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Books that Especially Appeal to Boy Readers

Terrell A. Young, Ed.D. & Barbara A. Ward, Ph.D.

Many of today’s teachers want to create lifelong readers, and, in particular, they often worry about finding books that will engage their boy readers. Sadly, many boys regard the act of reading as a feminine activity (Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002). Since boys often value reading less than their female counterparts (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Gambell & Hunter, 2000), teachers must make Herculean efforts to engage them and guide them in choosing books that will appeal to their interests. William Brozo made an especially compelling case for the need to entice boys into reading and then keep them engaged. He writes, “...capturing boys’ imaginations through literature is a critical element of improving boys’ psychological, sociological, and academic health. Reading books that appeal to and affirm young men’s masculine identities in positive ways may transform a boy’s sense of self and expand his academic possibilities” (2002, p. 21-22).

Boy readers often relish nonfiction, adventure stories, books with male protagonists, stories that feature animals and sports, and series books (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Book stores and libraries should take care to purchase these types of books that are particularly appealing to boys. In this book column we have examined several possible titles that are sure to lure boy readers into reading. For our next column, we will feature books with female protagonists and books sure to interest many female readers.

Grades K-2


This stunning picture book biography of the newly elected 44th U. S. president combines rich lyrical prose with breathtaking watercolor illustrations. The young Obama learned that he was happier when he met life’s challenges with hard work and perseverance. Weaving the theme of hope into the Obama story, Grimes leaves readers with the notion that each of us can have hope and make a difference in some small—or large—way.

Born into a long line of bullfighters, the Little Matador reluctantly but dutifully hones his skills as a matador so he can follow his father in the family business. While what he really enjoys doing most is painting, his parents insist that he prepare for his career in bullfighting. When forced to fight a bull in the town arena, he sketches the charging bull, who stops in his tracks to admire his likeness—much to the delight of the onlookers. Afterward, everyone wants the Little Matador to paint their portraits—even his parents.


In engaging rhyme, the author describes the high seas adventures of young Gulliver Snip in and around his bathtub. When his ship sinks, Gulliver manages to jump overboard and head to the safety of his mother’s favorite living room lamp, to which he clings until the long-suffering but patient woman saves him and tucks him into bed. As he falls to sleep, Gulliver dreams of the next day’s adventures when he will once again be the captain of his very own clipper ship. Young readers will clamor to hear this delightful picture book read again and again, and the cheerful acrylic and pastel illustrations are certain to leave a smile on the lips of adult readers as well.


Jack is the youngest and the quietest member of a raucous family, and when he tries to tell his mother, his father, his grandparents, and his siblings that he plans to climb up the mountain, no one hears him. With his trusted stuffed bear, Chester, for company, Jack claims his voice through several confidence-raising experiences with the creatures who make the mountains their home—even reuniting a wolf cub
with its mother and managing to frighten away a bear. When his worried family finally finds Jack, the now-confident young boy commands attention and makes them listen to every word describing his day. The book’s soft illustrations make the natural world a friendly place to visit and home a safe place to return to after a day’s adventures.


Although he wants to be in his family’s mariachi band, Gustavo is unable to play any of the instruments needed. Lonely and longing for a way to contribute, he takes to wandering outside his home where early one morning he is inspired to sing as he feasts his eyes on the lovely desert habitat. As his voice fills the air, neighbors and family members realize that Gustavo’s voice is the instrument that he can contribute to the family’s musical enterprises. Young readers will be warmed by the bright colors associated with the desert in the inviting illustrations and will be likely to identify with Gustavo’s wish to contribute to the family’s enterprise with his own unique gift.

Grades 3-5


James receives a pen-and-ink-set as a birthday present from his artist father. Later, James’s friend, Marvin, a beetle, climbs up on James’s desk and discovers the opened ink and paper. Marvin dips his legs into the ink and paints a lovely painting as a gift for James. Everyone is impressed with the fine detail of the painting, but James cannot reveal the identity of the true artist. Later, the two friends are able to solve an art heist at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and to recover one of Albrecht Dürer’s famous drawings that greatly resembles Marvin’s pen-and-ink gift to James. This intriguing mystery helps both Marvin and James realize that, “A good friend is someone you can count on. No matter what.”

After his dad leaves, Mitch and his mother spend the summer at Bird Lake with his mother’s parents. Mitch’s dream that he and his mother will move into the house next door is shattered when Spencer and his family move in for the summer. Spencer wonders if their house is haunted. Is it possible that his dead brother is trying to communicate with them? Mitch knows the answer to this haunting mystery.


Wife and husband team, Kathleen Krull and Paul Brewer, will have kids rolling on the floor with this new title, a biography of a unique French performance artist, Joseph Pujol. Pujol himself often caused audiences to literally faint with laughter at Paris’s Moulin Rouge in the late 1800s with his special talent. Pujol trained his abdominal muscles in order to perfect “the art of the fart” by mimicking sound effects, tunes, and stories. Boris Kulikov’s illustrations are the perfect complement for this hilarious text written in verse.


Based on a true story, the author describes the best night in 11-year-old Mackenzie’s life as the evening that Cash comes into his life. When his abusive father tosses the pit bull puppy into his bed, it is love at first sight for both boy and dog. Cash and Mackenzie spend every waking and sleeping moment together, and Cash quickly learns to stay out of Mackenzie’s father’s path. The inevitable encounter occurs, though, and Cash finds herself dumped in the middle of nowhere, left to fend for herself. Loyal Mackenzie never forgets her and keeps searching for his beloved dog for months. Young readers will rave about this inspiring story of a heroic canine and the small acts of heroism she inspires as the most unlikely folks band together to bring Cash home.

Pedro Morales loves playing basketball. He especially loves playing with Ned Hancock, the best player on his team and the most popular guy in school. Practicing with Ned makes Pedro a better player and instills a desire within him to be even better. Things seem to change, however, when Pedro runs for school president against Ned. Would Ned purposely do things to make Pedro lose his confidence and appear to be a poor player? The boys’ friendship is tested by this competition.


In the bottom of the last inning of the second-to-last game of the season, Willie’s team, which is in first place in the league, finds itself trailing the other team, 3-2. With players on second and third and two outs, Willie comes to the plate. He will either hit the runners in or lose the game. Willie knows that if he blows the game, the other players will be mad at him and call him names. Little does he know that, at the crucial moment, he will make a new best friend who can grant his wishes. Nor does he know his new friend will be a large blue chimp wearing orange and white surfer shorts.

**Grades 6-8**

Adler, David A. (2008). *Don’t talk to me about the war.*

Thirteen-year-old Tommy Duncan doesn’t care a bit about the war raging in Europe. Instead, he spends his time playing baseball and following the Brooklyn Dodgers on his radio. Tommy is preoccupied by matters closer to home, such as his mother’s failing health and his growing feelings for a classmate. But as his friend Beth daily reads newspapers for news about a war being fought thousands of miles away, and as he listens to the stories of Sarah, a Jewish classmate, the war becomes more personal. Tommy’s struggles mirror the nation’s during this period before the United States lent its military forces to the conflict that became World War II. Readers will find
Tommy’s innocence about world politics, his mother’s fragile health, and his emerging interest in Beth quite appealing and true to life.


In this third art mystery featuring the three friends from Chicago, Calder and his father travel to Great Britain on business, and Calder accidentally gets involved in a community’s dispute over the quality of the artwork in the town square. When Calder disappears, his father appeals to his schoolmates Petra and Tommy, who fly overseas to look for clues. The three friends must rely on their own unique talents as well as recollecting what they know about one another in order for there to be a happy ending. As in the previous two books, art is at the heart of the plot—in this case, the mobiles of Alexander Calder, and as usual, Calder’s ever-present pentominoes play an important role. The book will keep readers turning their pages as quickly as possible in order to learn Calder’s fate.


When nine-year-old Ethan’s father hires him out to the Lyman family to pay the father’s debts, Ethan enters an uncomfortable new world where his new master can thrash him for any perceived mistakes, and where fellow indentured servant Daniel feels safe only when he rides his beloved horse Ivy. Readers will root for the boys to escape the fates Mr. Lyman has planned for them, and they will surely shudder in horror at the mistreatment inflicted by the boys’ master. Particularly poignant is Daniel’s loss of his own language, identity, and name, since all Irish boys are known as Paddy to the townspeople. Daniel turns out to be less than difficult, after all, and secrets about Mr. Lyman are revealed.


Using the panels familiar to fans of graphic novels, the author/illustrator describes the events that precede Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, including the horrific battles and lives lost. Interestingly, he also shows some of the town’s citizens, watching in fear as the troops from both sides of the conflict ride through the town. The stark illustrations of the corpses of men and beasts
and the sheer numbers of soldiers who lost their lives during these pivotal moments of the Civil War are sure to engage readers, reminding them of the cost of military conflicts. Butzer’s use of primary sources such as letters, diaries, and speeches lends credibility to his efforts and makes readers feel as though they too are on the battlefields. This historical graphic novel is further strengthened by the author’s notes at the end of book that provide explanations for the panels and offer additional detail for curious readers.

New York: Amulet/Abrams. 288 pages, $15.95,

This witty noir mystery will keep readers laughing as they encounter Vinny Biggs, a mini-mobster in charge on the underworld of Franklin Middle School. Biggs deals in everything from stolen candy to forged hall passes. His hit men turn uncooperative classmates into outcasts by “outing” or shooting them with water guns so it appears that they have wet their pants. Biggs seeks out seventh-grader Matt Stevens to solve a case for him, which Stevens always refuses until Biggs makes an offer he cannot resist.

New York: HarperCollins. 192 pages, $15.99,

Brady Steele’s life both changes and is spared when he climbs onto his roof to view a meteor shower. Much to his surprise a meteor slams through the roof of his room and right through the mattress on his bed. As Brady and his cousin Quinn spend a week cycling, playing basketball, caving, and fishing, Brady notices surprising surges in his skills, strength, and energy level. Later, he experiences startling side effects of these new found skills. Could these changes be related to the meteor?

In the fourth book in the Percy Jackson and the Olympians series, both Percy and his mother worry about what will happen when he begins classes at his new school. They have good reason since Percy has a “history” with schools, and his mother’s boyfriend used his influence as an English teacher to get him into this particular school. As in the previous books, Percy and his friends are thrust on a dangerous quest that leads them to many of the famous Greek gods, and this time into the fabled labyrinth. Their actions take them to Alcatraz and even cause Mount St. Helens to erupt before they achieve their noble goal.

**Grades 9-12**


When he is 15, Abenaki Louis Nolette finds himself recruited to fight in the Union forces during the Civil War. Drawn by the wages that will improve the lot of Louis and his mother, and the Union’s desire to stamp out slavery, he quickly begins to reconsider his decision to enlist. As battles continue to draw huge tolls and he watches men die right before his eyes, Louis finds leadership and humanity in the most unlikely places.


In true Walter Mitty fashion, sophomore Joey Eastland sees himself as a great football receiver in his imagination. In reality he is what his coach calls a “hydration therapist,” providing water on the sidelines for the high school gridiron stars. But in Joey’s case, his failure to perform during tryouts is caused by nerves, and the coach gives him a second chance when he happens to see Joey intercept a ball flung at a classmate. Almost overnight, Joey’s dreams of football glory come true and take him dangerously close to betraying himself and his friends in his search to join the high school’s golden gridiron boys. Just how much of himself will Joey change in order to be accepted into the inner circle?

High school senior Sam Carrier doesn’t find it easy to live peacefully in a world intolerant of Tourette’s Syndrome. At the most unfortunate moments—say, when he’s trying to talk to a girl he has his eyes on—his body betrays him by jerking and going into spasms. When his cruel stepfather kicks him out of the house after graduation and then a newfound friend dies, Sam sets off on a road trip with his crush, Naomi, who has a few secrets of her own. On the way to meet his grandmother, who lives in Jerk, California, Sam discovers several secrets about his father and the windmills he crafted, and he begins to come to terms with his condition.


Only a handful of countries still use the death penalty for offenders younger than 18, and the United States is one of them. Inmates who have been sentenced to death for crimes they committed as teenagers speak in this thoroughly engaging page-turner. The author explores capital punishment, the prison system, and justice through her insightful interviews with inmates, attorneys, and the families of victims. The stories of Death Row inmates Mark, Nanon, and Roy are, by turns, haunting and chilling, and readers will ponder the value of a human life and the consequences of one violent act. Kuklin raises questions about the fairness of our justice system that are hard to answer.


Thirteen-year-old C. J. loves his dad a lot, but he still finds it hard to understand why his dad left the family for a brief time. Although he’s back, C. J. doesn’t trust his dad or trust that he won’t leave again, and he finds it hard to shed the responsibilities he was forced to assume during his father’s absence. The story of a family trying to heal the broken ties that once bound and are now severed as one
member leaves is told through a series of powerful, gut-wrenching poems complemented by the always evocative illustrations of Lewis. In simple sketches, Lewis puts all the hopes and fears of a marriage on the face of C. J.’s mother and the reluctant acceptance of his father into the family fold on C. J.’s own visage.

References


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