

Books for Struggling and Reluctant Readers

Readers struggle for a variety of reasons, but often it is because they fail to find the “good book” that allows them to break through to see reading as something of value to their lives. What follows is a selection of such good books, both fiction and nonfiction, that are accessible to struggling readers, yet provide a quality reading experience.

Teachers should be aware that in addition to titles listed below, school and public libraries are packed with paperback series fiction, graphic novels (these take many forms, from collections of superhero comics to Japanese animation to the gritty work of authors like Neil Gaiman), and comics collections, magazines, and comic books, as well as heavily illustrated nonfiction titles like those published by DK Press, which can help struggling readers over the hump and move them toward becoming winning readers. Many of the books listed below also appeared on the Young Adult Library Services Association’s “Quick Picks” list available at the American Library Association Web site (<http://www.ala.org/yalsa>). “Quick Picks” is an annual list compiled by librarians of outstanding titles, which will stimulate the interest of reluctant teen readers.

145th Street: Short Stories. Walter Dean Myers. Laurel Leaf, 2001. 160 pp. A book of interconnected short stories all set against the backdrop of the Harlem neighborhood is centered around 145th Street. Some stories are comic, while others border on tragic as Myers examines the lives

of teenagers growing up in difficult circumstances. Yet the tough subject matter is balanced with a vision of caring community where every day the characters find a reason to believe. Myers is the winner of the first Michael Printz Award for young adult literature for his novel *Monster*.

The Adventures of the Blue Avenger. Norma Howe. Delacorte, 1999. 240 pp. On his 16th birthday, David Schumacher decides to legally change his name to Blue Avenger after one of the heroes he created for an original comic book. David has lofty goals, including being able to create a weepless meringue, all of which he manages to accomplish in this witty story of determination and perseverance.

Bad Beginning (A Series of Unfortunate Events, Book 1). Lemony Snicket. HarperCollins, 1999. 162 pp. A way over-the-top, slightly scary tale of the Baudelaire orphans who are victims of one misfortune after another. Told with an almost tongue-in-cheek style by a narrator who seems to have dropped out of the pages of a Dahl or Dickens book, this first volume will hook readers into the misadventures of the orphans; 6 more volumes in the series have already been published.

Captain Underpants and the Wrath of the Wicked Wedgie Woman. Dav Pilkey. Blue Sky, 2001. 176 pp. The fifth “epic novel” about the extraordinary Captain Underpants—faster than a speeding waistband . . . more powerful than boxer shorts—the formidable superhero is under siege by a terrifying new enemy, the merciless bionic-powered Wedgie Woman. Loaded with jokes, puns, and comics, a surefire laugh riot for even the most reluctant of readers.

Define Normal. Julie Ann Peters. Little Brown, 2000. 144 pp. Antonia Dillon is a driven honor student who is chosen to become a peer counselor at her middle school. Her first counseling session finds her matched with her polar opposite: Jasmine “Jazz” Luther, a girl whose body is adorned in black make-up, multiple body piercings, and tattoos. Despite the mismatch, the two girls grow closer, slowly revealing to each other their secrets in a touching tale of friendship.

Dreams: Explore the You That You Can't Control. Tucker Shaw. Penguin, 2000. 160 pp. Published in cooperation with Alloy.com, one of the top teen sites on the Internet, this is a quick, easy to use and read dream analysis. The first part of the book examines topics such as nightmares and sleepwalking. The second part examines 19 common “weird dreams.” The third section offers simple instructions on how to start a dream journal.

Driver's Ed. Caroline Cooney. Laurel Leaf, 1996. 199 pp. When Remy and Morgan and their friends decide to snatch some street signs, they have no idea that their prank will lead to disaster. When a stolen stop sign causes a fatal accident, Remy and Morgan must decide what to do. Should they come

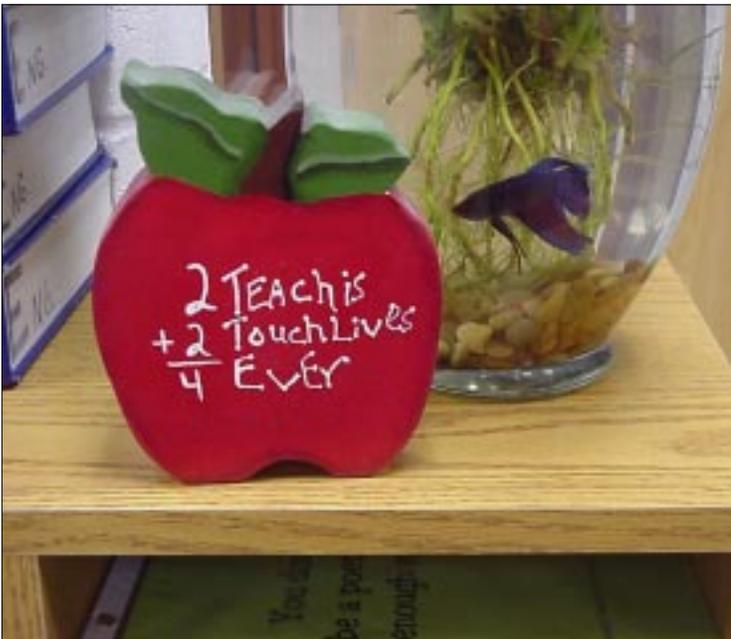
forward? What will happen to them if they do? This absorbing story, told from both Remy and Morgan's points of view in alternating chapters, will lure even the most reluctant readers.

Ella Enchanted. Gail Carson Levine. HarperCollins, 1998, 232 pp. At birth, Ella is cursed by a fairy named Lucinda, who gives her the “gift” of obedience. Anything anyone tells her to do, Ella must obey. While such a curse may have struck down another girl, Ella just becomes even more determined. Once her mother dies, it seems all is lost unless she can track down Lucinda and have the spell removed. Complete with a wicked stepmother, this Cinderella variation loaded with wit and humor will keep readers engaged.

Encyclopedia of Professional Wrestling: 100 Years of the Good, the Bad, and the Unforgettable. Kristian Pope and Ray Whebber Jr., Krause, 2001. 178 pp. Jam-packed with photos of wrestling's greatest performers throughout the years, this book provides fans of the number one rated cable program (*Monday Night Raw*) with loads of information on today's biggest stars, as well as looking at past champions. Each entry has a photo and short biographical sketch of performers ranging from the early television icon Gorgeous George up to today's biggest stars like The Rock.

Flight #116 Is Down. Caroline Cooney. Point, 1993. 200 pp. One of the classic adventure tales by one of young adult literature's finest writers. It was a day like any other day for Heidi, except on this day, a 747 crashes into the woods behind her house. Slightly spoiled and dependent upon her parents, Heidi must now find courage in order to save lives. Written using brief timed segments, the action moves along quickly as Heidi and others race against the clock.

Ghost Train. Jess Mowry. Henry Holt, 1996. 96 pp. On Remi's very first night in his new home, a spooky old house in California, the thirteen-year-old young Haitian refugee wakes up to see a steam train roll by his window like a huge fire-breathing



monster. Remi soon befriends a streetwise smart-talking girl who lives near him, and they set out to solve the mystery of the nightly ghost train.

Got Issues Much?: Celebrities Share Their Traumas and Triumphs. Randi Reisfeld and Marie Morreale. Scholastic, 1999. 144 pp. Using short biographical sketches, the famous reveal the obstacles they overcame during their preteen and teen years. Students will find these stories inspiring; as one reader commented on Amazon: "I can look at the book and read about how the stars deal and I know I'll make it through whatever the problem is."

Holes. Louis Sachar. Yearling, 2000. 232 pp. This is the Newbery award winning adventure of one Stanley Yelnats who is sent to Camp Green Lake, a juvenile detention facility. Like most things in Stanley's life, however, nothing is as it seems: there is no lake, no campers, and the grass is not green. There is little grass; instead, the ground is covered with piles of dirt from holes dug by Stanley and the other JDC crew. Filled with wild humor, *Holes* turns into a mystery as Stanley wonders about the real reason he and the others are creating craters in the hot Texas sun.

In the Forests of the Night. Amelia Atwater-Rhodes. Laurel Leaf, 2000. 176 pp. Here is a vampire tale with lots of different twists. The story concerns 300-year-old Risika who wanders the streets of New York City by night in search of blood to feed her hunger. But when she encounters another vampire, one she blames for her brother's death, Risika's passion becomes not for blood, but for revenge. Atwater-Rhodes penned this novel at age 14.

Oh, Yuck!: The Encyclopedia of Everything Nasty. Joy Masoff. Workman, 2000. 212 pp. From the cover shot of a finger lodged firmly up a nose through the pages of vivid descriptions, this heavily illustrated volume covers the gross, putrid, and stomach turning. Organized from A to Z, the author looks inside the human body (acne, body lint, eye

gunk, vomit, etc.) as well as to the larger grosser world of cockroaches, lice, maggots, rats, and slugs, not to mention cannibals.

Party Girl. Lynne Ewing. Knopf, 1999. 120 pp. Ana and Kata are best friends, inseparable since fourth grade. As they are walking home from winning a dance competition, Ana is killed in a drive-by shooting. Kata struggles with coping with the loss of her best friend and wanting to avenge her death. A gritty realistic book looking at gang life which is enhanced by the author's use of Spanish, Quechua, and gang lingo into the dialogue.

Rats. Paul Zindel. Hyperion, 2000. 176 pp. Starting with a scene of a man devoured by a mob of vicious rats, the book is a classic man against nature story as billions of rodents invade New York City after their feeding ground (a Staten Island landfill) is buried under asphalt. It takes a 15-year-old girl, the daughter of the landfill supervisor, to save the city. Lots of fast-paced, gross-out scenes that should appeal to former and future *Goosebumps* readers.

See You Later, Gladiator (Time Warp Trio). Jon Scieszka. Viking Press, 2000. 80 pp. The funniest in the series features hapless middle school students thrust back into a different time period. In this adventure, the slapstick time travelers face off against villains from Ancient Rome, including a fantastical food fight. Loaded with laughs, if not a great deal of logic, this page-turning adventure is filled with clever escapes and stupid puns from the author of *The Stinky Cheese Man*.

The Simpsons: A Complete Guide to Our Favorite Family. Matt Groening. Harper, 1997. 234 pp. Still popular after over a decade on the air, this guide provides young readers with the low-down on every aspect of the show. Not just a plot guide, the book is filled with all sorts of lists such as guest voices and, of course, a complete list of all of Bart's chalkboard writing assignments that kick off each episode. Readers who love the show will browse

through the book and find plenty of fun facts and fantastic illustrations to keep them from watching television for a long time.

Special Effects in Film and Television. Jake Hamilton. DK, 1998. 63 pp. A wonderfully illustrated oversized volume that uncovers for readers the secrets of movie and TV special effects. Using popular movies like *The Matrix* as examples, the book is filled with two-page spreads that provide readers with information and plenty of illustrations revealing the magic behind special effects, including computer-generated animation.

Spiders in the Hairdo: Modern Urban Legends. Collected and retold by David Holt and Bill Mooney. Nonfiction. August House, 1999. 112 pp. An easy-to-read book retelling classic urban legends in a short-story format. With a penchant for gross-out and horror stories, Holt and Mooney also mix in lots of laughs. The irony level is high as readers will delight in getting the details on stories they may have heard “really happened” but, of course, never have.

Stuck in Neutral. Terry Trueman. Avon, 2001. 128 pp. Fourteen-year-old Shawn McDaniel is trapped inside his own body. Struck with cerebral-palsey, Shawn has no control of his muscles. He cannot walk or talk, yet inside his own mind, despite these circumstances, he is happy to be alive, only now he is afraid his father wants to kill him.

Things I Have to Tell You: Poems and Writings by Teenage Girls. Betsy Franco. Candlewick Press,

2001. 80 pp. Stark black-and-white photographs are set against the writings of teenage girls to create a powerful statement about growing up female in the United States. These creative works emerge from teenage girls from a wide variety of backgrounds growing up in radically different circumstances, yet common themes and intense emotions shine through in every piece.

Words with Wings: A Treasury of African-American Poetry and Art. Belinda Rochelle. HarperCollins, 2001. 48 pp. Editor Belinda Rochelle pairs 20 poems by African American poets with 20 works of art by African American artists. Each poem and piece of art evokes the history, identity, and pride of African American people, whether it addresses slavery, family, childhood joy and woes, or racism. Artists and poets also include William H. Johnson, Gwendolyn Brooks, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Nikki Giovanni. Although often created years apart, the words of the poets and the works of the artists will be forever linked because of this collection.

You Hear Me?: Poems and Writing by Teenage Boys. Betsy Franco. Candlewick Press, 2000. 128 pp. Boys making the first tentative steps into manhood will find reflections of that experience in the poems and short prose collected by Franco. Written by boys ranging from ages 12 to 20, the collection touches on common themes, shared truths, and universal emotions. What the writing lacks in polish, it more than makes up for in passion.

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