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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Authors

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* 2-6 FI Reviewed by Devi Chitrapu

Frog has only one dream—to become a princess. Every morning, she spends time traveling on the wings of imagination to the royal palace, picturing herself as a princess. Scarcely does she realize that the life of a princess is not as great as it seems.

One day, the wild play of her imagination is jolted when the prince’s golf ball splashes into her pond. Frog’s daydreams come true as she, clutching the golf ball, approaches the prince and croaks, “This ball for your hand in marriage.” The horrified prince could never break his word, so he dodges Frog’s request. He gives her many chances to experience the role of a princess, hoping she will fail. Frog’s dreams wane as she fails at following the rules on all occasions and during all rituals. The climax comes suddenly at the time of the promised kiss when Frog saves herself from becoming an appetizer to the royal guests, overturning a tray of frog legs as she leaps into the darkness.

*The Frog Princess* is an interesting and humor-filled story. It has the potential to stir children’s imaginations and give them a fun-filled story time. Allchin’s illustrations breathe life into the tale. Combined with the simple language, they make *The Frog Princess* a great book that moves children to laughter.

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B+ 4+ FI Reviewed by Kathe C. Homer

Three orphans, January, Erin, and Mouse, escape from their orphanage and travel down the river on a makeshift raft. They become grounded on the “Black Middens” and find themselves in an unknown world of abandoned warehouses and factories. A strange old man and an even stranger girl with webbed fingers and little memory of her past, pull them out of the Middens. Their dilemma, then, is whether to stay and help the little girl, or continue their search for freedom and adventure. Each of the children grieves from a lack of family, but they come to realize that they are a family to each other and others like themselves.

This is a very odd book. There is a feeling of fantasy throughout it, even though the events could be real. Somehow the reader, like the orphaned children, never feels anchored or grounded. Everything washes by with a surreal, dreamlike feel. It is an enjoyable book, though it is unclear whom it is best recommended for.

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A 5-9 FI Reviewed by Annette Van Wagenen

Alexander says he has seen ghosts ever since he was young, but the only person who believes him is his mother, who suddenly disappears. For over three years, Alexander hopes that his mother will come back. When he is thirteen, during the weeklong spring break, his father takes him to visit a new acquaintance, Mrs. Hambrick. Alexander resists getting along with her and her two children.

While visiting an old Civil War battle site, Alexander somehow shatters the window of time and falls into the past. He comes face to face with the ghost of a young soldier who insists he needs help. As an uneasy friendship develops between the two, Alexander is drawn into a reality where he must confront the haunting past his new friend has already lived.

This gripping ghost story weaves historical facts with supernatural elements. The reader is
drawn into the lives of two very different young men who both lost loved ones and then sees how each helps the other cope with that loss.


A Pre+ PB Reviewed by Vicky M. Turner

This kid wants to keep all of his body parts where they belong. But how can he do that when people are saying things like, "Scream your lungs out," "Jump out of your skin," and "Laughing can crack you up?" And what would happen if a kid did not "hold his tongue?" Would it fall out? Could he tie it back in with some string? What about some superglue? The ending of this humorous book does a little more explaining than its prequel, *Parts*, making it a much more satisfying read.


A 2-6 PB Reviewed by Devi Chitrapu

*Raccoon on His Own* is a perfect book for story-time reading. It instills its readers with a sense of fear as well as courage as it tells of young Raccoon, who likes to be independent and do different things. The story is a journey of self-discovery, the result of an unexpected adventure. As a baby, Raccoon is separated from his family when he lands in an abandoned canoe and drifts away from his mother. He learns bravery as he compares his loneliness in the canoe with the snake- and alligator-inhabited water. He forgets his fear in the company of his own reflection and takes comfort in reaching for turtles and chattering with the warblers. However, the sight of nine little ducklings swimming close to their mother makes him realize the importance of being close to his own family. The bittersweet lesson he learns makes him understand his love for his mother, and he rushes back to her when he sees her waiting for him.

As in most picture books, the illustrations do a better job than the words of conveying the story with all of its accompanying emotions.


B 1-5 PT Reviewed by Donna Cardon

Attenborough has gathered a rather eclectic collection of poems and rhymes. A table of contents listing section headings and the illustrator of each section is followed by a forward by Andrew Morton that extols the virtue of memorizing poetry and explaining the rational behind this particular selection of poems. An introduction by the compiler then roughly outlines the organization of the poems and discusses tips for poetry memorization. The poems are grouped in sections with such vague names as "Short and Sharp" and "Fur and Feathers." A title index, index of first lines, author index, and credits are found at the back of the book.

The book is attractive, with brightly colored illustrations on each page. The sophistication of the poems ranges widely, from "Polly had a Dolly who was Sick, Sick, Sick," to Shakespeare and Wordsworth. The style of illustration varies almost as much as the style of poetry, creating a feeling of hodgepodge. This impression is increased because many of the poems are printed on top of the illustrations, which makes the poems a little difficult to read. What the collection lacks in continuity is made up for in its exuberance. Both poems and illustrations are lively and full of energy. This is a good first collection for the reluctant poetry reader.
The Tale of Tricky Fox

The Tale of Tricky Fox is yet another interesting picture book from experienced teacher and award-winning author Jim Aylesworth. Like his other stories, this is written in couplets and read-aloud sounds. Intelligent behavior, competition, and creativity seem to be the prominent themes. Besides being interesting, this book is an instant success with animal lovers—the main character is a fox who claims he is smarter than humans and can easily outwit them. He bets his brother that he can fool any human into giving him a pig. Pretending to be old, feeble, and helpless, the fox goes from house to house carrying a sack with a piece of log in it. He claims his sack has important, secret contents, which nobody should try to see. He tells everyone that he is tired and wants a place to rest for the night, then convinces them that the contents of his sack are missing. He goes to the last house, hoping to get a pig, but instead learns a lesson from a clever bulldog.

McClintock’s illustrations contribute significantly, making the story vivid and appealing.

A 2-6 PB Reviewed by Devi Chitrapu


A K-3 PB Reviewed by Annette Van Wagenen

Based on a Native American legend, this story demonstrates why bragging is not a good idea. Big Bear boasts that he is the largest, strongest, and loudest animal of all. Brown Squirrel challenges him to a contest. Bear agrees and declares he will keep the sun from rising the next day. When the sun comes up the next morning, Squirrel forgets the words of his wise old grandmother, “When someone else is wrong, it is not a good idea to tease him,” and begins to harass Bear.

It is not very smart for an animal as small as Brown Squirrel to tease a big bear (especially a bear who has just lost a bet). Bear seeks an apology that Squirrel is not about to give. The result is an entanglement that leaves Squirrel with a permanent set of stripes. The vivid illustrations are done in bright, contrasting colors. They add greatly to a colorful story.

A 2-6 PB Reviewed by Anneta Van Wagenen


Reviewed by Vicky M. Turner

Animals on the farm are down-and-out bored. The kids are back in school, and there is nothing to do. At Hen’s urging, the animals take a walk into town to find something to do. Seeing people with smiling faces coming out of the public library, they decide to investigate. One by one, the animals enter the library and ask the librarian for something to do. But the librarian doesn’t understand “oink” or “baa.” Finally, she understands Hen’s polite query for a “boook.” Three books are delivered to the animals, and they spend the rest of the afternoon in happy reading—that is, all the animals except Frog, who has “Read it! Read it! Read it!”

This is a delightful read-a-loud. Animal sounds are always a favorite with children. This book was read to several groups of children.

**B 4+ PB**  Reviewed by Susan E. Woods

Fifteen-year-old Walks Alone’s peaceful life is tragically interrupted after a surprise attack leaves many of her Apache people dead. Walks Alone escapes with her life, her young mute brother, and little else. She has been well trained in survival tactics by her now-dead father and mother. She cares for and heals the bullet wound she received during the attack and hunts, cooks, and cares for her brother and another young Apache woman and baby. The dream of finding her grandmother and Little Hawk, who had announced his intent to make her his wife, drives her forward.

The story is one of great courage in the face of the terrible tragedies endured by many of the indigenous peoples in the American West. Although the work is historical fiction, the detail and western historical facts make the story real and believable. Walks Alone has courage, character, and a deep desire to be reunited with her family and loved ones. Readers can’t help but admire and love this lonely, determined Apache girl as she struggles to reach her goals. Walks Alone is much like any young girl with dreams and hopes. Her thoughts are logical and intelligent, and readers will feel proud to accompany her on her terrible journey. Although the story does not have a happy ending, there is no doubt that Walk’s Alone will survive with dignity and an enduring spirit. Young and old readers will be honored to figuratively travel side by side with this strong Apache girl.

*Walks Alone* received the NCSS-CBC Notable Children’s Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies award, The School Librarians International Honor, and ABA’s Pick of the Lists.


**B 3+ FI**  Reviewed by Kathe C. Homer

Eleven-year-old Ant is unhappy with her family and prefers to pretend that her “real parents” are coming soon to take her away from it all. She lies her way in and out of everything, causing problems for herself and those around her. Her one true friend, along with a caring teacher, helps her realize that she is at least part of the problem and so must be part of the solution.

Ant and her family have developed bad habits in their relationships with one another. Ant feels unloved and unwanted, but her behavior causes her parents to feel the same way. If they can recognize the problem, admit their mistakes, and commit to working together, they might be able to solve the problems they’ve created and share their love and need for each other. This is a common dilemma for many families, so this book might be helpful to those in similar situations.


**A- 4+ FI**  Reviewed by Kathe C. Homer

Through the use of journal entries, *The Wanderer* tells of Cody and Stephanie and their trip across the ocean in a small sailboat to visit their grandfather. The crew consists of two brothers and their sons, another brother who has never married, and Sophie, an orphan who was adopted by yet another brother. Due to individual needs and personality differences, tension between family members rises as the trip proceeds. When the stormy ocean becomes a common enemy, each finds that they have resources and strengths that help the whole unit survive.

There are several twists in the story, some of which the reader is led to as well as others that come as delightful surprises. The writing is
very good and the story compelling. Both older children and adults will enjoy this one.

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A 3-6 PB NF Reviewed by Devi Chitrapu

This autobiographical story is based on the author’s tour of Greenland. It describes her long journey to the earth’s largest island with all of its magic and mystery. Dupre writes of exploring Greenland’s shores by kayak, visiting tiny villages, and a significant encounter with a raven in its homeland.

The book provides readers with useful information about Greenland’s tribal people, particularly the Inuit, describing their source of livelihood, eating habits, survival skills, and popular stories and legends. It also describes the artic animals and birds living in this harsh climate.

Many superstitions dominate the lives of the people of Greenland. They believe that the Northern Lights are the spirits of their ancestors playing ball in the sky. Similarly, they believe the raven is a messenger, creator, and even a trickster. Dupre encounters a raven, which gives her a stone and believes that it is sending her a message to find strength and spirit in herself, the land, and the sea.

While it does lack a story line, this book has great informative value, which is greatly enhanced by the charming linoleum block prints. It will attract anyone curious about the kind of life that exists in far off places.

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A- 6-8 FI Reviewed by Robert L. Maxwell

Harriet is back, a year or so later. When her parents announce they are going to Paris for several months, Harriet prepares to insist that she will not go—until they tell her they weren’t planning on taking her anyway. Instead, they have arranged for Ole Golly to return and stay with her while they’re gone. Something mysterious is going on with Ole Golly, now supposedly happily married and living in Montreal. Why is she willing to return? And where is her husband, Mr. Waldenstein? (Has he been murdered?) And why does she seem so sad? Naturally, this fires up Harriet’s spying instincts, and she investigates with great vigor. Her friend Sport helps in the investigation, and along the way they make friends with an odd but very Harriet-like girl who has moved in across the street.

First published in 1964, Harriet the Spy stirred controversy for discussing the previously un-discussable, ordinary thoughts and feelings of preteens. This book does not, of course, have that same “zing”—a lot of water has gone under the bridge in the ensuing four decades; and it would be hard to shock today’s readers of children’s fiction. But that isn’t the purpose of this book, which continues the story with the permission of the Louise Fitzhugh’s estate. Ericson first read Harriet as a child in 1964 and has evidently harbored ambitions to write about Harriet ever since. To take on a story that has become something of a cultural icon is rather daring, especially for a first novel, but Ericson does fairly well. There are a few incongruities—there are no textual clues that this story is set in the late 50’s or early 60’s, as the original was, and in fact some clues hint that it is set in 2002. For example, it only takes a couple of hours for her parents to fly from Paris to New York, and the cover art shows a junior-high Harriet dressed in contemporary junior high garb. Yet the household seems to be set in the mid-twentieth century: live-in cook; parents awaiting their dinner sipping martinis in the living room while Harriet eats her dinner in the kitchen; Harriet enthused about how lucky she is to actually have access to a telephone in the hall. Still, the story itself is interesting and comes to a satisfying conclusion. Harriet fans may welcome this continuation.

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A PreK-2 PB Reviewed by Annette Van Wagenen

One sunny day, Corduroy and his friends visit the zoo, where there are many fun places to explore. They visit the rainforest and Australian animals, as well as the reptile house. This gentle book has pull-up flaps that reveal surprises at each animal habitat.

Children will be delighted by the bold, well-defined watercolor illustrations. Along the path are interesting facts about some of the animals visited. Reading this book makes one want to go to a real zoo.

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A 5+ PT Reviewed by Donna Cardon

In the introduction to her Michael L. Printz 2002 Honor book Heart to Heart, Greenberg explains how the book was created: “A group of distinguished American poets were invited to choose a twentieth-century American artwork and write a poem stimulated by it.” The result is a well-done volume. Each page contains a full-colored print of the inspirational artwork and the poem inspired by it. Each of the forty-three poems is by a different author, and they are grouped into sections according to three motifs: “Stories,” “Voices,” and “Expressions.” Greenberg includes a short biographical note about each artist and author and a complete index at the end of the book.

It is hard to imagine a better introduction to twentieth-century art and esthetics. The poems vary in style as much as the art works that inspired them. Some are concrete and descriptive while others are abstract and philosophical. Some are set verse, while others are free verse. The featured works of art are of different mediums and genre. Greenberg resists the temptation to add extraneous borders and decorations, leaving the pages pleasantly uncluttered. Teachers and parents may want to use this book as a springboard for discussions on viewing and writing about art. After reading through some of the poems, students can’t help but feel inspired to write their own interpretive compositions.

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* PreK-2 PB PT Reviewed by AnnMarie Hamar

Night is starting to fall, and inside Noah’s ark, the smaller animals are getting nervous as larger, stronger animals eye them hungrily. The thought of having to sleep in the same room with a panther, tiger, and bear is not very comforting to those of a more gentle nature. “It’s getting dark/Inside the ark,” says an owl who is afraid of the dark. But when rough waters cause the boat to tilt and rock, even the elephant and leopard grow fearful. The smallest creatures of all—the sparrow, the mouse, and the spider—comfort their shipmates with promises of songs, stories, and “a web of sleep to wrap you in.” In the morning, Noah finds the mighty and the meek snuggled together, fast asleep.

Hooper’s rhyming text combine with Munsinger’s expressive illustrations to create a refreshing presentation of the story of Noah’s
ark. The poetry and drawings achieve a balance of light-heartedness and suspense without being disrespectful. The story’s underlying message is that of learning to trust others and getting along with those who are different. *A Stormy Ride on Noah’s Ark* is a charming story and a perfect read-aloud.


B+ 3+ FI Reviewed by Kathe C. Homer

This book addresses the very real problem of middle school cliques and is told through the voice of five girls who are members of a clique run by Candace, an unkind, mean-spirited, manipulative girl. One day, Maya discovers she has been dumped from the clique when she is not invited to a sleepover at Darcy’s home. She is mortified, wonders what she has done to deserve this (nothing, as is usually the case), and is afraid to go to school and face her schoolmates and former “friends.” As the readers listen to the other “voices,” they will realize that some of the girls are really nice and sensitive despite Candace’s influence. In the end, some choose to leave the clique, opting for real friendship instead. Candace just moves on, drawing others into her group.

This is a helpful book for kids who are in this kind of situation or are getting to the age where they may be confronted with it. At this age, kids really want to “fit in” and can be drawn by strong, manipulative personalities into groups that may be harmful. Readers learn that it is a good idea to examine personalities, priorities, and character traits before becoming a part of a group.


A K-3 FI PB Reviewed by AnnMarie Hamar

The pajama-clad students of Sleepy Valley Sloth School are content to spend their class time sleeping. Occasionally, the teacher wakes up and tries to teach a lesson, telling his student to “keep those snores coming.” Their daily schedule consists of a three-hour lunch, naptime, study hall (sleeping with books over their faces), and recess (sleeping on the swing set). This peaceful routine is interrupted by the arrival of Sparky, a spunky young sloth. Her attempts to engage her classmates in games and reading activities fail miserably; the other sloths literally push her away. Sparky’s arrival coincides with a visit from a real boar from the S.O.S., Society for Organizing Sameness, who has bad news: Sleepy Valley has not lived up to S.O.S.’s standards, so he has come to shut down the school. Sparky uses her imagination to devise a plan to fool the boar and, with the help of her classmates, save the school.

Lester and Munsinger get in a few digs at educators who are more concerned with ratings than anything else. The story is full of puns and is often quite funny. Munsinger’s detailed, fanciful illustrations build on the text. The classroom is decorated with drawings of a turtle, a pillow, and a recliner; the sports equipment is covered with cobwebs. Sloths sleep on top of desks, draped over swings, and sandwiched between building blocks. The boar from S.O.S. wears a loud suit and carries a clipboard. Munsinger’s energetic, hilarious drawings bring the story to life.


B PreK-2 FI PB Reviewed by AnnMarie Hamar

A puppy named Hugs sets out early one morning to discover which animal gives the best kisses. The horse’s kiss is “sticky, but . . . quite warm.” The rabbit’s kiss is soft. The pig’s kiss is muddy and a bit scratchy, but still quite tender. In the end, Hugs discovers that his mother’s kiss is the best of all.

Loupy’s story is sweet, but Tharlet’s ink and watercolor drawings are the book’s strength. Tharlet, who also illustrated Brigitte Weninger’s *Davy* books, uses earth-tones, keeps details to a
minimum, and conveys a sense of warmth in her drawings. Her simple illustrations focus on Hugs and his kisses. For example, Hugs looks absolutely blissful when getting a kiss from the rabbit. The ending is predictable, but the illustrations more than make up for it and are sure to appeal to young children.

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A K-3+ FI Reviewed by Laura Beck

Once upon a time there were three bears who lived way out West: a little, bitty bear cub; a mild-mannered, middle-sized mama; and a great big, humpbacked, gray-haired grizzly, nine-feet tall and cross as two sticks. One day, as their red-hot beans were cooling, they take a walk. While they are gone, a dirty little desperado named Dusty Locks blows in, wreaking havoc on their tidy little house. What will the three bears do when they come home? This western retelling of Goldilocks and the Three Bears is a hoot n’ holler. A great read-aloud book.

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A 4-9 NF Reviewed by Sandra L. Tidwell

This biographical account portrays the challenging childhood of Lu Chi Fa. Three-year-old Chi Fa was orphaned during the summer of 1944, right before the Chinese Civil War broke out. He had four older siblings, but because of hard economical times, not one of them was willing to take care of him. Chi Fa was passed from relative to relative and even sold for bags of rice to another family. He lived in his home village for a time, and then traveled to Shanghai, Hong Kong, and finally Taiwan. Through a myriad of physical and emotional experiences, which seem almost impossible to survive, Chi Fa holds onto the hope of future “good fortune.” Chi Fa finds hope in the moon, stars, butterflies, clouds, songs, verses, and dreams of flying dragons. He remembers a promise he made to his sister, Shiow Jen, to never forget that he is a good boy. Also of help is his mother’s favorite Confucian passage, “With course rice to eat, with water to drink, and my bended arm for a pillow—I have still joy in the midst of these things.”

At age twenty-eight, Chi Fa fulfills his life long dream of immigrating to the United States. Today, he is a successful restaurant owner in Morro Bay, California.

This book contains a powerful message about perseverance and the influence small acts of kindness can have on someone’s life. Chi Fa learned from everyone, but the positive moral values he learned from his favorite uncle, grandma, auntie, and an epileptic man he briefly cared for were the most important. The chapter subtitles are a good summary of these lessons and include things such as “Be Strong,” “Be Obedient,” and “Be Hopeful.” These are valuable lessons for today’s youth, who are often overindulged and take a life of opportunity and choices for granted. A map of China is located at the front of the book, and a time line paralleling Chi Fa’s life with the Chinese years and historical events is included in the back.

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B+ 2+ NF PB Reviewed by Kathe C. Homer

This is a lovely retelling of Christ’s miraculous feeding of the multitudes with only a few loaves and fish. Elijah wants to see if his new teacher has come. His mother lovingly reminds him to take care of his chores first. When he says, several times, that he wishes he had some large, wonderful gift to give to Jesus, his mother continues to remind him that “if the teacher is who they say he is, the size of the gift doesn’t matter.” The story is told from a young
boy’s viewpoint, with the emphasis on Christ’s ability to magnify a small gift, indicating that the size of a gift doesn’t matter to him.

The paintings used to illustrate this story add to the feeling of warmth and love that the text provides. The colors are vibrant, and the people’s expressions are delightful. This is a good book to have in a personal collection of religious books.


* 4-6 PB NF Reviewed by AnnMarie Hamar

“The Renaissance was a time when scholars, sculptors, and painters rediscovered the great works of ancient Greece and Rome.” They developed new techniques in painting and sculpture, keenly observed the world around them, and portrayed their subjects in a more realistic manner. Mason introduces readers to artists, styles, movements, and techniques associated with the Renaissance. His discussion begins with medieval manuscript illustration and the role of the Christian church as an art patron. He covers the development of secular art and the rise of famous artists and sculptors such as Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Tintoretto, and El Greco. Mason points out that many artists created secular as well as religious works. Perspective, the rise of the middle class, the development of oil painting, chiaroscuro, and sfumato are discussed as they relate to the work of the artists.

Mason’s text is well-researched and clearly written. He presents basic information about the Renaissance without including detail that might weigh down the text and overwhelm a younger reader. Mason discusses at least two important works of each artist—more for da Vinci and Michelangelo—and explains why each is important or unique. Yellow boxes scattered throughout the text provide information on artistic developments in Asia and Africa during the time of the European Renaissance. Illustrations consist of crisp, clear photos of famous art works. A chronology of events of the Renaissance and a glossary of art terms are included at the back of the book. Overall, this is a splendid introduction.


* 4-6 PB NF Reviewed by AnnMarie Hamar

When criticized for his tendency to paint “pretty pictures,” Pierre-Auguste Renoir said, “Why shouldn’t art be pretty? There are enough unpleasant things in the world.” Second in the Art Around the World series, this book explores the development of Impressionism and the attempts of four key painters, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, and Camille Pissarro, and their contributions to the movement. His discussion branches to include other artists, such as Edgar Degas and Vincent Van Gogh; and other movements, such as Expressionism that were influenced by the Impressionists. Pointillism, the Impressionist’s use of bright colors, the development of photography, and the contributions of sculptors are also mentioned.

Like his book Art in the Time of Michelangelo: The Renaissance Period—also in the Art Around the World series—Mason’s text is well researched and clear. The illustrations consist of photographs of famous art works associated with the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. The book includes a glossary of art terms, information on the development of art in other parts of the world during this time period, and a chronology of events of the Impressionist era. This excellent introduction is informative without being overwhelming.


A 4-7 FI Reviewed by Annette Van Wagenen
Eleven-year-old Jackie and her father are driving late at night in a foreign country when her father suddenly collapses at the wheel. Jackie tries to get help, frantically flagging cars down. Finally, two men pick her up. But instead of driving to the police station, they take her to a remote part of southern Italy. There, they seem to expect her to fit into their family life. Unable to communicate with her captors, Jackie makes plans to escape.

The gentle woman of the house befriends Jackie with kindness and tries to help her fit into daily life. Because of the language barrier, Jackie must interpret body language and voice intensity to discover why she was brought to this strange home. She must unlock the secrets of this three-person family in order to find her way home. But how?

This gripping novel draws readers in immediately with Jackie’s helplessness and appreciation for a family she does not understand. It is a dramatic thriller.

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* PreS-3 PB Reviewed by Vicky M. Turner

There’s trouble on the farm. A peck of nearly perfect, purple, almost pickled-peppers, a load of luscious, leafy lettuce, and a tub of tart, tasty tomatoes are missing. Where could all the loot be? There’s only one way to find out—check all of the criminals on the farm. With a bit of smart ducktecting, the police come up with the dirty rat.

Based on the old television show Dragonet, this book is better listened to—unless read by someone familiar with the show. The words are fun to read; the ending catchy; and even though the concept may not be understood by children, they will still love the tale. Especially the DUM DE DUM DUM part.

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A 1-3 FI PB Reviewed by Donna Cardon

This book contains two stories, both of which are set in ancient China and extol master craftsmen. In the first, a boy sets out to find a teacher of swordsmanship so that he can learn the art and defend his small village from bandits. The master teacher enlists the boy as a servant, and as the boy works, the teacher hurls household items at him. Eventually the boy learns alertness and quick reflexes as he dodges the thrown objects. Finally, the teacher attacks him with his sword, and the boy is able to dodge every stroke. The master declares the boy’s education complete. The boy returns to his village and becomes a hero.

In the second story, an emperor hires a master painter to paint a great wall in his palace. As the work progresses the greedy emperor plots to kill the artist to ensure that the masterpiece will never be duplicated or surpassed by the artist in the future. The artist learns of the plot and uses his great skill to create a magic doorway in the painting, enabling him to escape the emperor.

Caldecott-winning illustrator Provensen uses her characteristic clear lines and warm palette with an Asiatic twist. Oil on vellum looks very much like Chinese rice paper story scrolls. Provensen even adds Chinese word characters within the picture frames to show what individuals (and the household items) are saying, and then offers a translationunderneath. Though the crisp text, sprinkled with humor, suggests the style of a Chinese legend, it is unclear whether the stories are truly “retold” as the cover suggests, or original. Either way, this book is a pleasant read at home or in the classroom.

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A 10-12 FI Reviewed by Robert L. Maxwell
Connor Rigoletti-Chase has a problem. Arriving home from school one day he finds his mother, a successful partner in a California law firm, at home! Even worse, Pamela Rigoletti is acting very strange—she’s fired the gardener and cook and is actually making dinner herself, expecting her family to sit down to together to eat it. What’s more, she’s removed all television sets from the house and disconnected all the phones but one. But things go from odd to sinister when Connor finds a book in his living room about a famous, early twentieth-century painter whose middle-period painting features Connor’s mother. When his mom starts “freezing” in portrait poses, Conner and the rest of his family begin to get worried, but the adventures really start when Connor touches a charcoal sketch of his mother and is whisked back to 1926. Connor finds himself at the painter’s, Fitzgerald Cotton, residence, which is in the same spot that the Rigoletti-Chase family will live several generations later. Cotton has quite literally lost his muse, who came mysteriously to him one day and disappeared just as mysteriously about a year later. The loss has thrown him into a slump, and he is unable to work. He has tried to paint “Pammie” without the model, but the paintings just don’t turn out right. When Connor has a chance to look at these paintings, he is shocked to discover that they are paintings of his mother in the exact poses she was “frozen” into in his own time.

Woven into this time travel story is yet a third time period, the late fifteenth-century. The famous, but evil, artist Lorenzo da Padova is using black-magic paints to create his masterpiece, a portrait that leaves both artist and model dead. The model, Francesca Rigoletti, is an ancestor of Connor and his mother; Cotton, a descendant of da Padova, has gone so far as to obtain Lorenzo’s paints and is using them to paint Connor’s mother. Conner must both save his mother, now entrapped by the actions of the obsessed artist, and find a way to return home.

Reiss has written a number of teen novels dealing with the themes of time travel and mystery. Skillfully written, this page-turner will keep the flashlight on under the covers well after bed time.


A- 10-12 NF Reviewed by Wendy Simmerman

This book is for anyone whose idea of costuming involves a glue gun and a trip to the local thrift store. The author cannot be faulted for a lack of creativity—she includes at least sixty-four basic costumes ranging from Ancient Greek and Roman to 1990s punk. The upside is, no sewing skills are required. The downside is, no sewing skills are required. Constructing an entire garment with a hot glue gun (Rogers recommends buying glue sticks in ten-pound boxes) may be a quick and easy way to prepare costumes for a weekend high school production, but it does have some serious disadvantages. It complicates cleaning and durability, and does not allow the range of options available with professional or semiprofessional costume construction, such as precise sizing and design. The concept behind these costumes is that various articles of clothing can be taken apart and recombined to create period costumes. The ideas are sound and could be accomplished using a needle and thread for greater durability. For someone with basic sewing skills but no experience in costuming, this could be a wonderful idea book.

In its defense, the book is clearly not meant for professional costumers, but rather for those with little experience and even smaller budgets who simply need a good costume that could turn a sixteen-year-old into Queen Elizabeth. The instructions are clear and easy to follow, with many photographs and diagrams explaining how to create each outfit. Most of the costumes look simple enough to create in an hour or two. The range of ideas is wide enough that nearly any production could be staged using the simple costumes presented. Because the costumes shown were created for adults, this book targets high school theatre, but it could be adapted to be used for younger children and community theater as well.

 Reviewed by Gabi Kuptiz

Ibn Battuta has an urge to travel long before the invention of modern conveyances. Born in 1304, he spends his boyhood studying the Koran in his native Tangier and emerges a scholar. At the age of twenty-one, Battuta left Morocco for Mecca. Armed with his natural curiosity and desire to see the world, Battuta pushes towards the east, experiencing the highs and lows of travel. He encounters merchants and bandits; he experiences loneliness and friendship. Hunted by the sultan’s assassins in India, Battuta devises a plan that saves his life and prompts the sultan to offer him an ambassadorship in China. Wounded by rebels, he survives, only to learn that the plague has taken his parents. In all, he spends almost thirty years “on the road” and covers over 75,000 miles. Battuta amasses no jewels or money, but he is rich because his travel memories are his riches.

In 1355, Iba Battuta told his story to Ibn Juzayy, the Moroccan court secretary “who wrote it down in Arabic.” The original handwritten book is currently at the National Library in Paris.

It is replete with lyrical musings: “Traveling—it gives you a home in a thousand strange places, then leaves you a stranger in your own land,” and “Traveling—all you do is take the first step.” The text illuminates Battuta’s world and time. Enclosed are a map and an explanation of terms and their pronunciation. The illustrations include Arabic and Chinese calligraphy and are in rich gold, red, and blue colors. Weaving through the text and illustrations is the road taken by Battuta bearing his comments—comments that are as apropos today as they were when uttered over six hundred years ago.


 Reviewed by Vicky M. Turner

Miracles and wonders are everywhere, wonders such as wheat and the earth and cows and milk. Bread and butter are a wonder. High in the blue, blue sky a bird that began as a small egg and grew to something that sings and soars is a wonder. White picket fences surrounding a garden full of colors and smells and tastes are a wonder. But of all the wonders one sees and hears and smells and tastes each day, the most wonderful of all are children!

This book brings its readers back to the most marvelous creation of all—a child. The simple story and bright, colorful pictures blend to make this book a wonder.


 Reviewed by Irene Halliday

The magic of summer is about to give way to schoolbooks and homework. Billy Whee isn’t quite ready to let go of his after supper firefly hunts with Stuart, Juny, and Mary Frances. Flooded by the light of the last full moon of the season, Billy stands in his bedroom wishing he could capture the moon and take it out whenever he wanted. Extending his arms through the open window toward the moon, he is amazed to find they stretch farther and farther until he is able to grasp the moon and pull it into his bedroom. How can he hide the moon so his mother won’t think he has turned on his light to read or play?

Billy’s adventure with the captured moon is eloquently written. The watercolor and gouache-over-pencil illustrations not only complement the story, but heighten its excitement and magic. Young children will easily identify with Billy’s end-of-summer feelings and will enjoy his exciting nocturnal adventure that gives him a
spirit-raising secret and enhances his anticipation of future full moon nights spent catching fireflies with his friends.


Reviewed by Laura Miles

What fills a hand fuller than a skein of gold? Toulse and the blinded rebel Innes must answer this riddle within seven days time, or they will be put to death. The only person who may know the answer is the queen, who was exiled long ago after her son disappeared. Chased and harried by the king's men while on their journey, the boys are brought face to face with another riddle: what happened to the young prince who was stolen by a strange little man who could spin straw into gold? Would the queen even recognize her son after so many years? In this deftly woven tale one learns why the strange little man took the boy and what happened afterwards. This is a thought-provoking story about love, greed, forgiveness, friendship, and true nobility.


Reviewed by Sandra L. Tidwell

Twelve-year-old Annie and her younger brother Thomas immigrate to America in 1847 to find their big sister Bridget, who is employed as a maid. They find Bridget but also find another set of hardships that physically and emotionally challenge them. In their native Ireland, during their voyage across the ocean, and in America, the youngsters run into many undesirable people, including a young thief who steals their possessions during their first few moments in New York, a drunken stable man who abuses children, and a dishonest housekeeper. The children's dream of earning enough money to send for their mother and other siblings seems impossible.

It seems unrealistic that so much happens to two little children in early America. The happy reunion with their parents is almost too good to be true, and at times the text is unclear and confusing. The author gives no list of sources she used to write this piece of historical fiction, nor is there an explanation of the characters and experiences.


Reviewed by Robert L. Maxwell

Both children and adults fell in love with the story of Abiyoyo when it was first published in 1986. The story tells of a young boy and his father who are ostracized ("that means they made 'em live on the edge of town"). The boy is ostracized for incessantly playing his ukulele, his father for playing practical jokes with magic. When the monster Abiyoyo appears on the scene, however, the pair defeat him by singing a song about him and making him dance, at which point he disappears with a swoop of the father's magic wand. Father and son are joyously welcomed back to the town, and the book ends with the entire village dancing to Abiyoyo's song. The book was enchanting both for the story, the eminently sing-able song (my kids were known to sing it for hours, which almost got them ostracized), and Hays' charming illustrations, showing an unlikely (but pleasant) multicultural South African village.

In this sequel, which takes place some years later, the little boy has grown up and has his own family, which has formed a band. Alas, the town is now confronted with another monster: uncontrolled growth. The forests have been cut down, so the village is flooded every spring and afflicted with drought every summer. The villagers decide to solve the problem by building a dam but are soon stymied when they strike a huge boulder. The solution? Find Grandpa and his magic wand—maybe he can bring Abiyoyo back and have him move the progress-impeding boulder. No sooner said than done, Abiyoyo—
uncut fingernails, slobery teeth, stinking feet, and all—is back, but this time he is a nice monster. The villagers ply him with food, and Abiyoyo obligingly moves the boulder. They try to dance him to sleep again, only to discover that the boulder has fallen right on Grandpa’s magic wand, and so Grandpa can’t make Abiyoyo disappear again. “There is only one thing to do. Let’s make Abiyoyo lots of good food, then he won’t want to eat us. And if we sing him lots of good songs, he won’t get mad at us.” So the villagers learn to live with the monster and even teach him to brush his teeth. Abiyoyo helps them replant the forest. Everyone lives happily ever after. The end.

This saccharine-laden morality tale is an unexpectedly poor sequel to the delightful Abiyoyo. While the first book certainly had its over-the-top moral aspects—the multicultural village living together in sweet harmony—it did contain a scary monster and had an interesting plot in which evil is banished. The sequel is prosaically written and just plain silly—it’s not finished until evil is brought back and converted to good (shades of the absurd ending to the Star Wars trilogy). This unsatisfying and unworthy sequel is not recommended.


Aylssa Reed’s life is about to take a change for the worse. Her much anticipated baby sister is still born, and her parents—especially her mother—are enveloped in great sadness. Her mother has a nervous breakdown, and her father decides to move to a smaller apartment in the city near his work and her new school. But even then things don’t work out; her father moves out and gets a girlfriend. At school, things are also bad. There are many cliques, and Aylssa just doesn’t seem to fit in. The one bright spot in her life is her Grandmother Daisy G., who is a go-getter, dancer, and one who never shows her sadness.

This is a very depressing story with no great role models, uplifting message, or hope. Alyssa even steals things from her father’s apartment—things that belong to his new girlfriend—without feeling bad about doing so. Although Aylssa is in the fifth grade, this story is geared more to young adults.


A PreS-3 PB Reviewed by Vicky M. Turner

It all started when the dish ran away with the spoon and did not come back. All of the other nursery land animals decide to look for the two runaways. The fork in the road draws a map for the animals to follow, and off they go. After roaming all over nursery land, they find the spoon—and the dish in lots of pieces. At the repair shop, Jack puts the dish back together. That night they change the nursery rhyme slightly—so they can all stay home.

Delightful pictures blend with a slightly loony story. Fun for all those with nursery rhymes in their blood and for those just being introduced to the marvelous cast of characters.


A 2-6 NF Reviewed by Annette Van Wagenen

This is one of the most interesting books about memory one will ever read. It delves into the mysteries of the mind to teach readers what memories are, where they are stored, what triggers them, how they can be sharpened, and lots of other mind-enhancing data.

Rose Cowles designs her illustrations to enhance the concepts being presented. She uses humorous cartoons with colorful captions to explore the surprising ways that memory operates. It may be mind-boggling to open up this book, but it is well worth the risk.

Review: A 3-6+ FI

Reviewed by Laura Beck

Prince Ralph of Upper Crestalia wants to get married, but his mother does not want him to, so she sets up a contest with tests so ridiculous that no aspiring bride will pass. Frustrated and still unwed, Ralph drives off in his car but breaks down along the way. Luckily for him, along comes Opal, princess of Lower Crestalia, who is not only beautiful and genuinely nice, she also drives a pickup truck and fixes cars. Determined to marry, the two drive back to Upper Crestalia to face the tests and outsmart the devious queen.

★★★★★


Review: A Pre+ PB

Reviewed by Vicky M. Turner

"That's my dog. That's my red dog. That's my big red dog." This story builds in typical Walton fashion as adjective after adjective is used until this dog is a "Great dog!"

Walton plays with words, manipulating them to fit his lively sense of humor and making them more than just words. Words are his trademark—words used widely, well, and with humor.

★★★★★


Review: A 2-4+ FI

Reviewed by Laura Beck

Once upon a time, there were three little pigs who wanted to build houses and a wolf who wanted to eat them. One day, the wolf came to the first pig's house and blew it down. However, he miscalculated and blew so hard the pig fell out of the story. In this fun twist on the traditional tale, the three pigs romp through several stories, collect friends along the way, and finish their story with a happy ending.

★★★★★