic Harold and the Purple Crayon (Johnson, 1955), readers explore the new world with the little girl. This beautiful book encourages readers to unplug, to slow down, and to find a muse for their imagination. (SPC)
Light in the Darkness: A Story About How Slaves Learned in Secret
Written by Lesa Cline-Ransome
Illustrated by James E. Ransome

Even though it is against the law, Rosa and Mama sneak out of their cabin in the dark of night to attend a secret underground school. Morris, an adult slave who had learned to read from his plantation’s mistress, teaches the letters and sounds of the alphabet using only sticks. For anyone caught by patrollers, a whipping was certain to follow; one lash for each letter learned. Although bodily freedom was only a dream for most slaves, freedom of the spirit and soul was a possibility through literacy. This lyrical narrative accompanied by predominantly dark-toned watercolor paintings is a “celebration of those who sought the light of knowledge during the darkness of slavery.” An author’s note and short bibliography are included. (DK)

The Day the Crayons Quit
Written by Drew Daywalt
Illustrated by Oliver Jeffers

It is a dark day indeed when the crayons in your box go on strike. At least Duncan’s crayons have the courtesy to explain their points of view. Gray would like something smaller than elephants to work on; yellow and orange would like a definitive answer as to which is the true color of the sun; pink would like not to be pigeonholed as a girls’ color. Each crayon has its own voice and perspective, which is presented in friendly letter format with a matching picture to demonstrate the issue. The letters offer viable arguments and stances for writing persuasively. Duncan listens carefully and addresses all of the issues presented to him by creating a masterpiece that will surely grace the refrigerator door at his home for a long time. (JS)

Nelly May Has Her Say
Written by Cynthia DeFelice
Illustrated by Henry Cole

With six younger brothers and six younger sisters, Nelly May wants to help support her family. Her solution: work for the man who lives up the steep hill, Lord Ignasius Pinkwinkle. Lord Pinkwinkle is a peculiar fellow. For example, he insists that Nelly May call him “Most Excellent of All Masters,” the dog is called “fur-faced fluffenbarker,” and the bed is the “restful slumberific.” He even has a special name for Nelly May—one that makes her say, “Hmmph.” The tense relationship between Nelly May and Lord Pinkwinkle soon reaches a climax, and Lord Pinkwinkle has an epiphany. Cynthia DeFelice has written a playful, ear-tickling tale about a young girl who loves her family and herself. Henry Cole’s illustrations, created in watercolor, pen, and ink, delight the eye. (SPC)

The Matchbox Diary
Written by Paul Fleischman
Illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline

In this immigration story, a young girl opens a cigar box that holds her great-grandfather’s matchbox collection. Each matchbox contains a relic that served as his diary during a time when he couldn’t read or write. Born in Italy, her great-grandfather came as a boy to America, became a printer, and later owned a bookshop. He also sold antiques “filled with stories. Other people’s diaries.” Using a unique style, the book is written entirely as a dialogue between the young girl and her great-grandfather. Detailed, realistic illustrations rendered in acrylic gouache are in sepia tones when great-grandfather recalls his childhood and in deep colors when the page refers

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Little Red Writing
Written by Joan Holub
Illustrated by Melissa Sweet

Once upon a time in pencil school, Ms. 2 tells her pencil class that it is time to write a story. Little Red sets out on a storytelling journey with her basket of nouns and learns firsthand about the importance of different parts of speech, the value of punctuation, and the benefits of other ideas about writing. In fact, hidden within the pages of this book are basic tips for the beginning writer. Holub presents a hilarious and engaging re-telling of Little Red Riding Hood that brings all key characters into play, including the Wolf 3000, a pencil sharpener on a rampage! Sweet’s watercolor, pencil, and collage illustrations include many intricate details that readers will not want to miss. (CD)

Exclamation Mark
Written by Amy Krouse Rosenthal
Illustrated by Tom Lichtenheld

Like the new kid entering a classroom, Exclamation Mark is trying to find his place on the page. He tries every way he can to fit in, but until he meets Question Mark, he feels lost and alone. Question Mark begins a conversation with Exclamation Mark using a barrage of questions. This annoys Exclamation Mark to the point that he yells at her, thus finding his true calling. Exclamation Mark discovers other ways he can use his voice and contribute to the well-being of his community—a world of “endless possibilities.” The illustrations resemble lined primary writing paper—an unmistakable context for the drawings and text. The word play amuses children and adults alike. This engaging story will inspire creative thinking and writing. (JS)

Ah Ha!
Written and illustrated by Jeff Mack

Can a person use only two letters to create an entire story? Jeff Mack proves that with creative punctuation and lively, engaging mixed-media illustrations, two letters (H and A) can be used to create a delightful cyclical story young readers will truly enjoy. Frog is trying to have a relaxing day in his pond, but through a series of fortunate and unfortunate events, Frog’s day might not be as relaxing as he anticipated. This clever and unique story will take readers of all ages on a rollicking grand adventure that highlights Frog’s daring (and quite lucky) day. With its open-ended conclusion, this book begs to be read repeatedly and invites readers to speculate just what might happen to Frog next! (CD)

Fictional Novels

The True Blue Scouts of Sugar Man Swamp
Written by Kathi Appelt

Readers will enjoy this lighthearted adventure with a touch of “Meanwhile, back at the ranch . . .” thrown in. The Sugar Man Swamp is facing impending dangers: developers planning a gator wrestling attraction and feral hogs hungry to devour the famed sugar cane. The True Blue Scouts, raccoon brothers J’miah and Bingo, search for the Sugar Man. They have to wake him so he

to the present day. This beautiful intergenerational book recognizes the importance of story in people’s lives. (EBF)
can set things right. Chap Brayburn, a 12-year-old boy, is also trying to save the swamp and protect his mother’s business selling her famous sugar fried pies and hot, bitter coffee. The story is interlaced with playful language—the “rumble-rumble-rumble” (p. 52) of the hogs, and the “snip-snap-zip-zap” (p. 56) of Gertrude, the canebrake rattler. This delightful read has mysteries unfolding at every turn. (JS)

**Hold Fast**  
Written by Blue Balliett  

Early’s father, Dashel Pearl, spoke about the power of words to his children from the day they were born. “They are for choosing, admiring, keeping, giving. They are treasures of inestimable value” (p. 6). But now, he is gone. Missing. Vanished. “Gone. Four miserable letters. What does the word mean?” (p. 2). Early and her family are forced to move into the city shelter. This fast-paced mystery will remind readers of the power of words and language and prompt them to try and solve the patterns Early discovers while attempting to understand her father’s sudden disappearance. The author incorporates topics of homelessness, temptation, despair, friendship, and dreams with respect and depth. (CD)

**Gaby, Lost and Found**  
Written by Angela Cervantes  
Scholastic, 2013, 220 pp., ISBN 978-0-545-48945-4

Gaby lives with her father because immigration officials deported her mother, an illegal immigrant from Honduras. Despite her father’s best intentions, he has no idea how to care for his daughter, and he often forgets to buy groceries or pick up food from the food pantry, leaving Gaby to fend for herself. What saves her from emotional trauma is writing profiles and adoption advertisements for the local animal shelter as part of a school service project. This is the story of a girl who loves to care for animals in need but is in need of a home herself. The book also addresses important controversial issues such as illegal immigration, poverty, and child neglect. (CD)

**This Journal Belongs to Ratchet**  
Written by Nancy J. Cavanaugh  

Rachel is 11 and believes “. . . everything in her life is old and recycled” (p. 3). She lives with her father who refuses to talk about her late mother. Instead, they talk about cars. Her talent for car repair earns her the nickname Ratchet. Moving frequently and being home-schooled, Ratchet longs for a friend. She joins a “Get Charmed” (p. 15) class to learn about make-up and style, but ends up working on go-carts with boys. Her dad’s reputation is that of an oddball environmentalist, currently petitioning to save the town park from being replaced by a strip mall. The story evolves through homework assignments, poems, free writes, and diary entries. With pages resembling a journal, readers feel they are sneaking a peek into Ratchet’s life. (JS)

**The Candy Smash**  
Written by Jacqueline Davies  

Fourth grader Jessie Treski may be book smart, but she’s clueless when it comes to feelings. Her single-minded determination to solve the mystery behind the anonymous candy hearts in everyone’s desks leads to unexpected heartaches. Without warning, her brother Evan develops a crush on a classmate and finds that he enjoys writing his own poetry, both of which he wants to
keep a secret. Each chapter heading defines a literary term, and the class’s teacher, Mrs. Overton, isn’t shy about her love for poetry; she even shares her own writing and introduces her students to poetry by Valerie Worth, Sylvia Plath, Eleanor Farjean, and Carl Sandburg. As Jessie comes to realize, it’s far better to smash candy than a couple of human hearts. (BW)

**Zebra Forest**
*Written by Adina Rishe Gewirtz*

Set during the Iranian hostage crisis, this riveting novel features 11-year-old Annie, her younger brother Rew, and their grandmother with whom they live. Their mother has deserted them and their father was killed in a fight. Annie, a storyteller, likes to tell her brother stories, especially about their father, who they imagine as a pirate or a pilot. She also creates stories related to *Treasure Island*, the beloved book that they read and reenact. Zebra Forest, near their home and named for its white birch and chocolate oak trees, becomes the children’s refuge. When prisoners escape, the children and Gran find themselves held hostage in their own home. Family secrets are revealed and the children learn the truth about their past. Themes of forgiveness, redemption, and hope resound within this book. (EBF)

**Sure Signs of Crazy**
*Written by Karen Harrington*

Sarah Nelson is 12, and her life has been anything but a bowl of cherries. Her mother drowned her two-year-old twin brother but, thankfully, failed to drown her. Sarah lives with her father, a functioning alcoholic, and they move from town to town whenever their past is uncovered. Sarah talks to her pet plant and keeps 2 diaries—one private, one public—and she collects words. Sarah’s teacher suggests students choose a person or character to write letters to over the summer. She chooses Atticus Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird*—a perfect father. Readers journey with Sarah as she deals with family secrets, experiences her first crush, and looks for indicators that she carries the family crazy gene. Sarah’s courage anchors her eventful summer. (JS)

**Escape from Mr. Lemoncello’s Library**
*Written by Chris Grabenstein*

Mr. Lemoncello, a billionaire master game maker, decides to build the town of Alexandriaville, Ohio, a new high-tech library with features like glass-top computers and a magnificent Wonder Dome with ten video screens displaying the 10 parts of the Dewey Decimal System. Mr. Lemoncello invites 12 children to be the first to visit the library for an overnight lock-in based on essays they have written, and Kyle Keeley, an expert at playing Mr. Lemoncello’s games, manages to be selected. The students are unaware, however, that a mystery game involving books, secret clues, pictogram puzzles, rebuses, and other technology awaits them. Chris Grabenstein invites readers to help solve the mystery and cleverly weaves numerous references to children’s books into the text. (DK)

**Prisoner 88**
*Written by Leah Pileggi*

“Welcome to the Idaho Penitentiary, gentlemen” (p. 3). These were the first words that 10-year old Jake Oliver Evans heard in his new home. Jake had been
sentenced to five years in an adult prison. Prison is a change from the life to which Jake had been accustomed. He receives food three times each day, learns to read, and has a regular job. Jake quickly discovers the realities of prison. He asks another inmate, “Do crazy men come in here or do men go crazy once they’re here?” (p. 62). Inspired by a true story, Pileggi artfully crafts the life of Jake Oliver Evans. Readers will gravitate toward this work of historical fiction because of Jake’s unique, authentic voice. (SPC)

**Counting by 7s**  
*Written by Holly Goldberg Sloan*  

Willow Chance is special. Two loving people adopted her on the seventh day of the seventh month of the seventh year they tried to expand their family. Willow explains, “[We] just naturally look like a family” (p. 12). Willow is obsessive and intensely curious about the number 7, medical conditions, and plants. But in the wake of a devastating tragedy, Willow retreats and lives under the care of her only friend’s family and an unskilled school counselor. This moving, contemporary realistic fiction novel will have readers laughing, crying, and cheering for Willow. The cadence of Willow’s voice will mesmerize readers. This story of loss, coming of age, and eventual peace seeps into readers’ souls and stays long after the final page. (SPC)

**Navigating Early**  
*Written by Clare Vanderpool*  

Thirteen-year-old Jack Baker’s father is finally coming home at the end of WWII. Unfortunately, his return is marred by the death of Jack’s mother, and Jack is forced abruptly to leave his home in Kansas to attend boarding school in Maine. There, Jack meets Early Auden, “the strangest of boys” (inside jacket flap). Early often skips classes and listens to records in the school basement, spends time reading the number Pi as a story, and collects news clippings about the sightings of a Great Appalachian Bear. This fabulous book engages students through a multitude of stories and mysteries that intertwine beautifully. Math aficionados will enjoy the amazing tale of Pi woven throughout the text. (CD)

**Nonfiction**

**Look Up! Bird-Watching in Your Own Backyard**  
*Written by Annette LeBlanc Cate*  

In this highly detailed look at the world of birds, informational prose with a conversational tone, dialogue balloons between humans and birds, sidebars, captions, maps, and other text features invite readers to inquire, draw, and gather data about birds in their neighborhoods. Divided into chapters discussing a variety of topics, this unique book includes hundreds of full-color ink and watercolor illustrations that invite reader response on many levels. Sketching is taught as a means of observing and experiencing birds more closely. The author provides instructions and recommends that readers first observe birds holistically in order to notice the smaller details more readily. A bibliography and an index are included in this essential book for any study or inquiry project on birds. (DK)
The Beatles Were Fab (and They Were Funny)
Written by Kathleen Krull and Paul Brewer
Illustrated by Stacy Innerst

The 1960s were arguably defined by the music of the Beatles, those flop-top Liverpool imports who changed the way teens dressed, thought, and talked. Gone were the stylized proper ways of expressing oneself. Instead, the world’s eardrums were assaulted by vocabulary that was slightly improper and yet appropriate to the situation. The Beatles expressed the everlasting nature of love by exuberantly declaring, “She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah.” Five decades after the British invasion, we still love them, yeah, yeah, yeah! The authors briefly mention the Beatles’ formative years, but mostly they share humorous anecdotes from their rise to fame, offering glimpses into each Beatle’s personality. The text and the acrylic-and-ink illustrations abound with playful moments, symbols, and physical characteristics attesting to the craze known as Beatlemania. (BW)

The Long, Long Journey: The Godwit’s Amazing Migration
Written by Sandra Markle
Illustrated by Mia Posada

A female baby bar-tailed godwit hatches on a June night in Alaska. “Crackle! Crackle! Crunch!” Young readers will enjoy following the baby chick’s growth as she learns to hunt for food, escapes a fox attack, grows feathers, and begins “hopping and flapping her wings.” In mid-October, the godwit is ready to fly on an eight-day nonstop trip of more than 7000 miles to Christchurch, New Zealand—a truly amazing journey. When godwits arrive in Christchurch, people on the shore greet them with welcome banners. The book’s descriptive language creates sensory images for the reader: the mother bird “trills softly”; the father “squawks a warning.” Posada’s watercolor-and-tissue-paper collage illustrations with double-page spreads provide children with a beautiful visual representation of the text. (EBF)

Martin & Mahalia: His Words, Her Song
Written by Andrea Davis Pinkney
Illustrated by Brian Pinkney

This retelling of the little-known collaboration between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahalia Jackson utilizes a unique combination of words, color, font size, and font style to tell the story of the convergence of their lives during the civil rights movement. Prose and poetry describe Martin’s and Mahalia’s lives in parallel form. Green and blue colors illustrate Martin’s life while red and orange colors illustrate Mahalia’s. Eventually, colors shift to purples and magentas when their collaboration culminates at the March on Washington. A timeline, bibliography, discography, and author’s and illustrator’s notes are included. (DK)

Poetry and Novels in Verse

Etched in Clay: The Life of Dave, Enslaved Potter and Poet
Written and illustrated by Andrea Cheng

Dave the Potter spent most of his life as a slave in South Carolina where he fashioned beautiful, enormous vessels. Dave’s talent outstrips that of those around him, but others take credit for his
work, “forgetting it was me / who rolled the clay / for the handles / thick and solid” (p. 30). Dave falls in love with words, especially “the long words / that I love best” (p. 37). Unable to write because of his state’s strict anti-literacy laws, Dave realizes that his unwritten thoughts will “float away / like twigs in a stream, / stuck on a rock / for a moment / and then gone” (p. 95). Dave’s story attests to one man’s determination to be remembered. (BW)

The Lightning Dreamer: Cuba’s Greatest Abolitionist
Written by Margarita Engle

This verse novel presents a fictionalized biography of Gertrudis Gómez de Avelladañeda, a 19th-century Cuban poet and abolitionist. Known as Tula, she defied custom and refused an arranged marriage when she was 14. Tula’s story is told by multiple narrators including her younger brother Manuel; her mother; Caridad, her beloved nanny and household servant; the nuns who welcome her to use their library; and the orphans who act out her plays. Banished to her grandfather’s mansion, Tula lives amongst slaves and befriends Sab, a slave whose face was scarred rescuing a child from a burning hut. Tula’s poetry conveys subversive ideas about slavery and injustice by using metaphor. A historical note provides factual information, and excerpts from her writing in English and Spanish are included. (EBF)

When Thunder Comes: Poems for Civil Rights Leaders
Written by J. Patrick Lewis
Illustrated by Jim Burke, R. Gregory Christie, Tonya Engel, John Parra, and Meilo So

Individual poems pay tribute to 17 civil rights leaders from around the globe in this compelling book. Although children will be familiar with many of the people like Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, they will meet some lesser-known figures such as Ellison Onizuka, a Japanese American astronaut, and Muhammad Yunus, a Bangladeshi banker. A poem written in the Shakespearean sonnet form begins the book. Then individual poems about each leader are titled and reflect different poetic styles from rhyming poems to free verse. A full-page painting, illustrated by one of five different artists, accompanies each poem. At the back of the book, four pages of narrative provide factual information on each leader as well as suggested resources for further reading. (EBF)

Words with Wings
Written by Nikki Grimes

Daydreaming, Gabby is distracted from classwork by her flights of fancy, and her imaginative self-expression results in missed work and poor grades. As her teacher, Mr. Spicer, and her mother press her to focus, Gabby briefly eschews her woolgathering until she finds an appropriate channel for her daydreams. The book contains pitch-perfect phrases and poetry as Gabby searches for ways to go about “bringing daydreams in / for a landing” (p. 45). Once Mr. Spicer permits his students to record their daydreams, Gabby channels her thoughts into writing, “hoping to find / more words with wings / to dream and write about / tomorrow” (p. 77). Filled with hope, inspiration, elegant writing, and a word-loving protagonist, this novel in verse celebrates creativity in today’s classrooms. (BW)
The Language Inside
Written by Holly Thompson

This novel in verse is about 15-year-old Emma Karas, an American who has spent almost her entire childhood living in Japan. When her mother becomes ill, Emma reluctantly returns with her family to live with her grandmother. America seems like a foreign country and Emma worries about her mother, her friends, and their families back in Japan who are coping with the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Author Holly Thompson deftly weaves together issues of self-identity, PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), romance, volunteerism, dance, and teen alcoholism with language that is sparse yet clear and specific. (DK)

Forest Has a Song
Written by Amy Ludwig VanDerwater
Illustrated by Robbin Gourley

In 26 poems, a girl and her dog heed a forest’s invitation to look more closely at nature’s treasures; for instance, in “Forest Cinderella,” they note how a lovely lady’s slipper has disappeared without a word: “You didn’t even say / goodbye” (p. 13). While the girl steps carefully onto the forest’s floor and wishes “for socks of moss” (p. 18) in “Moss,” “Colorful Actor” describes a vivid red cardinal as “a freely flying / scarlet kite” (p. 31). “April Waking” offers delicious words that linger on the tongue: “Ferny frondy fiddleheads / unfurl curls from dirty beds” (p. 10). Even the multi-hued leaves on the endpapers and the exquisite watercolor illustrations are reminders of forest’s ever-changing siren song, luring readers into the woods’ friendly embrace. (BW)

References

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