This unthemed column features a selection of some of our favorite recently published titles across several genres. It includes biographies, informational texts, contemporary realistic fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, and concept books. We have also made sure to include picturebooks, middle grade novels, and numerous young adult novels for students in the eighth grade. Readers will find a range of titles about various topics such as Japanese internment camps, the Vietnam War, lucha libre, colors, and even a newborn elephant. From a memoir created by a young girl named Maggie Mayfield (*The Meaning of Maggie*) to a novel about the search for magic in the town of Midnight Gulch (*A Snicker of Magic*) to the story of African American sailors charged with mutiny for challenging racial discrimination in the navy (*The Port Chicago 50*), all readers of this column are likely to find a marvelous title or two that will resonate with them in meaningful ways.

*A Baby Elephant in the Wild*
*Written* by Caitlin O’Connell  
*Photographed* by Caitlin O’Connell and Timothy Rodwell  

“This is the scrub desert of Namibia (nah-MIH-bee-uh). It is the home to the African elephant and many other animals . . . . In this desert, a baby elephant named Liza takes her first breath after growing inside her mother for almost two years. Liza is born weighing 250 pounds, the size of a grown black bear. Her mother weighs about 8,000 pounds.” And so begins this appealing informational book aimed at readers in the primary grades. It provides interesting facts about the life of this newborn elephant, such as the fact that within a few hours she is able to walk and keep up with the rest of her family and that the backs of her ears, belly, and toenails are bright pink. The text also informs readers about the lifestyle habits of the family in which Liza lives, how its members take care of baby elephants, and how she learns to control the 40,000 muscles in her trunk. Liza’s family includes other babies, too—a situation that provides her with valuable opportunities to practice certain behaviors, like how to greet another elephant.

The photographs are delightful to pore over and are reminiscent of those found in *National Geographic* magazines. For instance, there are close-up images of Liza walking alongside her mother, taking her first mud bath, and drinking water. The book concludes with a section titled “Did You Know?” that offers additional information about elephants, such as the ways in which they communicate and their aquatic ancestry. There is also an author’s note. For readers in the upper elementary grades, there is *The Elephant Scientist* (2011), a recipient of a Robert

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1 We recognize that some eighth graders may want to read about students in the eleventh and twelfth grades, for example, but we caution teachers and librarians to preview these young adult titles to ensure that they are appropriate in terms of content as well as the developmental level of readers.
F. Sibert Honor, written by Caitlin O’Connell and Donna M. Jackson. (JCM)

Niño Wrestles the World
Written and illustrated by Yuyi Morales

“Señoras y Señores, Put your hands together for the fantastic, spectacular, one of a kind . . . NIÑO!” Award-winning author and illustrator Yuyi Morales’s newest picturebook excites and captivates as readers follow Mexican wrestling’s bravest luchador, Niño. No opponent is too terrifying for underwear-clad Niño. Inspired by myths and legends from Morales’s childhood, Niño’s contenders line up to challenge him. La Momia de Guanajuato, Cabeza Olmeca, La Llorona, El Extraterrestre, and El Chamuco all succumb to Niño’s wrestling moves, like the Tickle Tackle and the Marble Mash. All, that is, except LAS HERMANITAS! What is a luchador to do when faced with freshly napped sisters ready to tussle?

In addition to celebrating the art of lucha libre, or Mexican wrestling, Niño’s story pays homage to all children who play and imagine to their own and others’ delight and glee. Morales masterfully designs each opening in this 2014 Pura Belpré Illustrator award-winning picturebook, combining unique fonts and text placement with rich hues and close-up profiles to create suspense. Readers will be chanting ¡NIÑO! ¡NIÑO! ¡NIÑO! by the end and will be requesting more books that provide additional insights into lucha libre. Xavier Garza’s dual language picturebook, Lucha Libre: The Man in the Silver Mask (2007) would make for a fine addition to this Mexican wrestling read-aloud experience. ¡Viva la lucha libre! (AZ)

Green Is a Chile Pepper: A Book of Colors
Written by Roseanne Greenfield Thong
Illustrated by John Parra

“Red is a ristra. Red is a spice. Red is our salsa on top of rice.” And so begins Roseanne Greenfield Thong’s second book. In her newest concept book, Thong thoughtfully weaves English and Spanish in verse to animate the beauty and charm of the everyday colors in one Latino family’s small town. She writes, “Orange are the marigolds on the Day of the Dead. Orange are the platos for special bread.” Although the book is oriented toward the teaching of colors, readers will easily grow an appreciation for the ways Spanish language and Mexican traditions paint the landscape. A glossary translating unfamiliar terms for English-speaking readers is available at the end of the book.

Award-winning artist John Parra exquisitely illustrates Thong’s poetry. Parra’s vivid, folk-style illustrations of acrylics on board breathe life into Thong’s prose. From the green of the cilantro, to the yellow of the masa, to the blue of the endless sky, color imbues this picturebook with vigor and spirit. In addition to the brilliant wash of color, Parra completes each scene with small details and patterns, like the gray strands in abuela’s hair and the flower motif on a little girl’s skirt. This book reminds readers that “The world is a rainbow of wonder and fun: ribbons of colors rolled into one.” Green Is a Chile Pepper is a must-have for any concept book collection about colors and would pair perfectly with their first publication, Round Is a Tortilla: A Book of Shapes (2013). (AZ)
Brother Hugo and the Bear
Written by Katy Beebe
Illustrated by S. D. Schindler

This entertaining book details the adventures of the unfortunate Brother Hugo, who cannot return his library book because it was eaten by a bear. The improbable event will delight readers who swear their dog really did eat their homework, even as it highlights the reality that Brother Hugo must replace the book in the ways of his time—reproducing the illuminated manuscript by hand. Beebe’s witty understatement and humorous irony are to be savored. The Abbot’s calm admonishment—“Books in bears’ stomachs do monks no good”—and Brother Hugo’s reflection on bear habits—“[O]nce a bear has a taste of letters, his love of books grows much the more”—offer young readers an entry into sophisticated humor expressed in simple and restrained ways.

Evoking the memory and feeling of ancient illuminated manuscripts, Schindler’s gorgeously detailed watercolor illustrations, with their richly painted initial caps and page borders, set the medieval mood. Detailed expressive faces, an often carefully hidden bear, glorious endpapers, and images such as a running Brother Hugo tossing scrolled poems as bear snacks add to the visual appeal. Adventure and excitement are skillfully interwoven with information about the historical equivalent of interlibrary loans, book-making techniques, and the generous community of the monks, each helping Brother Hugo with his massive project. The historical note at the end of the book references Beebe’s story inspiration: Peter the Venerable’s written request to monks of another abbey to borrow a volume of St. Augustine’s letters, “For it happens the greater part of our volume was eaten by a bear.” Fabulous! (KJM)

The Favorite Daughter
Written and illustrated by Allen Say

The unconditional love between a father and daughter is artfully represented in Allen Say’s newest picturebook, The Favorite Daughter. Yuriko decides she no longer likes her name or art after a new art teacher mistakenly calls her “Eureka” and her classmates tease her. Yuriko finds hiding from her true self to be difficult once she resolves to change her name, who she is, and what she loves to do. With guidance from her father, Yuriko reclaims her Japanese heritage and her confidence as an artist as they visit favorite Japanese-inspired landmarks in New York, talk through her feelings, and tackle an assignment for her art teacher.

As in his previous works, such as Caldecott winner Grandfather’s Journey (2008) and Drawing from Memory (2011), accomplished storyteller Say draws from his own life to recount his daughter Yuriko’s journey, and does so in ways that will resonate with many readers. The dialogue reads effortlessly and enhances this much-needed book for a generation of children living and negotiating the possibilities and demands of growing up biracial. The deep affection between father and daughter is enhanced by the softness of Say’s illustrations. Yuriko’s facial expressions alone tell a story on every page. The art for this book was crafted with watercolor, pen and ink, pencil, and one special medium for Say—photographs. Readers will be touched when they encounter real photos of Yuriko at the beginning and at the end of the book and understand why Yuriko is Say’s favorite daughter. (AZ)
Fish for Jimmy
Written and illustrated by Katie Yamasaki

Jimmy and his brother Taro live a normal, happy life in California with their parents, the owners of a vegetable market. Their parents had moved there from Japan in the hopes of having a better life. However, all of this changes when Pearl Harbor is bombed by the Japanese in December of 1941. One day three FBI agents arrive at the home and take their father away to prison because “he posed a threat to America.” Soon after, Jimmy and the rest of his family are also taken away to an internment camp. While at the camp, Jimmy is so disillusioned over their mistreatment that he stops eating, making the rest of his family worry about his health and wellbeing. He misses the “good rice and noodles, fresh vegetables and fish” that his mother used to cook in their kitchen back home.

One night Taro slips away from the camp and discovers a black pool of water where he is able to catch seven fish. The following morning, his mother cooks the fish and Jimmy eats and begins playing with other children. The surrealistic illustrations are created with acrylic paint on canvas paper and convey the emotions of Japanese Americans during this shameful moment in American history. They also depict the growth of Jimmy as he takes care of his family in the absence of his father. For example, the image of Jimmy reaching down to catch fish in the pool depicts him as oversized. This story was inspired by experiences of the author’s family. To build background knowledge about the Japanese internment camps, teachers might want to pair this title with an informational text such as I Am an American: A True Story of Japanese Internment (1994) by Jerry Stanley. (JCM)

Year of the Jungle: Memories from the Home Front
Written by Suzanne Collins
Illustrated by James Proimos

Collins has drawn on memories of her father’s combat duty in Vietnam to craft a tender but frightening story. Before he leaves, Suzy relishes him reading aloud her favorite Ogden Nash poem about Custard the Dragon, who, “Even though he always feels afraid . . . is really the bravest of all.” As Suzy’s emotions shift from curiosity through worry and fear to deep anxiety over the year, she, too, must learn to be brave.

Proimos’s bold and colorful stylized cartoon illustrations, splashed across white backgrounds, reflect Suzy’s youthful exuberance. Interspersed are double-paged, full-bleed spreads depicting her imagination and growing awareness of the war. The first features a Vietnam of smiling cartoon animals. As worry settles in, Proimos includes Suzy in an unsettling tableau with grimacing masked animals. By winter, when dad mixes up his daughters’ birthdays, Suzy notes, “The jungle must be a very confusing place for him to make such a serious mistake.” A page turn reveals jungle animals aggressively heaving angry snowballs across an apocalyptic landscape as Suzy, her large expressive eyes dulled, stares fearfully at a reflection of her former self.

As Suzy’s anxiety skyrockets, a final imaginary landscape has the jungle animals replaced by iconic images of tanks, helicopters, and guns. Just as Suzy’s hope is failing, dad returns, “Tired and thin . . . [with] skin . . . the color of pancake syrup.” In the most tender of passages, Suzy emotionally reaches out to her clearly suffering father, drawing him back to her and their reading of Nash. This book offers a stunning exploration
of the impact of a past war, sadly so relevant to children in the US today. (KJM)

The Granddaughter Necklace
Written by Sharon Dennis Wyeth
Illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline

The Granddaughter Necklace is a fictionalized tribute to women and girls in the author’s family, going back as far as a great-great-great-grandmother named Frances who traveled from Ireland in the 1860s. Frances married a free man of color who owned a farm in Virginia. As part of this family’s tradition, a beautiful necklace, along with stories about other girls and women who have worn it, is handed down. Stories about the women are shared in the text, and readers are allowed to see the various reasons and events for which the necklace is passed down. For example, one girl receives the necklace from her mother before boarding a train to live with an aunt who can better provide for her financially, while another receives it before being baptized.

Part of the text near the end reads, “I am Sharon, daughter of Evon. Evon was the daughter of Mildred. Mildred was the daughter of Cordelia, who was the daughter of Sallie. Sallie was the daughter of Frances. And Frances was the daughter of a woman whose name I have not yet discovered. I wish I knew who she was. . . . I write stories for a living and now I have my own daughter.” The realistic illustrations, which were created using acryl-gouache, feature soothing, warm colors and depict the loving relationships among the women across time. The book concludes with the author’s note detailing information about her inspiration for this story as well as her family ancestry. (JCM)

On a Beam of Light: A Story of Albert Einstein
Written by Jennifer Berne
Illustrated by Vladimir Radunsky

This gentle book exquisitely captures the amazing genius of Albert Einstein. Berne discusses Einstein’s most famous scientific discoveries in a way that opens his world of “wondering, thinking, and imagining” to a new generation in remarkably comprehensible ways. With a New Yorker-cartoon feel, Radunsky’s ink and gouache illustrations add a playful, yet intellectual air, with a touch of quaint quirkiness. For example, Einstein’s pondering of where his sugar cube went when it dissolved into his tea led to “the idea that everything is made out of teeny, tiny, moving bits of stuff—far too tiny to see—little bits called ‘atoms.’” To underscore Berne’s prose, Radunsky shifts to a comically unsophisticated, but effective pointillism to represent the atoms that make up all things, “[e]ven Albert and you.”

While eschewing any mention of the intricacies of his private relationships or of his Jewish heritage (and remarkable luck to be visiting the United States in 1933), Berne helps young readers grasp the creative science of a complicated man they can get to know better when they are older. She begins this deeper layering in her author’s note, mentioning the role of Einstein’s work in the creation of the atomic bomb and emphasizing his pacifist beliefs.

Told as a student not to disrupt class with his questions, Einstein refused to give up on his fascination with the “hidden mysteries in the world.” This book—and its call for young readers to see themselves as the thinking, wondering, imagining scientists of the future—is a delightful homage to that fascination. (KJM)
Stubby the War Dog: The True Story of World War I’s Bravest Dog
Written by Ann Bausum

Stubby, a Boston terrier, may be the most famous animal hero from World War I. When the United States entered the war in 1917, James Robert Conroy volunteered and was stationed in Connecticut where he met the scruffy stray. The clever canine joined the soldiers and learned the countless bugle calls, marched in formation, and even saluted by sitting down, rearing up his front legs, and raising his right paw to the right side of his face. By the time Conroy and Stubby completed boot camp training, they were inseparable. When Conroy’s unit marched on board the Minnesota bound for Europe, Stubby was hidden in a blanket. Later, he became the mascot for the 102nd infantry of the 26th Division that was sent to the front line in northeastern France.

The Americans’ job was to make sure the Germans didn’t break through a barrier, keeping the French capital safe. Stubby helped in this endeavor. He heard incoming rounds of artillery fire and would bark an alarm warning. He also sensed when a gas attack was about to begin and would race through the network of underground trenches and bunkers to warn his human friends. During one conflict, he wandered onto the battlefield where shrapnel got stuck in his left leg, but he survived.

This loyal and loveable dog also performed other duties, such as finding wounded soldiers on the battlefield and capturing a German soldier. When they returned home to America, Conroy and Stubby led the Boston victory parade celebrating the return of the Yankee division. Stubby now lives in the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. This nonfiction book is organized like a scrapbook and is perfect for intermediate and adolescent readers, especially dog lovers. (DD)

Half a Chance
Written by Cynthia Lord

Lucy is feeling out of place when her family moves to a cottage on a New Hampshire lake. The first morning she is awoken out of a deep sleep by the wild haunting cries of majestic loons. Soon she meets the next door neighbors Nate, Emily, and Grandma Lilah who have been watching the loons for years. Grandma Lilah is unable to travel safely on the lake anymore, so the children complete Loon Patrol each day by rowing in kayaks to an island where the loons are nesting with their chicks. Lucy’s father is a professional photographer who is traveling on assignment for the summer. When Lucy learns that he is a judge for a photography contest for kids, she enters under another name, hoping to impress her father and gain his approval.

The contest is a scavenger hunt with a list of words and phrases: secret, collection, journey, heading home, texture, and more. Using a point-and-shoot camera, Lucy spends the summer exploring the outdoors, framing shots, and capturing nature’s beauty. Sprinkled throughout the book are photography tips such as, “A close-up picture is like entering another world where little things are gigantic” (p. 16). With the themes of starting over, family, friendship, jealousy, growing old, and protecting the environment, intermediate readers will have lots to relate to. They may even be inspired to tell their own stories through photographs. (DD)
The Meaning of Maggie
Written by Megan Jean Sovern

Overachieving Maggie is growing up with two older sisters who ignore her, a mother who tells her to pull herself up by her bootstraps, and a father whose legs are falling asleep from multiple sclerosis. The book begins on her birthday when she receives a beautiful leather-bound journal. She decides to write her memoir—the story of her eleventh year. A lot happens that year, including her dad taking a tumble at work and quitting his job and her mom returning to work in a downtown hotel. She also runs a mile for the first time and has a crush on a cute boy she meets in study hall.

Maggie is intelligent, precocious, and dreams of becoming rich and the president of the United States someday. Yet her dad’s time travels into his past help her understand that there is much more to life: “I’d thought knowing where the sidewalk ended and where the red fern grew and where the wild things were could help me figure out LIFE. But maybe Dad was right. What if I needed to write my own story?” (p. 24). Maggie naively believes everything will be okay with her dad and that his sleeping legs will get better. When she researches multiple sclerosis for her school science project, she begins to realize that she may not be able to fix him. Maggie’s inner dialogue is hilarious and the footnotes are entertaining and enlightening. This coming of age story is full of family, self-discovery, and learning to work together to survive the hard times. (DD)

A Snicker of Magic
Written by Natalie Lloyd

Hey-yo! Meet Felicity Juniper Pickle who has been wandering from place to place with her Mama and sister Frannie Jo. They finally land in Midnight Gulch, where Felicity hopes there is a “snicker of magic” left so that her family will settle down and her Mama will find her creative spirit. On Felicity’s first day of school, she meets Jonah Pickett, who introduces her to many townspeople full of fascinating stories about secrets, curses, music, and magic. Felicity has a special gift of noticing words shimmering or hovering over people’s heads. She also sees words zooming out of a quilt, bursting from a bookshelf, or clinging to trees. She collects the words she loves the most—like “Winsome Wonder Believe” (p. 191) and “Fierce Determined Purposed” (p. 164)—in a blue book and sometimes makes them into poems for her little sister.

Even though she suffers from stage fright, Felicity volunteers to be in her school’s talent show, the Duel, in hopes of breaking her Mama’s wandering curse. With the help of Dr. Zook’s Blackberry Sunrise ice cream, some sweet and sour memories are dredged up, and she gains the courage to use the words she has plucked from the wind to string a story together. Natalie Lloyd masterfully paints pictures with her lyrical words and imaginative plot. A Snicker of Magic is about family, friendship, fear, freedom, and forgiveness. Three words twirl around in the air regarding this debut novel: Enchanting Magical Splendiferous! (DD)
If I Ever Get Out of Here
Written by Eric Gansworth

Just because Lewis was a Welfare Indian didn’t mean he had to look like a Welfare Indian—at least that’s what his mother thought after seeing Lewis had his braid intentionally severed off by a friend. In 1975, Lewis found making new friends as the only Native American in his class, living on a reservation, and being dirt poor to be beyond difficult. To complicate matters, Lewis was small for his age, wore glasses, and had become the moving target for the middle school bully. And to make things even more devastating, his favorite band, the Beatles, had broken up. Things begin to look up when George, a military kid, arrives, and the two bond over their mutual appreciation of music.

In an effort to keep the conditions of his reality a secret from George, Lewis fabricates stories about his life. Things come to a head when Lewis decides he must push against his oppressive surroundings and face the truth. As an accomplished writer, artist, and enrolled member of the Onondaga nation, Eric Gansworth writes a no-holds-barred account of one boy’s journey of self-exploration, family, memory, and friendship.

In this novel, Gansworth’s YA debut, readers will identify with the ups and downs of adolescence, the work of trying to navigate different worlds, and gain insight into one family’s life on the reservation. Music fans will appreciate the ways in which Beatles-related song titles and albums shape this novel. A playlist and discography conclude the book, allowing readers to identify and enjoy songs associated with each chapter. (AZ)

Openly Straight
Written by Bill Konigsberg

Rafe Goldberg is entering a New England boys’ boarding school for his junior year, leaving behind a family and community in Boulder that celebrates him—along with his openness about his sexuality. Clear in his identity as a gay adolescent, Rafe is sick of the label that he feels overpowers every other aspect of his being. He longs to bond with guys in a way that transcends preconceived notions of the “gay kid” (p. 9). Central to this engrossing novel is the conflict that arises as Rafe enacts someone he is not in hopes of being seen for who he truly is.

The irony becomes apparent to Rafe in time, but the stage is set early. During a first-day pick-up football game, as Rafe revels in an easy camaraderie with presumably heterosexual classmates, he notices members of the opposing team “share an eye roll” (p. 14) and quickly labels them as “PIBs . . . the People in Black . . . who wore trench coats and sat on the sidelines and judged everyone” (p. 14). In Rafe’s head, “Ben the Jerk” (p. 15) is “all holier-than-thou” (p. 17). Luxuriating in his self-imposed moniker, “Jock Rafe” (p. 18) nicknames Albie, his non-athletic roommate, “Stocky Guy” (p. 20). He equates Albie with fatigue-wearing “survivalists” (p. 20) and laments having a “dork” roommate (p. 32). Almost simultaneously, he responds to Albie’s query about the “kind of guy” (p. 21) Rafe is by lashing out: “Why do I have to be any particular type?” (p. 21).

When he falls deeply for Ben, Rafe struggles with the more serious consequences of his
charade. His halting, nonlinear growth is often discomfiting but feels as real as the tender love story Konigsberg creates. Beautifully blending the pathos and joy of belonging, Konigsberg forces readers to think—and to hunger for a sequel. (KJM)

The Port Chicago 50: Disaster, Mutiny, and the Fight for Civil Rights
Written by Steve Sheinkin

Noted nonfiction author Steve Sheinkin has created another riveting title focusing on a little known aspect of American history and the unsung Port Chicago 50. Written in an engaging manner, Sheinkin masterfully incorporates the stories of those who lived through this event, demonstrating that history does not take place inside a vacuum and is not simply a series of dates. He highlights the institutional racism present in the military and how this affected the everyday lives of African Americans who served.

Initially, African Americans who enlisted in the navy in the 1940s were only allowed to serve in lower-level positions, such as mess attendants. Others, including those profiled in this book, were given dangerous jobs, like loading ammunition onto ships at a base in California—though they received little training on how to do this properly. Only African American sailors loaded ammunition, while those who gave orders about how to do this were White. Sheinkin writes, “From the moment they arrived at Port Chicago, most of the men lived in constant fear of a catastrophic explosion” (p. 24). A catastrophic explosion did indeed take place on July 17, 1944, killing 320 sailors, of whom 202 were Black.

The 50 sailors who refused to continue loading ammunition onto the ships after this explosion were charged with mutiny and subsequently prosecuted. Port Chicago 50 provides insights into the thoughts and feelings of these men and the key role they played in challenging racism in the military by taking a stand that could have cost them their lives. They are civil rights heroes and should be recognized as such. Sheinkin’s title features artifacts throughout, including photographs of numerous individuals involved, copies of letters, and newspaper articles. This book deserves a place in all secondary classroom and school libraries. (JCM)

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