

Choosing Books with “Meat on their Bones”

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Why Literature?

Because literature has the power . . .

- To make us more human, to help us see the world from inside the skin of persons very different from ourselves; to live more lives than the one we have; to try on various roles.
- To develop compassion and insight into the behavior of ourselves and others (through characters so real that the reader lives and suffers and rejoices with them).
- To show us the past in a way that helps us understand the present.
- To move us in ways that facts, statistics, and history texts can never do (or rarely do).
- To develop the imagination; to help us entertain ideas we never could have had; to interpret and translate our experiences, to shape our world, and to enlarge our imagination.
- To take us out of ourselves and return us to ourselves as a changed self; to enlarge our thinking while educating our hearts.

Huck, C.S. (1987). To know the place for the first time. In *The Best of the Bulletin*. pp. 69-71.

What Makes a “Good” Book?

George Woods, the late and longtime children’s book critic for the *New York Times*, addressed the topic of evaluating children’s books in a speech to an auditorium of college students. “How do we know a good book? He asked his audience. Pens came to the ready for the scholar’s definition. “We know a good book . . . (pause) . . . because it hits us in the gut.”

[George Woods, “Evaluating Children’s Books,” Speech at Brigham Young University, September, 17, 1977.]

A few book review resources I’ve come to trust . . .

Book Links – located under Products and Publications/Periodicals at www.ala.org/

The Horn Book Magazine – www.hbook.com

Journal of Children’s Literature [Children’s Literature dept.] – information available @ www.ncte.org

The Reading Teacher [Children’s Books column] – information available through www.reading.org

Voices from the Middle [Book Talk page] – information available through www.ncte.org

Annotated book lists in *Literature Circles in Middle School*, *Literature Circles Resource Guide* and *Literature Circles and Response* (published by Christopher-Gordon, Publ.)

Some advice from the 5th graders in Kate Norem’s class at Geneva Elementary School:

- ❖ You can’t go wrong with adventure and mystery.
- ❖ Don’t choose too thick of a book (except for *Harry Potter* and *Eldest* and *The Thief Lord*...)
- ❖ Choose books with bright colors.
- ❖ If your kids like sports, choose a sports book (try to choose the right sport).
- ❖ Pay attention to what books your kids like and pair books of similar types – if they like *Spidernick* books, then choose a mystery.
- ❖ Sometimes choose the opposite of what they read.
- ❖ Pick using the “just right” criteria (Not too long, not too short; the font is not too big and not too small; etc).
- ❖ Re: main characters – usually best if it’s a girl for a girl reader and a boy main character for boy readers.
- ❖ Choose series books.

Books That Prompt Response Exhibit . . .

Qualities that arouse a reader's interest and emotions

[Can readers relate to the characters or issues? Do they care about what happens? Will they hope for a sequel and/or feel some loss at the end of the book? Does the presentation of topic, theme, or issue elicit curiosity and a desire to know more? Is the language and vocabulary lively, interesting, and provocative?]

Books such as: Ruby Holler, Animal Grossology, Sold, Skippyjon Jones, House of the Scorpion, The Book Thief, Crispin at the Edge of the World, Shabanu, Crossing the Wire

Compelling content

[Does the literature offer any elements of action, suspense, or mystery? Does the content prompt curiosity and wonder? Is the dialogue intriguing and does it illuminate the characters, time period, or culture with a fair portrayal? Is there humor or controversial characters and situations or even unexpected events to prompt discussion?]

Books such as: Because of Winn-Dixie, Passage to Freedom, Encounter and Pedro's Journal, Sometimes I'm Bombaloo, No More Dead Dogs, Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler's Shadow, Sister Anne's Hands, Mama and Owen and Mzee, The Librarian of Basra

Intriguing format

[Does the author offer a unique way to tell a story or present the information? Is the book written as poetry, in letters, as diary entries? Does the format encourage participation? Are there interactive elements, such as pop-ups or lift-the-flaps?]

Books such as: The Invention of Hugo Cabret, Pictures of Hollis Woods, Love, Ruby Lavender, Each Little Bird that Sings, The Gardener, Click, Clack Moo: Cows that Type, Out of the Dust, Bat 6, The Wanderer

Realistic characters

[Are characters portrayed as "round" and multi-dimensional? Do they remind readers of anyone they know? Are there some "good guy" and "bad guy" characters? Do the characters grow and change?]

Books such as: Gossamer, Gooney Bird Greene, Hattie Big Sky, No David!, Lily's Purple Plastic Purse, The Life and Times of Adolf Hilter, Pippi Longstocking, Harry Potter series, all books by Beverly Cleary

Strong, colorful illustrations/images that support and extend the story

[What medium or style did the illustrator use and why? What do the illustrations or photographs do to present and extend meaning? Does the written description create images in the reader's mind and what do these images do to help readers understand the story? How do the book's illustrations and/or language give life to the story or information?]

Books such as: Flotsam, Actual Size, The Invention of Hugo Cabret, Mama, The Gardener, Once Upon a Banana, Sitti's Secrets, Shabanu

From *The Wonder of It All: When Literature and Literacy Intersect* (Heinemann, 2007)

Some additional thoughts about choosing books – based on taste and quality:

“Every now and then a book comes along that makes me want to send a valentine to its author.”

--Katherine Paterson's review of Jean Fritz's *Homesick: My Own Story* in *The Spying Heart*, p. 38

“What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it.”

--J. D. Salinger

"In the end, the question of a good book is one of respect: respect for the truly fine work of authors who pay their dues and create works of lasting value, and also respect for the response of individual readers who cast the deciding vote on the worth of a book. There is, after all, only one list of good of good books that is completely dependable. The only list we can trust without reservation is our own."

J. Jacobs & M. Tunnell, *Children's Literature, Briefly*, p. 19

“The test of literature is, I suppose, whether we ourselves live more intensely for the reading of it.”

--Elizabeth Drew