Children’s Literature Reviews

From Microbes to Music: Recommended Children’s Literature for Grades K–8
Jonda C. McNair, Deanna Day, Karla J. Möller, & Angie Zapata

This children’s literature department features reviews of recently published titles about a range of topics, including a mouse who solves mysteries, extreme weather, tiny creatures, the experiences of contemporary Native Americans, and the ocean. It also includes a wide variety of genres and subgenres. For instance, readers of this column will find an informational book about microbes, a graphic novel about lowriders, and a wordless book about a warm and loving but short-lived relationship between a farmer and a baby clown. We hope readers of this column find multiple books that will resonate with them in meaningful ways.

Marla Frazee has crafted an amazing picturebook that tugs at the heart of readers and tells a sweet story about a short-lived, yet very special relationship. The story begins with a farmer standing alone in a field. Brush strokes convey the movement of the wind, clouds, and a train that happens to pass by. Something falls off the train, and it turns out to be a baby clown. The farmer takes the clown home with him. At times, the clown is happy, and then the farmer is content. At other times, it is obvious that the clown is sad (especially after he takes a bath and washes off his makeup) and misses his family. Then the farmer is distraught and works really hard to cheer up the clown. The farmer also teaches him how to take care of a farm. One favorite image is of the clown sitting alongside the farmer milking a cow. Soon after, the train passes by again, and the two say their goodbyes before the clown leaves with his family. The facial expressions and body language of the characters convey the range of emotions expressed in this distinguished picturebook. It deserves a place in all elementary school and public libraries. (JCM)

A Tale of Two Beasts
Written and illustrated by Fiona Roberton

This picturebook, organized in two stories, begins with, “I was walking home from Grandma’s house, through the deep dark woods, when I spied a strange little beast.” The girl rescues the little creature and takes him home to bathe, dress, and feed. She decorates a cardboard box for him to sleep in and names her new pet Fang. The animal’s expressive face shows how he truly feels about being held captive. One day the girl opens her window, and Fang runs away as fast as he can to the deep dark woods.
The second part of the book shares another side to the story. “I was hanging from my favorite tree, singing happily to the birds when . . . I was AMBUSHED by a terrible beast!” The little beast, better known as the girl, carries Fang to her secret lair where she makes him disgustingly clean, dresses him in a ridiculous sweater, and forces him to eat squirrel food. In addition, she keeps him in a tiny box with nowhere to hang. Fang formulates a plan to escape to freedom. When he returns to the woods, he finds they aren’t as pleasant as he remembers, and he decides to retrieve a warm hat at the beast’s home. The little girl is so pleased to see him that Fang wonders if maybe she isn’t that terrible after all. This amusing and appealing book will make a great read-aloud and writing mentor text. (DD)

**Elizabeth, Queen of the Seas**
Written by Lynne Cox
Illustrated by Brian Floca

This sweet book is about an elephant seal that seemed to consider the Avon River in Christchurch, New Zealand, her home. It is perfectly illustrated with unassuming, yet emotionally impactful watercolor and pen-and-ink illustrations that harken back to a pre-digital era. In a charmingly subdued palette of predominantly green, blue, orange, and gray tones, Floca expertly captures the warm, personal aspect of this story, told from the perspective of a boy named Michael and the townspeople who embraced the seal’s presence in their community. Soft circular images with diffuse edges are juxtaposed with narrative text rendered in a traditional serif font and with more extensive illustrations that fill pages and cross the gutter at important plot points.

Close-ups rich with expression, such as when Elizabeth returns after her third removal and pops out of the water near an elated Michael, and action, such as when Elizabeth is almost run over by a car, are interspersed with tranquil riverbank scenes. Cox carefully avoids ascribing human emotions to Elizabeth (explicitly described as “a wild animal”). Elizabeth’s snorts were “as if to say hello,” and her choice to sleep in the street was because “maybe she liked the feel of the warm firmness under her belly”—or maybe it was something else. For whatever reason, Elizabeth, named after the current queen of England, stayed. This nonfiction picturebook written by long-distance, open-water swimming champion Cox is a fitting tribute to this intriguing mammal. The story and accompanying facts about elephant seals are simultaneously engaging and informative. (KJM)

**Hermelin the Detective Mouse**
Written and illustrated by Mini Grey

It was a brave new day on Offley Street until Hermelin realized that the people of Offley Street needed his help. What’s a book-reading, fast-typing, and expert mystery-solving mouse to do when there are problems and puzzles to be solved? Get on the case, of course! Hermelin the Detective Mouse launches readers into the important work of helping neighbors in need. Working with oversized typewriter keys, round cheese box beds, and binoculars from a cereal box, Hermelin solves each case before him and even saves Baby McMumbo from an unfortunate garbage truck accident, all without revealing his mouse identity. When his neighbors organize a gathering to thank the mysterious...
detective, Hermelin encounters a new problem—will they accept him as the brilliant detective he is or see him just as a rodent?

Creative and engaging, Grey’s writing and illustrations paint a rich landscape, one filled with interesting neighbors who have even more interesting problems. The intricacy of these dramas is reflected in the detailed mixed-media scenes. Readers will have numerous narratives to follow in the illustrations alone. Hermelin’s attic space, the Offley Street Notice board, up-close looks at Hermelin’s casebook—each are carefully crafted and provide nuanced insights into his world. Hermelin is a reminder of the tiny, but mighty heroes that populate our books and our hearts. (AZ)

Blue on Blue
Written by Dianne White
Illustrated by Beth Krommes

“It’s a bright, beautiful, blue-on-blue day, but a storm is on its way, and soon . . . Thunder! Lightening! Raging, roaring! Rain on rain on rain is pouring. Will the sun ever be back?” Together author Dianne White and Caldecott Medalist Beth Krommes, illustrator, engage readers in a poetic, literary, and visual experience in Blue on Blue. The delicate prose and scratchboard-and-watercolor pictures move readers through the textures, sounds, and the unexpected treasures that emerge right before, during, and after, “rain on rain on rain is pouring.”

The beauty of nature’s rhythms is conveyed through White’s paced descriptions of the storm. “Pounding, hounding, noisy-sounding. Dripping, dropping. Never stopping.” White’s written text is lyrical and meant to be read aloud, again and again. White’s artful written expressions and exploration of a rainy day are brilliantly transformed by Krommes’s signature illustrations. Each double-paged opening provides a vignette from diverse perspectives. Krommes depicts bird’s eye views of stormy landscapes, up-close looks at drippy puddles, and sweeping scenes of the blue sky breaking through cotton clouds, “Blue on blue. White on white.” Like The House in the Night (2011) and Butterfly Eyes and Other Secrets of the Meadow (2006) (both illustrated by Krommes), Blue on Blue takes readers into a world where the ordinary and everyday become beautifully illuminated. (AZ)

Carnivores
Written by Aaron Reynolds
Illustrated by Dan Santat

The first double-paged spread of this stellar picturebook offers a witty union of cartoon images, droll text, and energetic design that carries through the wonderfully raucous, if grimly carnivorous, story. Bold black diagonal lines split the visual field into energetic thirds. A roaring king-of-the-beasts lords over fearful herbivores, a cavernous-mouthed shark pursues terrified fish, and a “timber wolf’s howl strikes terror into the hearts of fuzzy woodland creatures everywhere.” Adding visual depth, this jaggedly split scene starts on a sunny steppe, moves to a murky underwater setting, and finally to the dark of night. However, the tense build-up is quickly dispelled as “even SAVAGE CARNIVORES get their feelings hurt.” They seek acceptance—but do they really want to change?

From the start of this hilarious book with its “Carnivore Food Pyramid” full of anxious prey animals to its final endpapers of decimated...
empirdness—this book is an exceptional example of sardonic humor. Carnivores and omnivores (e.g., octopus, penguin, snake, turtle) eaten by other meat-eating animals are included in the food pyramid. This adds a delightful ironic subtext for attentive and knowledgeable readers, as will the fact that all animals are drawn in reasonable cartoon facsimiles of real animals, with the exception of the pastel rainbow-colored bunnies. The owl’s solution and ultimate demise is tragically entertaining, but the final wolf/bunnies scene offers a true laugh-out-loud moment as a wolf arm reaches from beyond the book’s pages to grab three innocently berry-munching bunnies by their ears, bemoaning their “really negative attitudes.” (KJM)

Hana Hashimoto, Sixth Violin
Written by Chieri Uegaki
Illustrated by Qin Leng

Inspired by memories of her grandfathers, Uegaki has created a gentle story of love, determination, and insight. Through images of old photographs and a flashback, Hana’s and her Ojiichan’s tender relationship and his experience as Second Violin in a symphony orchestra are established. Meaningful Japanese cultural highlights are intertwined with experiences that easily cross cultures. Visiting Ojiichan in Japan, Hana sleeps on “sweet-smelling tatami mats” with her “buckwheat pillow,” waking to violin notes that “drift upstairs, through the shoji screen.” Ojiichan can “mimic the sounds of raindrops on the oilpaper umbrella” and reproduce chirps of “crickets Hana tried to find in the grasses”—significant given the history of crickets as musical pets in Japan. Hana references a traditional Japanese folk song when she requests the song about “a crow cawing for her seven chicks.”

Hana decides to learn the violin. Back home, her brothers mock her bold confidence at entering a talent show after only three lessons. On show day, Hana, the sixth violinist to play, suffers momentary doubt. As she marches toward the solitary microphone across a larger-than-life stage, her anxiety builds: “She wished she could turn into a grain of rice and disappear into a crack between the floorboards.” Instead, she draws strength from her loved ones and triumphs in an unexpected way. Leng’s detailed pencil drawings, colored digitally, enhance this encouraging story’s sweet simplicity. In the end, the auditory and visual ribbons of musical notes that bind Ojiichan and Hana strengthen her sibling bonds as well and offer new perspectives on music and success. (KJM)

Tiny Creatures: The World of Microbes
Written by Nicola Davies
Illustrated by Emily Sutton

Did you know that there are tiny creatures living everywhere? A single drop of seawater holds twenty million microbes, the same number of people who live in New York State. This fascinating nonfiction picturebook introduces children to microbes that are too small for their eyes to see except with the aid of a microscope. Zoologist Nicola Davies describes microbes in simple and inviting text. Microbes live in the sea, on land, in the soil, and in the air. They also live where nothing else does, such as in volcanoes, inside rocks, or in the backs of our refrigerators.

The folk art watercolor illustrations will help readers visualize and compare one of the smallest...
microbes, the polio virus, to one of the biggest—the paramecium. The book goes on to explain that microbes eat anything from live plants to dead animals. Some microbes, called germs, can get into our bodies and make us sick. When microbes are warm and well fed, they can split and split and split into thousands, then millions of germs. Two full-paged spreads show how E. coli divides and doubles in 20 minutes, filling an entire page with teeny tiny microbes. Luckily, only a few microbes make humans sick. Microbes are what turn food into compost or milk into yogurt. They help make our air good to breathe and help make snowflakes grow. Microbes are definitely the invisible transformers of our world! This intriguing book will engage children and stimulate lots of discussion. (DD)

Ocean: A Photicular Book
Written by Carol Kaufmann
Created by Dan Kainen

Readers will stop to do a double take when Ocean: A Photicular Book crosses their paths. They will puzzle over how the 2-dimensional yellow-banded sweetlips fish pictured on the cover appears to be waving his fins and tail from side-to-side. Using Photicular technology, Dan Kainen, the creator of Ocean, stitches interleaved images together to accentuate rhythmic motion—“the perfect medium in which to enter this parallel underwater universe.” The wonder and vastness of ocean life is artfully and technically represented across the final pages of this square-shaped book for children, with Carol Kaufmann’s talents as a writer, this book is sure to be a favorite informational text in any classroom or family library.

Intent on bringing young readers closer to the wonder and magic of the oceans, Kainen designed the book around the countless varieties of creatures that live in them. Similar to the authors’ Safari (2012), this uniquely formatted book begins with exciting insights from an ocean diver’s journal and invites readers to consider what can be done to better preserve the ocean ecology for the creatures that reside down below. A collection of vignettes profiling distinct ocean animals follows with images that deliver a rich and fluid visual experience. “A sea horse undulating through a kelp bed, a sand tiger shark’s haunting gaze, or a green sea turtle ‘flying’ dreamily through the dappled light”—these and other delights will teach readers of the ocean’s life and magic that we must protect. (AZ)

Extreme Weather: Surviving Tornadoes, Sandstorms, Hailstorms, Blizzards, Hurricanes, and More!
Written by Thomas M. Kostigen

In six exciting and informative chapters, Kostigen covers many extreme weather situations in potentially life-changing ways for young and middle grades readers. He starts by explaining in clear and simple terms aspects of climate change that seem to baffle some adults. First, he distinguishes between “climate” and “weather.” Then, he notes that as global temperatures rise, weather patterns shift, including changes in rain and wind patterns, and that this can result in some areas getting colder as the overall planet warms.

Kostigen offers readers scientifically supported explanations and includes short introductions to the history and significance of the weather
event in focus, but his emphasis is mainly on the immediately practical: helping young people “understand why the weather is changing and what [they] can do to prepare for it” (p. 7). To underscore this, each chapter has bright blue boxes with “before,” “during,” and “after” advice and safety tips.

*Extreme Weather* has a modern magazine feel with boldly colored text boxes and headings, glossy photographic backgrounds and overlays, lists, maps, and diagrams. These and other text features will engross young readers and hopefully motivate them to explore further, as Kostigen encourages: “Why not learn more? Why not do more? Start now!” (p. 109). While this book’s focus is not on shifting human impact on climate change in large ways, it opens spaces for honest discussions based on currently accepted science and offers small steps even children can take to make a difference for themselves and their communities. (KJM)

**The Fourteenth Goldfish: Believe in the Impossible Possible**
Written by Jennifer L. Holm
Ellie comes from a theatre family where her mom is a drama teacher and her dad is an actor, yet she prefers puzzles, scary films, and burritos. One day her mom returns home with a gawky teenage boy who seems very familiar—dressed in khaki polyester pants and tweed jacket. He turns out to be her 76-year-old grandfather! For 40 years, he has been obsessed with looking for a way to reverse senescence or aging. A scuba diver sends him an unusual jellyfish specimen that surprisingly turns him into an adolescent with pimples and long hair. To stay out of trouble, Grandpa Melvin returns to middle school with Ellie and becomes her after-school babysitter. He has a difficult time transitioning from scientist to eighth grader: he has to read science textbooks that do not reference him, and he is sent to detention because he forgets a hall pass. As time passes, he begins sharing science lessons and discussing scientists, such as Jonas Salk or Robert Oppenheimer, with Ellie. Since he has discovered the cure for aging or “the fountain of youth,” he believes a Nobel Prize is in his future. The only problem is that the *T. melvinus* jellyfish specimen is in his laboratory, which is heavily guarded by rent-a-cops, lab assistants, or security guards. This adventure-filled and funny novel will definitely appeal to middle school readers. Furthermore, it would make a wonderful literature circle book because of the themes of immortality, ethics, friendship, family, never giving up, and believing in the possible. (DD)

**Lowriders in Space (Book 1)**
Written by Cathy Camper
Illustrated by Raúl the Third
Readers of *Lowriders in Space* will be rooting for Lupe Impala, Flapjack Octopus, and Elirio Malaria, three friends with dreams of having their own garage shop. You name it and they can fix it. And their favorite automobile? The lowrider, of course—“cars that hip and hop, dip and drop, go low and slow, bajito y suavecito.” When the trio enters a car competition that promises a car full of cash, their preparation takes an out-of-this-world...
turn as their fix-it-up lowrider suddenly takes them into space for an interplanetary adventure.

More than a celebration of the vibrancy of lowrider culture or the wonders of the solar system and astronomy, this book honors friendship, passion, and ingenuity as essential to pursuing and achieving dreams. Camper’s anthropomorphic characters are animated through Raúl the Third’s detailed red, blue, and black ballpoint pen illustrations reflecting lowrider motifs, fonts, and dress. Innovating on the traditional graphic novel form, illustrations range from double-page spreads to oversized square panels, adding to the visual experience. Camper’s writing is a dynamic intersection of diverse Spanish dialects, regionalisms, and vernaculars, despite having a few questionable uses of accents and translations. From the zany endpapers, informative lowrider introduction, and helpful glossary of terms, Lowriders in Space adds to the diversity of Latino literature for young readers and is a must-read for those looking for an original, artful, inspired, and bajito y suavecito graphic novel. (AZ)

Half a World Away
Written by Cynthia Kadohata

Meet Jaden, a 12-year-old boy who lights fires, hoards food, steals money, ditches school, and calls his parents by their first names—Steve and Penni. Jaden feels worthless and broken because he is adopted. He refuses to attach to and love his new family because he longs to return to his birth mother in Romania. His psychologist makes him do behavior exercises every day—such as thinking of one good thing about his forever parents. Fortunately, Penni believes in Jaden and shows it by loving him unconditionally and sticking up for him despite his uncooperative spirit. Jaden is fascinated by electricity and completes a science project where he hooks up a moth’s cocoon so that a tiny light turns on every time the moth moves inside. Eventually, the family travels to Kazakhstan to adopt another son, and Jaden is convinced that he is being replaced. The three visit the adoption agency every day for a couple of hours to bond with the new baby. Jaden immediately understands why his infant brother doesn’t cry, refuses to look at them, and is unresponsive. Through this adoption journey, Jaden also begins to understand why his biological mother abandoned him and pledges to learn how to love his new brother. This honest portrayal of adoption shows how difficult it is to overcome loss and discover love. Half a World Away is moving, heart wrenching, and unforgettable. (DD)

Dreaming in Indian: Contemporary Native American Voices
Edited by Lisa Charleyboy and Mary Beth Leatherdale

Dreaming in Indian is an eclectic collection of thoughtful pieces written by a variety of individuals who are expressing their thoughts, feelings, and dreams as they relate to their racial identity as Native Americans. In the Welcome at the beginning of the book, the editors write, “This book stemmed from a desire to showcase the real life of indigenous people. Not the life portrayed in mainstream media and certainly not
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the life of Native people as it is seen through the lens of Hollywood” (p. 11). The book features Native Americans who have a range of professions and come from all walks of life. For instance, there are pieces from a children’s book author, a stand-up comedian, a makeup artist, an actress, a dancer, and a model. One of my favorite pieces is a snippet of a comic written by Arigon Starr about a 13-year-old boy who gains superpowers after eating government cheese. Other topics addressed throughout this outstanding volume include bullying, residential schools, poverty, art, and music. The book is illustrated with photographs of individuals and various artifacts, art created by the artists, and more. (JCM)

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