Good Books for Good Times

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A quick trip to the local bookstore or library quickly dispels any notion that reading for pleasure is something of the past. In either place you’ll find tables and shelves filled with appealing books as well as patrons browsing for the latest offerings from their favorite authors or looking to catch the newest trends in publishing. Good books are once again starting to fill the book shelves as publishers send out their latest offerings. The tempting glossy covers and fresh topics force us to put aside last year’s favorites in favor of new ones. Among the new offerings, we have no trouble finding several interesting titles with a wide range of themes, many helping us examine issues with different lenses so that we see the world anew. We hope you’ll find much food for thought and many pages to browse among these new books that caught our attention. Clearly, these are good books for good times.

**Grades K-2**


Henrietta the hen loves to read so much that she reads every book on the farm a dozen times. Then she starts checking out books from the library. Her love of reading leads to a desire to write, prompting her to share a book about fiction writing with the other hens. Together they brainstorm the perfect elements of a story, and she writes and publishes a book. Although she is devastated when it receives a terrible review in *The Corn Book,* the story hour children love it! Teachers will find that this poultry parody goes a long way in teaching children about fiction writing!

Eldon Hog loves to watch the royals ride by in their splendid carriages. One day an overworked fairy explains that he is the Hog Prince and if he kisses the right woman he will become a prince. Smooches abound as Eldon seeks his royal soul-mate, but later he realizes that the best things in life are often close by. Jason Wolff’s enchanting illustrations add to this wildly funny transformation of the “Frog Prince.”


Cars zoom across the pages in this simple and unique picture book. With each flip of the page, the skies grow increasingly crowded, becoming more polluted until all traffic comes to a halt. With simple rhymes -“Save the planet, Janet”- a four-page spread reveals exactly what each of us can do to make a difference. The illustrator used recycled materials to create the engaging collages that effectively deliver her crucial message about more thoughtful consumption.


As salsa, mariachis, and Tejano melodies greet his ears, a young boy notes the beauty that surrounds his home in the barrio. Parties, parades, bodegas, dancing, food, and worship help him celebrate his culture and traditions. Diaz’s mixed media paintings and collages dance with the text, enabling readers to experience vicariously the joys of one neighborhood.


Coffelt introduces young children to the language of comparisons, synonyms, and antonyms in this fun read-aloud. Bright, colorful pictures of animals grace the pages and make vocabulary-building even more
appealing. For instance, a cheetah bounds across a two-page spread, and the text notes: “I’m fastest! I’m fleet. I’m meteoric. I’m hypersonic.”


Ramadan is coming, and 10-year-old Leena is excited to take part in the fasting. Since she is too young to fast every day, she decides to fast the day her aunt will be with her family. That same day she attends a friend’s birthday party but wonders if she will be able to maintain her fast when she sees the chocolate cake and lemonade. Later that evening, a special surprise more than makes up for her sacrifices during the day. Leena’s maturity is manifested in ways that go beyond her first fast.


The queen bee is having a royal ball for all of the insects. Dressed in their finest raiment, they are all having a splendid time when they both feel and hear the approach of a large creature. Will it destroy the insects and their party? This rhyming story explains how the mosquito earned his distinguished title by which we know him today.


In a story set many years ago, Yohei, a poor Japanese boy, sells fish to help his family earn their living. When his father becomes sick and needs both medicine and care, life becomes even more difficult as Yohei needs to sell enough fish to pay for his father’s medicine. When a stray cat appears at his door, he shares his meager meal with the feline and cleans the mud from her fur. The boy’s kindness to the feline is rewarded when the cat leads people who want to buy fish to Yohei’s home, making it possible for him to sell enough fish to pay the family’s bills and to care for his father at the same time. Eventually, Yohei is able to open his own store. This tale explains how the beckoning cat became a good luck symbol in Japan.

In watercolor illustrations and simple but informative text, this book describes different types of mountains such as the Tetons with their spreading ranges as well as Mount Kilimanjaro with its lonely cone. Readers will also note the species that have adapted in order to survive in the different types of mountains. Back matter includes detailed explanations of each of the 17 mountain images as well as a glossary, bibliography, and websites, all of which are sure to prompt readers to long for a trip to the nearest mountain peak. This title, with a preservation message that threads throughout its pages, is part of the “About Habitats” series.


Who knew that under all those icy flakes of winter a whole other world lives? This simple picture book shows readers the colorful ladybugs huddled close, the dormant snakes and woodchucks, the restive voles, the strangely quiet chipmunks, and the colorful salamanders and bluegills, all of whom take life a little bit more slowly during the winter while they wait for spring. This unique perspective on the natural living world beneath the white surface, coupled with elegant watercolor illustrations that almost seem to pulse slowly and highlight the vividness of the creatures that rest nearby, is engaging.


Life seems to be different when Ava Tree wakes up on her eighth birthday. It is more than the special backwards and inside out birthday party her older brother
has planned for her. Ava Tree thinks she has developed wishing power. As she experiments with this new gift, she realizes that some wishes bring lasting joy to her friends, and some bring only temporary results; others are not at all what she had hoped for. Is it possible that she is taking advantage of this new found power?


War erupts in Allie Finkle’s fourth grade class when a new student transfers from Canada. More worldly than the other girls, Cheyenne leads the attack on the playground as the girls chase the boys so she can kiss them. Social pressure forces all the girls in Allie’s group to start going with boys, and Allie grows increasingly uncomfortable with the peer pressure that changes her classmates and friends, one by one. In the third of a series, each chapter heading is a rule that Allie lives by to make life run smoothly. Allie is refreshingly independent and not afraid to remain a kid, but it isn’t easy. Once she understands the situation, Mrs. Hunter, the class teacher, takes a firm stance on fourth graders trying to grow up too soon.


Fourth grader Sassy Simone hates being the smallest member of her class and family, and she really dislikes being called Little Sister. She is, after all, more than just a little sister, and her own Sassy Sack contains everything needed during any emergency. When the family is trapped on an outing, Sassy uses her diminutive size to their advantage. Readers will smile at her sassy personality, fashion sense and style, and her dreams of having a color for every day of the week. As she asks her friends, why can’t they wear cool colors such as fuschia, guava, or persimmon instead of their drab school uniforms? The relationship between Sassy and her storyteller grandmother is especially strong. Readers will look for more books about this original character with a personality that matches her name.

The eye-popping visuals in this essential title on today’s ever-changing technology, combined with just enough description to intrigue readers, make this a must-have for any school or library collection. Web-savvy readers are sure to delight in quoting interesting facts about wave farms, nanorobots, and graphic games, just to name a few of the topics covered in this offering, part of the new Navigators series. Look closely at this one when it arrives because it won’t be on the shelf for long.


Ten-year-old Isabelle’s life changes when she receives an apple from a large elephant seal. First, she is rescued from a dismal life in a rainy, boggy town where she stayed at a horrid boarding house and worked at a dreary factory. She then learns that she is the only surviving member of a family that tends the world’s only remaining magic-producing farm. As she discovers her new powers and gifts, Isabelle is torn between staying at the magical farm and returning to help her friends in the boarding house and factory.

**Grades 6-8**


Looking for a way to save the family’s Vermont farm after an injury in 2005, Tyler’s father hires a migrant Mexican family, the adult members who are in the country without proper papers. Tyler, 11, is upset that his father is breaking the law, but over time, he becomes close to the children, particularly the oldest daughter, Mari, who writes letters to her mother who has returned to Mexico because of an ailing relative. There are many subplots woven skillfully throughout the book, allowing the author to show the complexity of immigration, the injustice of some
laws, and the ability of people to change. Readers will fall in love with Mari who keeps hoping everything will work out fine.


At her twelfth birthday party Rissa, who has been feeling increasingly disconnected from her mall rat friends, finally stands up for herself and lets her friends know that she doesn’t approve of the way they treat others. What she regards as herd behavior prompts them to tease others and dress and behave exactly the same. Not even Rissa’s mother or older sister can understand why she chooses to unlink herself from her group of friends at the start of middle school. Her declaration of independence is not smooth sailing either. Rissa finds it even harder to fit in since just about everyone in middle school already seems to have their own set of friends. She soon realizes that independence comes with a price, and that even her new friend isn’t perfect. How can Rissa be true to herself when she’s not even sure who that is? Readers will identify with this portrait of group-think mentality, bullying, and courage, with a few humorous missteps along the way.


Grandma Dowdel, who gained her fame in *A Year Down Yonder* and *A Long Way from Chicago*, is back! It is now 1958, and this time it is an entire family of five that she helps instead of easing a single person’s transition to her small, bully-filled town. Mrs. Dowdel’s gifts help them all - from 11-year-old Bob who finds himself tied up, naked and dangling over her outhouse hole to his older Elvis-obsessed sister, Phyllis, who has not made the best choice of friends or boyfriend to their father who is a new minister trying to get his first church started. Readers will discover that some gifts are only for the moment while others can last an entire lifetime.

In the fifth outing for the younger sister of detective Sherlock Holmes, Enola must come to the rescue of Mrs. Tupper, her landlady, who has been kidnapped. Following clues found in a crinoline in the woman’s wardrobe, the enterprising Enola traces the kidnappers’ path to the home of Florence Nightingale, who was engaged in secret communications during the Crimean War. Nightingale has taken to her bed, and commands a vast volunteer army of social activists from her home. Readers will be particularly taken by the protagonist’s personality and the close calls she has as she and her more famous brother’s paths grow ever closer. While the plot and the war may be of little interest to some, they will surely clamor for more from Springer as Enola herself just keeps getting more interesting.


Seventh grade certainly can be confusing, and what’s a level-headed girl to do when all her friends are swooning over boys, and love is in the air? Briefly, Emma-Jean, the quirky individualist first introduced in 2007’s *Emma-Jean Lazarus Fell Out of a Tree*, finds herself responding to the call of love, and she contemplates inviting her friend Will Keeler to the seventh grade dance. Complications arise, and Emma-Jean comes to her senses in the nick of time, realizing that friendship just may be more important than a crush. There is romance afoot at home as well, and as she did in the first book, Emma Jean adds her own ingredients to make things go smoothly.
Grades 9-12


Freed from responsibilities by a snow day, 17-year-old Mia and her family leave their Oregon home to visit friends. A car wreck kills her parents and brother Teddy, and Mia lingers in a coma, trying to decide if she should go or stay. As her family and friends visit her bedside, reminding her of their love, Mia reflects on her life so far and what she considered to be a difficult choice about whether to leave her boyfriend for musical training as a cellist at Juilliard in New York. The writing is elegant, and Mia’s ruminations on her past life and future pain are thought-provoking.


Set in 1899 in rural Tallulah, Louisiana, this riveting account of bigotry along the bayous is based on a true story of the lynching of five Sicilians, recent immigrants to the country. The family grows and sells produce to blacks and whites alike, staying to themselves for the most part, but misunderstandings and ignorance are simmering just below the surface. Fourteen-year-old Calogero is at the heart of the tale, and the author uses his innocence about racial and ethnic mores and boundaries in the South to trace the town’s growing hostility to his family, a hostility that ends in tragedy and leaves readers pondering how quickly we can become caught up in mob justice.

**About the Authors:**
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