Beyond Primers: High-Quality Children’s Literature for Primary-Grade Readers
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In this column, we review high-quality children’s books sure to engage and entertain emergent and newly independent readers.

Literature for young children has come a long way. Across the genres, we find striking illustrations, rich text that doesn’t sacrifice emergent reader text patterns and structures, and subject matter that captivates and challenges young readers. We share below some noteworthy titles that honor the curiosity, abilities, and experiences of a diverse range of readers in the primary grades.

Rain Fish
Written and illustrated by Lois Ehlert
Beach Lane, 2016, unpaged, ISBN 978-1-4814-6152-8

“When blue sky turns gray and it rains all day, / that’s when rain fish come out and play.” The child’s eye is at the heart of a new picturebook by master collage artist Lois Ehlert. Across double-page spreads, Ehlert depicts how the collection of debris that typically accumulates on city streets during a rainstorm is morphed by the run-off. The debris takes on fish-shaped forms: an orange peel becomes an eye; a feather transforms into a tail; a crumpled receipt takes the form of a head. “Do you see them, too?” queries the artist. And of course, young children do! The rhyming text is direct, yet playful, inviting readers to ponder where the rain fish may go when the rainstorm is over. Large font and limited vocabulary make this book appealing and accessible to beginning readers. In an author’s note (hiding under the dust jacket on the endpapers), Ehlert reveals that the items appearing in the images are the “art supplies” she collected on walks over the course of a year. Encouraging her readers to try their hand at collage with found objects, Ehlert once again promotes observation and experimentation with her unique artistic style and perspective. (ETD)

Noisy Night
Written by Mac Barnett
Illustrated by Brian Biggs

“What is going LALALA above my head?” asks a young child standing on his bed in a 10-story apartment building. A partial cross-sectional view of the floor above him reveals a clue to the answer, and turning the page, we see a male opera singer rehearsing. He in turn wonders, “What is going ma ma ma above my head?” as we catch a glimpse of wheeled furniture legs in the apartment above. So goes the patterned cacophony of the literature for young children has come a long way. Across the genres, we find striking illustrations, rich text that doesn’t sacrifice emergent reader text patterns and structures, and subject matter that captivates and challenges young readers. We share below some noteworthy titles that honor the curiosity, abilities, and experiences of a diverse range of readers in the primary grades.

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book’s namesake, *Noisy Night*, with each resident puzzling over the strange sounds on the floor above. Each successive sound is a rhyme that begs to be vocalized (“BAA BAA BAA,” “cha cha cha”), making this text ideal for emergent readers to study and practice their phonemic awareness and phonics skills. Bold lines and vibrant color also connect the diverse building residents, while the detailed wallpaper of the dwellings accentuates each noisemaker’s individuality. Full of energy and silly surprise, *Noisy Night* is terrific for both independent reading and interactive read-aloud. (GE)

*Marta! Big and Small*
Written by Jen Arena  
Illustrated by Angela Dominguez  

This seemingly simple concept book for younger readers packs a lot of punch within its pages. At one level, it is a concept book about opposites and animals, revealed as a young girl explores her environment. Using the comparison-and-contrast structure, young Marta is compared to animals large and small. But the book is far more complex, orienting readers toward the different animals’ points-of-view. Each animal is introduced by way of its perspective toward Marta. Additionally, readers get a sprinkling of Spanish words. Each simple sentence thus introduces an animal, its perspective, a Spanish adjective, and that adjective’s English definition repeated within the sentence, reinforcing the “opposite” concept: “To a bug, Marta is grande. Big, very big” and “To an elephant, Marta is pequeña. Small, very small.” Consistent text structure and the use of repetition across the book make this a wonderful choice for primary-grade readers. The inclusion of Spanish words provides a platform for children to practice reading in two languages, fostering a spirit of multilingualism in the classroom. A parting two-page spread shows Marta nestled inside, holding a butterfly on her fingers and surrounded by her nature journal, paints, binoculars, and other tools of a naturalist, modeling for young readers their own potential for exploring the world around them. (MAC)

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

The flutter of a fan, a curtsey, an invitation to dance—so begins the next installment in Molly Idle’s series of wordless books featuring Flora, a young ballerina (*Flora and the Flamingo, Flora and the Penguin*). Once again, Flora encounters feathered friends—here, two peacocks whose
colors mirror her leotard and whose tails match the shape of her fan. In this toy book, readers assume the role of choreographers as they lift flaps to extend Flora’s fan and the peacocks’ tails in an embodiment of the dance. The trio performs against a pure white backdrop while the branches of a willow dangle from the top of the page, offering the impression of a curtain. In contrast to this serene scenery, the dance itself is fraught with drama. Clearly illustrating the dilemma of divided attention in friendships (a concept many young children are familiar with through their own evolving relationships), Idle explores a range of emotions from jealousy, to anger, to grief, to regret, and finally reconciliation. A satisfying and stunning four-page foldout spread depicts a coming together and a creative new interpretation of Flora’s fan (which had been torn in the fray). Visually stunning, this wordless book is sure to invite multiple readings and rich conversations. (ETD)
Walk with Me  
Written by Jairo Buitrago  
Illustrated by Rafael Yockteng  
Translated by Elisa Amado  
Offering a flower, a young girl asks an immense lion to “Keep me company on the way home.” She has a long walk through the city to pick up her baby brother from daycare. Then she has to get groceries from “the store that won’t give us credit anymore.” Once home, she cooks dinner and invites the lion to “Eat with us and, if you like, you can wait till Mama gets home from the factory.” When Mama arrives, the girl allows the lion to return to the hills, but then implores it to “come back when I call.” Juxtaposed with Buitrago’s lyrically easy text, Yockteng’s colorful, muted illustrations present a busy cityscape, with cracked buildings and zooming vehicles—a depiction not quite terrifying but nonetheless overwhelming for the young girl. With the lion by her side, ferociously frightening the adults around her, she lifts her chin and grins. Settling in bed next to her brother and mother, she reaches for the family photo on the nightstand, and then we finally understand her entreaties. Her father is in the photo, but not in her daily life, and his bushy hair and brawny build clearly resemble the lion. From endpaper to endpaper, Walk with Me is a deceptively simple book that will easily engross young readers in compelling discussions about courage and compassion amidst loss. (GE)

Spot, the Cat  
Written and illustrated by Henry Cole  
Readers must put their skills of observation to the test in Henry Cole’s seek-and-find picturebook. On the cover, we meet a boy and his precocious cat, who is peering through a telescope on the rooftop of the row house next door. Blue sky on the cover is echoed in blue endpapers, but this wordless book proceeds in richly textured black-and-white. As the story opens, Spot (the cat) watches a bird on the windowsill as the boy reads on a cozy couch. The temptation proves too much, and Spot heads out to seek adventure. Adult readers may need support from eagle-eyed young readers, as they, like the boy, seek to find Spot in busy city scenes. Variation in image size and placement propel the depiction of Spot’s journey, and varied perspectives aid the hunt. (One particularly striking double-page spread provides a kite’s-eye view.) The boy is so close so many times. Suspense builds throughout the cityscapes. Readers will readily empathize with the boy’s dejection at his lack of success; he heads for home, slumping in defeat. Will there be a happy reunion at the book’s conclusion? Seek and ye shall find out! (ETD)
Penguin Problems
Written by Jory John
Illustrated by Lane Smith

Think penguins have it easy? Think again. The persnickety penguin at the center of this comic picturebook is here to prove you wrong. Rousing begrudgingly from sleep, the penguin grumbles about the too-early time, the too-cold temperature, and the too-bright sun. Our protagonist continues complaining as it dives into the ocean for food: “It’s way too dark down here. Brrrr! I said, brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr! Oh, great. A leopard seal.” The penguin is even irritated by its waddle, but the last straw is the realization that all penguins look so alike that its own parents are indistinguishable from the crowd. Hearing the penguin’s cry (“I have so many problems!”), a walrus attempts to offer another perspective, using a whole page of text to wax philosophical. Will our penguin embrace the walrus’s wise words and change its tune? John’s snarky text and Smith’s speckled minimalist style and limited color palette work in tandem to validate the penguin’s grievances. While the penguin protests, young readers will chuckle delightedly. (GE)

Shy
Written and illustrated by Deborah Freedman

What if—a fundamental question we all ask ourselves before taking a giant leap of faith. This is the case with Shy, who is “happiest between the pages of a book,” especially books about birds. One day, Shy hears a bird trill by with the sound “treep treep troo-lee!” and he longs to meet her. After asking himself a series of “What if” questions, Shy realizes that if he wants to talk to this enchanting bird, he will need to bravely leave home and find her. Walking across the landscape, he hears a chorus of birds and feels as though he’s walking through the pages of his beloved books. Part of this book’s great appeal is that Shy is hidden throughout the first half. An elephant, armadillo, rabbit, turtle, giraffe, and other “remarkable creatures” follow the chorus of birds, but which creature is Shy? With a soft palette that mirrors the emotions Shy experiences across the pages, Deborah Freedman affirms that even the most shy among us can find the courage to pursue what we long for, even when faced with uncertainty. Young readers will love the suspense of waiting to find out Shy’s identity.
and how two unlikely friends find each other in the end. Shy gently models the vulnerability that comes from life’s uncertainty, making the unknown feel less fearsome. In doing so, Freedman’s deep understanding of how to reach children is undeniable. (KEC)

**Thunder Boy Jr.**
*Written by Sherman Alexie*  
*Illustrated by Yuyi Morales*  

Thunder Boy does not like his name. Readers are immediately plunged into an exploration of names in this humorous picturebook centered on the symbolism attached to our names. Thunder Boy’s first-person narration is punctuated by family members’ responses in speech bubbles, supporting readers’ understanding of dialogic give-and-take. Morales’s joyful mixed-media illustrations, built upon scanned images of brick and wood from the remnants of an antique Mexican house, deepen the familial warmth and humor. Thunder Boy is named after his father, whose nickname is Big Thunder, “a storm filling up the sky,” whereas Thunder Boy’s nickname, Little Thunder, “makes me sound like a burp or a fart.” Initially, Thunder Boy privileges the “normal” dominant culture names of his family members. But a “normal” name is not actually what he desires. Rather, he wants his own name, “a name that celebrates something cool that I’ve done.”

Thunder Boy reflects the independent thinking and identity that many primary-grade students discover as they begin school. He takes readers through his accomplishments and a series of names to accompany them: Not Afraid of Ten Thousand Teeth, Gravity’s Best Friend, and Full of Wonder. In doing so, he embraces the renaming tradition of his Native American heritage. The book concludes with Thunder Boy’s dad offering a new name for him: Lightning. Together, Big Thunder and his son Lightning “light up the sky.” (MAC)

**The Airport Book**  
*Written and illustrated by Lisa Brown*  

The excitement and adventure of air travel are featured in this straightforward, yet dynamic picturebook. A young boy and his family begin the journey by packing their luggage, a scene that takes place on the title page. As they hurry out the door, the main text begins: “When you go to the airport, you can take a car, a van, a bus, or even a train.” The explanatory, but never dry, text is juxtaposed with speech-bubble dialogue and colorful, cartoon-like, ink-and-watercolor illustrations demonstrating how events might really play out for travelers. On one double-page spread, the text states, “When you reach your gate, you wait. And wait and wait and wait. Outside, people are getting the plane
read.” Meanwhile, the boy’s younger sister spots her stuffed monkey being loaded onto the plane, while other passengers snooze, chat on their cell phones, watch the news, and ask about boarding passes. Readers see a cast of diverse characters, catching glimpses of their individual stories as the trip progresses, just as an air traveler would. Young readers will not only be fascinated by the details about what happens at airports and on planes, but they will want to start over at the book’s beginning to trace the illustrated experiences of everyone they’ve met along the way. (GE)

**When Andy Met Sandy**
Written by Tomie dePaola with Jim Lewis
Illustrated by Tomie dePaola

Meet Andy, a young boy with olive-toned skin and dark, textured hair. Meet Sandy, a taller girl with peach skin tones, red glasses, and orange curly hair. Andy is familiar with the playground, but Sandy is “new here.” In text limited to one-sentence pages, the authors explore the perspectives of these two characters on alternate pages. Andy and Sandy engage in internal debate about their encounter. Each speculates what it might be like to play together: Andy thinks, “If we were friends, she could help me climb to the top,” while Sandy thinks, “If we were friends, he could help me crawl through the tunnel.” Fortuitously, the seesaw presents an opportunity for connection, and by story’s end, Andy and Sandy are happily professing their new friendship. Simplicity in text is matched by simplicity in illustration. Employing his signature style, dePaola places his characters against a white backdrop, accompanied only by objects directly referenced in the text. Readers new to the beginner reader’s trim size will find this the perfect entry point and will eagerly anticipate the next installment featuring this pleasing pair. (ETD)

**Ling and Ting: Together in All Weather**
Written and illustrated by Grace Lin

Meet Andy, a young boy with olive-toned skin and dark, textured hair. Meet Sandy, a taller girl with peach skin tones, red glasses, and orange curly hair. Andy is familiar with the playground, but Sandy is “new here.” In text limited to one-sentence pages, the authors explore the perspectives of these two characters on alternate pages. Andy and Sandy engage in internal debate about their encounter. Each speculates what it might be like to play together: Andy thinks, “If we were friends, she could help me climb to the top,” while Sandy thinks, “If we were friends, he could help me crawl through the tunnel.” Fortuitously, the seesaw presents an opportunity for connection, and by story’s end, Andy and Sandy are happily professing their new friendship. Simplicity in text is matched by simplicity in illustration. Employing his signature style, dePaola places his characters against a white backdrop, accompanied only by objects directly referenced in the text. Readers new to the beginner reader’s trim size will find this the perfect entry point and will eagerly anticipate the next installment featuring this pleasing pair. (ETD)
In the fourth installment of her beginner reader series, Grace Lin presents six new stories starring identical twins Ling and Ting. As a whole, the stories take the sisters through the seasons—from spring to summer, then fall, then winter, and back again to spring. Each story emphasizes some type of weather and/or seasonal change, such as a surprise thunderstorm, a hot sunny day, a cool autumn day with brightly colored leaves, a snowstorm, and a rainbow after rain. Each story employs repetition to support newly independent readers, from descriptions of setting to context to dialogue. Across the collection, the sisters act in ways that children will recognize from their own families and friends: cooperation, competition, and a little trickery. One story, “Old Chinese Medicine,” provides a humorous nod to the twins’ heritage. Lin’s gouache illustrations support readers’ understanding of the text, as well as provide important clues for humorous moments within each story. This fusion of text and illustration supports readers’ understanding of nuance and mood and infuses the book with an age-appropriate playfulness for primary-grade readers. (MAC)

**Juana and Lucas**

*Written and illustrated by Juana Medina*


Meet Juana, an immediately likeable, spunky character who loves drawing, reading, Brussels sprouts (of all things), Astroman, and living in her home city of Bogotá, Columbia. Above all, Juana loves Lucas, her pet dog and best amigo ever. Written and illustrated by namesake Juana Medina, *Juana and Lucas* offers a relatable, compelling story about a young girl whose authentic voice admits her true feelings about school, her endearing abuelos, and the self-doubt she experiences learning “the English.” Medina incorporates various text features in playful, aesthetically inspiring ways, including large, bold font to emphasize words, varied typography, diagrams of important people and things in her life, context-rich Spanish words, and energetic ink-and-watercolor illustrations. Winner of the 2017 Pura Belpré Award, *Juana and Lucas* is a welcome addition to the landscape of early chapter books with strong, female characters. With this first installment, Juana is poised to join the influential ranks of Ramona Quimby, Judy Moody, and Junie B. Jones, but stands out by depicting a culturally and linguistically diverse character living everyday life. Like the best books for transitional readers, Juana is simply relaying the stories of her days and does so with a fresh blend of relatability and originality. (KEC)

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