

121

BOOKS

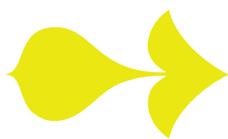
A VERY SUBJECTIVE GUIDE

to

THE GREATEST
KID BOOKS
OF ALL TIME

By *Andy Ward* who edits books
and *Jenny Rosenstrach* who writes them
With help from their daughters who love to read them

Why We Write About Books



THIS INTRODUCTION was hard for me to write. Not only because writing is always hard and there's a certain amount of staring-at-the-blank page and self-hating that has to happen before you can begin

to put something coherent down, but because the books you are going to read about here are more than just books to us. These books are, as Margaret Wise Brown would say, *important*. They are, in many ways, the story of our life as a family, not all that different in their memory-conjuring powers than a photo album or a diary or, God, one of those old home videos from when the kids were just babies and you had convinced yourself that, as exhausted as you were, you would somehow be able to preserve them this way forever. The books Jenny and I read to our kids carry that kind of weight for me. I can tell you where I was when we read each one of them: in a king-size bed in our hotel suite (free upgrade!) in Philadelphia, when Abby and I did a father-daughter weekend away, and we tucked into some Lemony Snicket after hitting the hotel pool and devouring the warm cookies they left on our nightstands; on the living room floor of our

Brooklyn apartment with a nine-month-old Phoebe, as we read and reread *Moo Moo Brown Cow* until one day, her first word—duck!—just kind of magically leaped out of her toothless mouth; in our town's public library, as Phoebe brought over a copy of *Meanwhile* by Jules Feiffer, the book that would set off a torrid comic book/graphic novel obsession that continues to this day, and that, with any luck, will endure for the rest of her life; in my old bedroom in my parents' house, with all the books from my childhood on the shelves, as the four of us laid on our backs on the bed and Jenny and I took turns reading *Miss*

Esta Maude's Secret, a book that belonged to my aunt Jane before it belonged to me; in the sticky, Cheerio-strewn, crime-scene-ish backseat of our leased sport utility vehicle (I still have guilt-pangs about the ways in which we violated that car), as we deployed *The Sneetches* to stave off waves of Abby's unhappiness on our first real road trip, as a foursome, to see the grandparents in Virginia; in Phoebe's second grade class, reading *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* aloud to 21 kids, and getting to those last transcendent pages and watching the weight of that story's message sink so completely into those hungry little brains. Seriously, I could

walk through all 121 of these books, one by beautiful one, and let the nostalgia pour forth. But I will refrain. Reluctantly.

I will say, though, that any list of favorite books is inherently subjective, and this one is no exception. Our criteria here: we simply picked books that we loved most, and that we think have a better-than-decent shot of turning your kids into geeked-out book-lovers and readers, too. Because of this, you might note some glaring omissions and odd, obsessive-seeming tendencies. These are, for the most part, intentional. We did not include *Goodnight Moon* or *The Very Hungry*

Caterpillar or *The Velveteen Rabbit* or *Blueberries for Sal* or *Harry Potter* or *Pat the Bunny* because we figured you don't need us to tell you that these are enduring works of art. You will also note a disproportionate number of titles by William Steig and Roald Dahl, and that is because we are disproportionately in love with the way they see and explain the world. Lastly, you'll find that we are heavy in the graphic novel department, but for a good reason: graphic novels did not exist when I was a kid, and I'm not sure I can ever forgive the world for that. There is, then, a certain element of vicarious living going on here and of making up for lost time. Any book list reflects the biases and tastes of the people who compile it, and I'm afraid ours is no different. I hope that means you won't enjoy it, or trust it, any less.

So: why do we write about books on Dinner: A Love Story, a website about family dinner? It's a valid question. All I can say is, we didn't set out to do any of this. I distinctly

Why Books? con't

remember a moment, when DALS was still in its infancy, that Jenny and I sat at the kitchen table and debated the idea of writing about children's books on a site that was all about, you know, dinner. Would it be weird? Would it fit? Would it be true to the DALS mission? The answers to those questions, as best as I can recall them, two years later:

1. Maybe a little.
2. Maybe kinda?
3. Yes, absolutely.

It would be true to the DALS mission because the DALS mission, as we saw it, was not, in fact, dinner. It was family. I'm talking family on the broadest, most basic level here; Jenny's salmon salad, to take just one delicious example, is about a recipe that you can pull off on a Wednesday night, and that tastes really good, but it's also—deep down, realizing that I am in danger of overstating things here—about the intensely good feeling that comes from giving your kids something they love, and from sitting around the table, enjoying it together, maybe even high-fiving each other because of its excellence. It's about pleasure and fulfillment and, really, isn't that what a story, properly executed, does too? Don't stories exist beyond those moments where your face is buried in the book? Don't they infect our lives,

as well? The bus ride home? Those last moments before sleep? Or even the dinner table? Yes, we decided. If we talked about these books—about which TinTin adventure was the best, or whether Kate DiCamillo was in the same league as Judy Blume—at the table, that was enough justification for us. Books would be part of the mission. (Also: we needed more stuff to write about. You can only come up with so many chicken recipes before a little piece of you dies.)

Here's another reason we write about books: we like books, and believe in them, and like it when other people believe in them, too. I'm not so good with remembering the everyday details of my life. I can't tell you the name of my eighth grade math teacher, or my freshman year dorm room phone number, or my cholesterol reading from my last checkup, or even who I had lunch with last Thursday (at least without checking my calendar first). Compared to Jenny, whose institutional memory for every moment and triumph and hiccup of her life is downright seary photographic, I'm like the amnesiac guy from *Memento*: I should probably start tattooing every inch of my body with the little stuff—i.e., the important stuff—before it fades away forever. You know what I do remember, though, with almost perfect clarity?



We picked books that we loved most, and that we think have a better-than-decent shot of turning your kids into geeked-out book-lovers and readers, too.

Finishing *The Trumpet of the Swan* when I was a kid. (I was eight years old. Or maybe nine. I forget!) I remember turning that last page, and not wanting it to end, thinking this was the best book I'd ever read, and having this vague sense that something was going on here that I didn't quite understand—at least, not enough to articulate it—except maybe to say that the words on the page, and the way they made me feel, were a whole lot more powerful than what I was getting from *Strange But True Sports Stories*. The last paragraph still crushes me:

On the pond where the swans were, Louis put his trumpet away. The cygnets crept under their mother's wings. Darkness settled on woods and field and marsh. A loon called its wild night cry. As Louis relaxed and prepared for sleep, all his thoughts were of how lucky he was to inhabit such a beautiful earth, how lucky he had been to solve his problems with music, and how pleasant it was to look forward to another night of sleep and another day tomorrow, and the fresh morning, and the light that returns with the day.

The cygnets crept under their mother's wings! Such a beautiful earth! The light that returns with the day! Dear, dear God. I would never forget this one. *The Trumpet of the Swan* was the book I would always think about when I thought about books from my childhood, the book I would use to forge an identity apart from the big brother I revered (he was a devoted *Stuart Little* guy), the book I always imagined reading aloud to kids of my own. Which, thirty years later, I did.

As friend-of-DALS and writer-extraordinaire George Saunders (see page 11) puts it, "A minute spent reading to your kids now will repay itself a million-fold later, not only because they love you for reading to them, but also because, years later, when they're miles away, those quiet evenings, when you were tucked in with them, everything quiet but the sound of the page-turns, will seem to you, I promise, sacred." Why do we write about books? That's why we write about books.

—Andy, April 2012

Meet The Reviewers

PHOEBE, age 10

➤➤ Easily the most prolific reader in the house. Seemed to figure out way before most that the secret to happiness is a good book, a comfortable chair and a curled-up dog. (Though she'd also spend all afternoon cozing up with a pharmaceutical pamphlet if allowed.) Favorite authors: George O'Connor, Jules Feiffer, Sharon Creech, Jeff Smith, Lemony Snicket, Pseudonymous Bosch, George Saunders. For reasons we have yet to diagnose, she refuses to read Harry Potter beyond *The Sorcerer's Stone*.

ABBY, age 8

➤➤ Had first mad love affair with a book at age three (see #19) and despite a generally sunny disposition, gravitates toward the dark genius of Roald Dahl, Lemony Snicket, and Phillip Pullman. Frequently wakes up parents at 6:00 am with questions like "What's the name of the second worst town in New Jersey?" Does a killer cockney accent.

ANDY

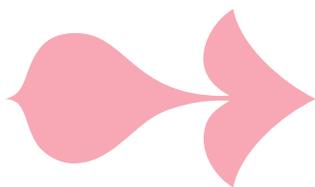
➤➤ Spends most of his waking hours editing books about things like the Mossad, brain science, and the processed food industry, but is frequently brought to tears by E.B. White and William Steig. Decided to have children because it would give him a good excuse to re-read *The Chronicles of Prydain* (#70). Is tempted to call b*ll\$#t on Curious George.

JENNY

➤➤ Author of two books about dinner. Would crawl inside any Little House book if she could (except maybe *The Long Winter*). As a kid, spent 90% of her library time in the Jill Krementz corner (#13). Writes bestselling children's books under the pseudonym J.G. Finch. Or at least plans to someday.

PLUS!

Guest appearances by David Sedaris, John Jeremiah Sullivan, George Saunders, Daniel Handler and Pseudonymous Bosch!



Key

We tried to list the books in roughly the same order that we have read them over the years. (Emphasis on the word "roughly;" Phoebe started with her *TinTin* books at age 5 and is still re-reading them at age 10.) You'll notice an age guide at the top of each page, plus a few icons next to each entry. This is to help you select books for your own kids. Here's what those icons mean.



➤➤ This book has lots of dialogue and opportunities for funny voices, so is ideal to be read out loud in classrooms, at birthday parties, and on sleepovers.



➤➤ We love all the books on this list but this one is especially lifechanging.



➤➤ This book is part of a series. In other words, you might not see your child for days—weeks even—if you hand them Book 1.



➤➤ This book is a comic book or a graphic novel.



➤➤ This book is a nice bridge between picture books and chapter books when your kid is just learning to read.



➤➤ Art is *craaaazy* good and would make an excellent gift.

1

The Important Book
by Margaret Wise Brown

➤ While everyone else is buying (the admittedly classic) *Goodnight Moon*, I firmly believe that if you're going to own one Wise Brown book, this should be it. A range of everyday objects—rain, a spoon, grass, a daisy—are demystified for kids in the most poetic, heartbreaking ways.

—Andy 🐰📖

2

Bruno Munari's ABC
by Bruno Munari

➤ By the time all is said and done, you'll probably own a dozen books in the A-B-C genre, but this one from the legendary artist and designer sets the bar high. What you'll remember about it: extremely beautiful, graphic watercolors on a stark white background and the little fly that appears on every page. It's not a coincidence you'll always find it in the gift shops at major museums. —Andy 📖

3

I am A Bunny

by Ole Rison
illustrations by Richard Scarry

➤ **What You'll Remember**
About It: The lush, very un-Busytown illustrations from the great Richard Scarry, and the simple, tender story chronicling a year in the life of a bunny named Nicholas, who sleeps in a hollow tree and dreams of spring. —Andy 📖

4

Moo Moo, Brown Cow

by Jakki Wood

➤ The watercolor drawings of a kitten's barnyard friends are delightful and the sing-songy rhythm of the counting theme ("yes kitty, yes kitty, two wooly lambs") is guaranteed to make it a winner with the under 12-month set. But it holds a special place in our hearts for a different reason: Our firstborn said her first word while reading about the "DUCK!" —Jenny

5

One Red Dot

by David A. Carter

➤ **What You'll Remember**
About It: The joy your child takes in this book of insanely intricate, three-dimensional, geometric pop-ups...until he or she finally gets his grabby little hands on it and destroys it. Until that moment, though, worth every penny. (If you like this one, also check out *Yellow Square*.) —Andy 📖

6

Hush Little Baby

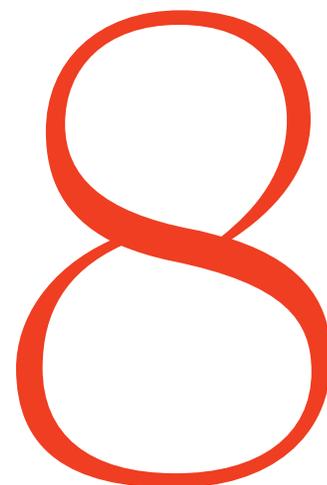
by Marla Frazee

➤ Our friends Sarah and Jay gave this book to us when Phoebe was just about three. The fable and the song won't be new to anyone but the artwork is beautiful and expressive and I found there was something pretty magical (for both parent and kid) about ending the day with an old-school lullaby. —Jenny & Andy 📖

**Thunder Bunny**

Barbara Helen Berger

➤ There's an author's message here that says everybody's special. And Thunder Bunny surely is one of those people. There is one line of this book that my family treasures and that is "I am THUN THUN THUNDER BUNNY!" —Abby
Parent Note: *Thunder Bunny is not a person, but Abby is right about the treasuring part. This is such a weird little book, told in poetic stanzas that force a young reader to make leaps about the story. A bunny is born blue ("Even her mother said 'oh my'") and ends up as part of the sky. Trust us.* 🐰

**Sally Goes to the Vet**

by Stephen Huneck

➤ There are six or seven in the series, but this and *Sally Goes to the Farm* were the ones we happened to own. Sally, the black Labrador retriever is horsing around with her friend Bingo the cat when she trips on a tree stump and hurts herself. She's rushed to the vet and describes various techniques for getting through the tough parts (shots) that we employ with our kids at the doctor to this day. (Picture something you love, like an ice cream cone.) The woodcut illustrations are stark and graphic, but the tone is warm and sweet. —Jenny 📖

9

Click Clack Moo*by Doreen Cronin*

➔ A group of cows get their hands on a typewriter hidden in a barn and use it to make demands of Farmer Brown. “The barn is cold, we’d like some electric blankets!” When he rejects their demands, the cows join forces with the hens to coordinate a milk and egg strike. We love the relentlessly logical farmer (“There will be no electric blankets. You are Cows and Hens!”), the pro-union stance, and the message: There’s power in the written word. —*Jenny* 🐮🐔

10

The Giving Tree*by Shel Silverstein*

➔ This book is about a boy who loves a tree. And the tree loves him. As the boy grows older his relationship with the tree gets shaky. Every now and then when he’s older he wants to borrow something from the tree. And every time the tree gives whatever she has to him. When he’s really really old, all he really needs is to sit down on her — by this point she’s a stump. This is a very interesting, inspiring book. I recommend it. —*Abby* 🌳🍷

11

Dahlia*by Barbara McClintock*

➔ A tomboy named Charlotte receives a frilly, lacey little doll as a gift and promptly sets about initiating this doll into the messy, non-frilly world of go-cart racing, tree climbing, and mudpie-making. What You’ll Remember About It: The finely detailed, almost Victorian illustrations, the kind of artwork you don’t see anymore. Much less girly than it appears, which is also part of the message. —*Andy* 🍷

12

Pierre: A Cautionary Tale*by Maurice Sendak*

➔ Poor little Pierre doesn’t care about anything—what he eats for dinner, whether he goes to town or stays home,

the love of his mother, the orders from his father. It takes a brush with death—inside a lion’s stomach, naturally—for him to learn that a total lack of engagement is, in fact, no way to live at all. —*Jenny*
(PS: It’s not that we like this more than the must-own, must-read-1000-times, *Where the Wild Things Are*, which we read to Phoebe every night from 6 months to 2 years old. But we’re guessing you bought that one for yourself the day you found out you were pregnant. Or received seventeen copies of it as a baby gift during the first year of your child’s life.) 🐾

13

Very Young Dancer*by Jill Krententz*

➔ The real-life story of a 10-year-old girl named Stephanie who plays Clara in the New York City Ballet’s *Nutcracker*, told in first person with large-scale documentary-style photographs. It was published in 1976, and when I ordered it for Phoebe just before her second birthday, I remembered every photo—Stephanie giggling with her best friend in class; the young ballerinas standing on their toes while fixing their hair in front of a mirror,

Stephanie flying through the air while auditioning for *The Nutcracker*—even though I hadn’t seen the book in 25 years. I read the other books in the series (*A Very Young Skater... Rider... Gymnast*) but none resonated quite like this one. When I wrote about Stephanie on the blog, it became clear that I wasn’t alone in my obsession. —*Jenny* 🎭

14

Do Not Open This Book*By Michaela Muntean*

➔ Stricken with writer’s block, a pig implores readers of his “unfinished” book to go away, it’s not done yet! We witness him “building” words out of letters in a workshop, pasting those words up on a wall to make sentences that add up to nonsense, and finally, in frustration, writing a mad lib-type page that readers can use to build their own story. All along the way, the grumpy author tries to convince us to stop turning the page, which of course, has the exact opposite effect. —*Jenny* 🐷

15

Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*by William Steig*

➔ A book, in some ways, about loss. But with a happy ending. Quick summary: Mama's boy donkey named Sylvester Duncan (how great is that name?) collects pebbles. One day, he finds a magic one: when you hold it and make a wish, the wish comes true. Not being dumb, he immediately sees the potential for good in this, wants to take it home to show his parents. Sees a lion on way home and, freaked and scared of being eaten alive, wishes he was a rock. Turns into rock. Unable to touch magic pebble and wish to be a donkey again, he sits there, inert: a rock. His distraught parents go looking for him. They look for him for a year. Parents eventually go for a walk and have a picnic on him. They find the pebble, place it on the rock, and Sylvester is reborn. Favorite little moment: "The sun was shining as if rain had never existed." — *Andy* 🐼 🌟 🌟

16

The Sneetches and Other Stories*by Dr. Seuss*

➔ You know how there are some days when the bedtime story feels like just one more thing to check off on the to-do list? I never felt this way about reading any of the stories in *The Sneetches*. And it's not like I had anything against *The Cat in the Hat*, but for me, Seuss is most magical when he's teach-

ing a lesson – and in between the deep aqua blue covers of this book you'll get three good ones: Treat people equally and fairly (*The Sneetches*); Be Flexible (*The Zax*); and Don't be afraid of something just because it's unfamiliar (*What Was I Scared Of*). —*Jenny PS: See: "Friend of DALs: George Saunders," page 11.* 🌟

17

The Paper Bag Princess*by Robert Munsch*

➔ A beautiful princess named Elizabeth uses her smarts to rescue her fiance, Prince Ronald after a fire-breathing dragon kidnaps him for his next meal and burns all her fancy clothes. Unfortunately, Ronald turns out to be an ungrateful loser and Elizabeth rides off into the sunset empowered and happy anyway. Good messages for girls, plus there's Elizabeth's winning line: "Ronald, your clothes are really pretty and your hair is very neat. You look like a real prince, but you are a bum." —*Jenny*

18

Rainbow Goblins*by Ul De Rico*

➔ What You'll Remember About It: The artwork. And I use the word artwork, as opposed to illustrations, because these aren't illustrations. They're jewel-like oil paintings on wood panels by a fine Italian artist, lending the whole thing the otherworldly feel of a children's book as imagined by a Renaissance master. Storyline is so-so, but the landscapes alone are worth the price of admission. —*Andy* 🌟

19

The Great Pie Robbery*by Richard Scarry*

➔ With its dastardly villains, gentle, low-level mayhem, and the amazing art of Richard Scarry, it's the perfect introduction to mystery genre. I think this is the only book Abby let us read to her between 2005 and 2006 (between 3 and 4 years old). A classic. —*Andy* 🌟

20

That Rabbit Belongs to Emily Brown*by Cressida Cowell*

➔ A queen will stop at nothing to own Emily Brown's much-loved stuffed rabbit companion. When bribery with jewels and riches doesn't work, she sends in the army, the navy, and finally, special-ops, only to

learn that there is no shortcut for earning the trust and love of a good friend. What You'll Remember About It: The inspired story-telling. It's hard to make something sound original, after all, but Cowell makes it look easy here. This was a huge hit whenever we would read it aloud for the kids on story day at kindergarten. Funny, unpredictable, creative, and whimsical (in the best possible, non-cloying way). And it only sounds better when read with a bad British accent. —*Andy* 🐼 🌟 🌟

21

Cricket in the Thicket*by Aileen Fisher*

➔ A collection of poems about nature, divided into four parts: Six Legs and Eight (aka insects), Four Legs and Two (birds and animals), Sunflowers High and Pumpkins Low (plants and flowers), Warm Days and Cold (the seasons). The poems are so wholesome it's almost painful. Take this last stanza from "The Turtledoves:" "Even when there's work to do, don't forget to nod and coo: 'Love to you.' and 'Love to you.'" —*Jenny* 🐼

22

What People Do All Day

by Richard Scarry

➔ I'm guessing that the overlap between kids who like dollhouses and those who like the large-scale illustrated books of Scarry is significant. In this one, Scarry takes us around Busytown where we see, among other exciting things, how a letter is mailed, how tonsils are removed, and where bread and wood come from. We even take a trans-oceanic voyage involving a dramatic rescue at sea. All the Scarry signatures are here: intricately detailed cross-sectioned buildings, slapsticky sideplots unfolding in the margins, raccoons flying planes ("Wrong way Roger!"), and, of course, Lowly worm turning up somewhere unexpected. I spent hours with this one when I was a kid and I was delighted to see it had the same effect on Abby. —Jenny 🍪

23

Scrambled States of America

by Laurie Keller

➔ So Kansas is talking to his best friend Nebraska one day when he realizes that he's bored sitting in the middle of the country never going anywhere or and never meeting anyone new. One thing leads to another and the two states are hosting a party for all fifty states, where, over a spread of New York cheesecake, Boston Baked Beans, and Idaho potatoes, they all agree to switch places to see a new part of the country. Excitement follows, quickly followed

by dismay—Minnesota, who switched with Florida, gets a sunburn, Hawaii, who was stuck with Kentucky and West Virginia, longed for peace and quiet, Kansas, in Hawaiian turf, is lonely out in the Pacific – and pretty soon, the lesson becomes obvious: It's good to seek adventure, as long as you remember your roots. Note: This book set off a U.S.A. map obsession with my 5-year-old nephew. —Jenny

24

Alexander and the Terrible Horrible No Good Very Bad Day

by Judith Viorst

➔ Poor Alexander is having a rotten day – the shoe store doesn't have the sneakers he wants in his size, Dad gets mad at him when he visits his office, he gets in trouble for fighting with his brothers even though it's not his fault. Instead of turning us off with what could easily come across as whining, Viorst instead reminds us that for kids, the little stuff is the important stuff. The little stuff is, in fact, everything. —Jenny

25

Gorky Rises

by William Steig

➔ An exploration of our dreams of escape, of transcending our circumstances and striking out...only to take comfort in home. A frog named Gorky mixes up a magic potion in his parents' kitchen one day, as any boy frog would want to do. He drinks it, and begins floating up into the sky. Up through clouds, through a rainstorm, into the heavens, where he is suspended, "like a coat on a hanger." Looks down on the world from whence he came, ponders life. Comes back down to earth, lands on 10 million year old Elephant Rock, which suddenly comes alive. Is reunited with his loving family. Favorite little moment: "What a magical, cloverous smell!" —Andy 🍪

26

Life Story

by Virginia Lee Burton

➔ Any book that begins like this: "Eons and eons ago, our sun was born, one of the millions and billions of stars that make up our galaxy, called the Milky Way," and, sixty eight pages later, ends like this: "The drama of Life is a continuous story, ever new, ever changing, and ever wondrous to behold"...is a book you're going to want to own. How we came to be is the eternal question, and Burton answers it efficiently, poetically, beautifully. —Andy 🍪

27

Meanwhile

by Jules Feiffer

➔ In the summer before first grade, Phoebe discovered this book at our local library. It's about a boy who loves comic books – loves them so much that he dreams he is living inside of one, fighting pirates and running from mountain lions and floating weightless through outer space. From there, it was a short trip to Phoebe trying to draw her own comic books (called "Mini Man," which drew, um, heavily from Feiffer), and then onto *The Adventures of Tintin* (#39). And *Amulet* (#61). And *Amelia Rules* (#50). And *Bone* (#54). And *Calvin and Hobbes* and *Garfield* and any comic book she can get her hands on. Five years later, Phoebe is still staring up at the world from the bottom of a deep, deep graphic novel hole. And it all started with *Meanwhile*. —Andy 🍪 🍪

John Jeremiah Sullivan

➔➔ When Jenny launched *Dinner: a Love Story* two and half years ago, I sent out a group email to all nine of my friends to help spread the word. She called me at work a couple of hours later, excited. “John Sullivan just registered on the site,” she said. Our first victim! John Sullivan, aka John Jeremiah Sullivan, is a writer, a funny person, and a kind soul. Have you heard of him? In 2011, he published a collection of essays, *Pulphead*, that got some halfway decent reviews. NPR called it “a collection that shows why Sullivan might be the best magazine writer around.” *The New York Times* Book Review called it “the best, and most important, collection of magazine writing since [David Foster] Wallace’s ‘A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again.’” Dwight Garner, reviewing it in the *Times*,

said it “put me in mind of one of Flannery O’Connor’s indelible utterances.” *Time* had this to say: “He’s the closest thing we have right now to Tom Wolfe, and that includes Tom Wolfe.” To which I will add: The fact that you can buy his book for less than I spent on a bunch of Swiss chard at the market last weekend is one of the great bargains, and investments, to be found on this earth. It’s hard to put into words just how sublime his stories are. John, in addition to being a *Dinner: A Love Story* charter member, was kind enough to offer up a few of his favorite childrens’ books for us. Of his picks, I can only claim to have read *The Giant Jam Sandwich*, but I’m here to say: if John Jeremiah Sullivan says these books are good and true, I’m going to believe him. —Andy



John's Picks

Here are four beloved books of my childhood, possibly out of print, but worth the while of parents to hunt down, especially if their youngsters are between, say, three and six. Written by an author who has actually prepared multiple DALs recipes (greatly enjoyed by family in cases where he didn't burn, mush them up, or accidentally serve them raw). P.S. DALs also turned me on to Don Pepino pizza sauce in a can. It's all I use anymore.
—JJS

- **The Giant Jam Sandwich**
by John Vernon Lord and Janet Burroway

A small town (Itching Down) is infested by wasps, to the point that folks can't deal. The townspeople have a meeting, where it's decided that they will build an enormous, field-sized jam sandwich, to trap all the wasps. Watching them do this, page after page... I can still feel the child excitement. They turn a swimming pool into a mixing bowl. They turn the town's biggest building into a giant brick oven. The pictures are bright but also detailed and subtle. If your kid loves books, it's a minor crime not to read him/her this one.

- **Shaggy Fur Face**
by Virgil Franklin Partch

A dog has a good master—and mistress, a little girl—but they're poor, and they can't keep him. They sell him, for

the cost of “ditch-digging britches,” to another man, who seems nice at first, but turns out to be a tyrant. That's when you get the story: of Shaggy Fur Face's escape from the new mean master, and his return to the old nice family (who are doing better financially, thank you). The line I've had in my head for 35 years now, that sustains me sometimes, is, “And he kept paddling south. And he kept paddling south.”

- **Billy's Balloon Ride**
by R. Zimnik

A boy is sick. His friends and relatives keep bringing him balloons, which his mother ties to his bed. Finally one night, there are so many balloons, he floats off into the sky. Great, gently suspenseful storytelling. Strange, haunting, somehow German-looking illustrations. The boy has a chubby red face and glasses. I'll never forget

him. Haven't seen this book since my own actual childhood but could, if I knew how to draw, recreate it page for page.

- **Lamont the Lonely Monster**

by Dean Walley and Don Page
Lamont is sad. He has no friends. He's too freaky looking. And so he searches for buddies. But in a twist that turns on its head the whole crap Nick, Jr. narrative of “Just act nice and normal, and you'll be popular and happy!”, Lamont's soul-mate turns out to be... an even scarier monster! Who's named, in a delightful Dickens nod, Uriah the Heap. Read your kids this book, and then when they're a little older, read them David Copperfield. Great way to teach them what “allusion” means.

28

Bread and Jam for Frances

by Russell Hoban

➔ I would of course recommend any book in the Frances series to young readers (especially those who are just growing out of shorter picture books) but this one seems especially right for the DALs reader. Frances, the beloved, beleaguered badger refuses to eat her mother's eggs, spaghetti and meatballs, or anything that's not bread and jam. So that's what her mom decides to serve her day after day, meal after meal. In addition to teaching a lesson to picky eaters, it contains a back-and-forth between Frances's parents that warms my heart every time I read it: Father: "If there is one thing I am fond of for breakfast, it is a soft-boiled egg!" Mother: "Yes, it is just the thing to start the day off right!" —Jenny 📖 🍌

29

Tiffky Doofky

by William Steig

➔ What it's about in a word: Faith. Trash collector dog named Tiffky Doofky stops, on his daily rounds, to get his fortune told. On this day, the fortune teller tells him, he will meet the love of his life. He goes on to meet the love of his life. Endures several strange encounters, and is almost strangled to death by a large boa constrictor named Dolores, only to be saved by a white poodle and snake charmer

named Estrella—who turns out, naturally, to be the love he's been looking for. And the daughter of a garbage collector, as well. Favorite little moment: "Why worry and get wrinkles? It would happen." Okay, another favorite little moment: "Madam Tarsal knew her onions after all." —Andy

30

Miss Esta Maude's Secret

by W.T. Cummings

➔ Who doesn't love a secret? The strange, hidden world behind that normal-seeming door, the earthbound newspaper reporter with the super powers, the little old lady with the...raging hot rod fetish? Esta Maude is a prim and proper school teacher who putters around town, very very slowly, in a small Model-T-ish black car—the Sunday Driver come to life. But at night, Esta Maude dons a racing helmet and goggles and climbs into what looks like a red Porsche 356 convertible, and races around town. And as she does, the absurdity of her obsession both delights kids and also keys them into what I think is a very crucial aspect of life: we are often much more interesting and complex than we let on, and even the fogeys—people, just look kids—still like to have fun. The story is great, but the art is the real star: it's that kind of early sixties, really graphic, red-black-and-white look that you see today and say, My God, why don't books look like that anymore? The downside: it's out of print and hard to find, an extremely unfortunately situation that some publisher out there should rectify. You heard me, publishers: Rectify! —Andy 📖 🍌

31

The Enormous Crocodile

by Roald Dahl*

➔ This is a book about a crocodile who lives in the muddy rivers of Africa. So. He decides that he wants to have a juicy, yummy child for lunch. It's a little bit complicated but not too much. I've read it a thousand times. Okay, that's it. —Abby 📖 🍌

* I am so sick of Roald Dahl. It's not that the depth of his imagination isn't enough to shame 99% of other novelists that have walked the earth, but for two years, Abby and I have been reading Dahl, and nothing else. We started with Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and James and the Giant Peach, then The BFG, which was similarly twisted and inspired, and then we just... kept... going. Does it sound like I'm complaining? I don't mean to. I'm sick of Roald Dahl, but I also love him. My only quibble is that, when you read nothing but Dahl for two years, some patterns and tricks reveal themselves. Kids, though: they adore those patterns and tricks, adore those sputtering grown-ups and invented words and disgusting moles on disgusting faces and the ominousness that seems to hang over everything, but that never completely descends. It's been quite a run, this Roald Dahl run. I'm glad we did it, but I don't want to do it again, and I'll miss it when it's gone.

32

Amos and Boris

by William Steig

➔ Sea-loving mouse named Amos builds a boat and sets sail. Destination: the other side of the water. (Love that.) One night, admiring stars on deck, he falls overboard. Endures a long night, abob in the "vast loneliness," confronts death, and is rescued and befriended by a whale of "abounding friendliness," named, of course, Boris. Amos climbs aboard Boris's back and they journey home, along the way becoming best friends. Years later, Boris is beached during a terrible storm. Amos finds him there, dying. Amos locates two elephants (just go with it) to help push Boris back to sea and save his life. Moral of the story: It's never too early to question your existence. Or to realize the value of a good friendship. Favorite little moment: "Morning comes, as it always does." —Andy 📖 🍌

33

What is God?

by Etan Boritzer

➔ Until my kids started third grade math, religion was always the hardest thing for me to explain to them. It doesn't help that I was raised Jewish (but celebrated Christmas—my mom is Presbyterian) and Andy was raised with no religion. I think I like Boritzer's book so much because it makes sense of our confusion—explaining the similarities and basic truths behind different religions and in the process, offering a blueprint for living an enlightened, morally-sound existence. Amazon lists this for kids 9 and older, but we read it to the girls starting at age 5. —Jenny

34

Brave Irene*by William Steig*

➔ A parable about perseverance. And an argument for being nice to your mom when she's not feeling so good. A dressmaker is sewing a gown for a duchess to wear to some kind of royal ball. But the dressmaker becomes ill and it falls to her young daughter, Irene, to deliver the dress. Problem: there is an epic, driving snowstorm, Irene is little, and the dress is a large thing to lug across a dark forest. An "ill-tempered" wind batters Irene, tears into her, but Irene is determined. She can't let her mother down. Then the dress is ripped from her hands, and flies away, stolen by the wind. She continues on, through the night, nearly freezing to death. She is lost. The dress, you'll be glad to know, is magically delivered. Irene is hailed by royal types as a "brave and loving" person. And she is reunited with her mother. Favorite little moment: "How could anything so terribly wrong be allowed to happen?" —Andy 🐉

35

Three Tales of My Father's Dragon*Ruth Stiles Gannett*

➔ I wish I knew this for absolute sure, but I think this was the first chapter book we ever read to Phoebe. She was in kindergarten, and I remember reading this trilogy—compiled in one beautiful hardcover volume—in bed, at night, and every time I would put it down and reach over to

turn off her bedside lamp, she would tug on my arm and ask for more. *Just two more pages!* Is there anything better than that, anything better than that moment when you first realize the hook has been set? Written by a sweet old grandmother with a crazy talent for invention and pure story-telling (and beautifully illustrated in grease pencil by her stepmother, Ruth Chrisman Gannett) this trilogy of stories about a boy named Elmer Elevator—who sets out with a talking feline companion to rescue a baby dragon from some bad guys who live a place called Wild Island—captivates but never, ever frightens. —Andy 🐉

36

Don't Bump The Glump*By Shel Silverstein*

➔ We are going to assume that you already own the more famous *Where the Sidewalk Ends* and *A Light in the Attic*. But this less-heralded, equally fun illustrated poetry collection was published in 1964, before both of those. All the trademark Silverstein characters show up here—"The Slurm," and "The Slithergadee," and "The Gletcher" and the hat-shaped "Ginnet" ("This is the quick-disgusting ginnet. Didn't he have you fooled for a minute?") and the watercolor il-

lustrations in the 2008 reissued version deliver. In Abby's words: "This book inspires me. It teaches me there's no reason why you should want your writing to be long or short. There's no difference between them because all you want to see in your writing is good."

—Abby & Jenny

37

Trumpet of the Swan*by E.B. White*

➔ The story of Louis, a trumpet swan, who was born without the ability to do the very thing that defines his species: trumpet. You already know how I feel about this book (see intro), but I have one more point to make: E.B. White wrote a buddy story about a boy and a swan, which is both completely unexpected and completely right. Imagine if Louis had been a dog named Buster. Chances are, he would not have been on this list. —Andy 🐉

38

Abel's Island*by William Steig*

➔ How I might summarize this: You are capable of so much more than you think. That, and it's amazing what we'll endure for love. Another Steig chapter book with a four-legged protagonist. Abel's a mouse, a trust fund dandy, newly married to a girl mouse named Amanda. One day, while picnicking (Steig loved a pic-

nic) on watercress, quail eggs, caviar and champagne (Steig loved food), a hurricane blows through (Steig loved storms) and snatched the scarf from Amanda's neck, prompting Abel to leave her (you get the idea re: Steig's obsessions) and rescue her scarf. He is, instead, swept away by the storm and washes up on a small island in a river, where a beautiful version of kid book *Survivor* unspools. Abel is forced, for the first time, to make his own way in life: to make new friends, to fend for himself, to find a new home and, at the same time, a way back to his love. Favorite little moment: "They toasted each other, and everything else, with a bright champagne which was kept cool in a bucket of ice." Favorite thing about that little moment: The word "bright." —Andy 🐉

39

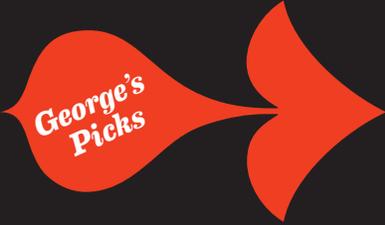
The Adventures of Tintin*by Herge*

➔ Whoever likes mystery stories and gangsters and people like that should read Tintin. These stories are about a little boy who tries to catch a lot of bad guys. He has a white dog named Snowy. Ummm. My favorite one is... I can't pick a favorite. Daddy, before you write this, tell the people that I thought of all this, okay? —Phoebe 🐉 🐉

George Saunders

➔➔ I remember exactly where I was when I read the short story, “Pastoralia,” by George Saunders: I was finishing lunch at my desk, back when I had hair and worked at *Esquire* magazine. As soon as I finished, I copied it and—this was 2000, remember—faxed it to a couple of the writers I worked with, no cover note attached. I thought it would inspire them. A few hours later, the emails started coming in: “I’m never going to write again.” “Jesus, man.” “Why would you do that to me?” Would I do this again? I would. Because great writing is inspiring and George Saunders is a great and inspired writer. He has the distinc-

tion of being the author of some of my all-time favorite grown-up fiction (my favorite is the story collection, *Pastoralia*, but really: you can’t go wrong), my all-time favorite kid fiction (*The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip*, see page 13), and some of my favorite non-fiction (check out “The Braindead Megaphone” sometime). He’s also a genius. (True story: he’s a winner of the crazy-prestigious MacArthur “genius” grant.) What I’m saying is, we love George Saunders, and his beautiful, generous view of the world. We asked him for his list of favorite kid books, and here’s what he sent us. We bought all of them. —Andy



George's Picks

Well, to start with, an apology/disclaimer. Our kids are grown and I've been away from kids' books for awhile, although I well remember the thrill, on a cold autumn night, of snuggling in with both our girls and feeling like: ah, day is done, all is well. Some of what follows may be old news, but hopefully one or two will be new to you. --GS

Let's start with **Kashtanka**, by *Anton Chekhov* and *Gennady Spirin* (Ages 9-12). I've written about this at length at Lane Smith's excellent website, but suffice to say it's a beautiful, simple, kind-hearted story with illustrations that are beautiful and realistic with just the right touch of oddness.

Speaking of Lane Smith, who is, to my mind, the greatest kids' book illustrator of our time, I'd recommend all his books but maybe particularly an early one, **The Happy Hockey Family** (Ages 4-8). It's funny and arch but at its core is a feeling of real familial love. With Lane, every book has its own feeling, and this one is sort of minimal and yet emotive—right up my alley.

Back when we were doing *Frip* together, Lane turned me on to **The Shrinking of Trehorn**, by *Florence Parrry Heide* (Ages 6-8). This is one of those books that stakes out its claim to greatness by showing something that, though harsh, is also deeply true: Grownups

often don't see kids and don't listen to them. The illustrations are masterpieces of 1970s cool, by the great Edward Gorey.

I love **The Hundred Dresses** (by *Eleanor Estes*, illustrated *Louis Slobodkin*, ages 7-9) for a similar reason. On this ostensibly small palette of a kid's book, Estes has told a deep unsettling truth, one that we seem to be forgetting; as Terry Eagleton put it: “Capitalism plunders the sensuality of the body.” Here, poverty equals petty humiliation, which drives a child, Wanda Petronski, to lie, and be teased for the lie, and then to create something beautiful—but the great heart-dropping trick of this book is that the other characters in the book discover Wanda's inner beauty late, too late, and she is already far away, and never gets to learn she has devastated them with her work of art, and changed her vision of the world. This is a book that, I think, has the potential to rearrange a child's moral universe in an enduring way.

George Saunders con't

I also love **Millions of Cats**, by *Wanda Gag* (Ages 4-8), for its eerie-funny Eastern European illustrations. I always mentally group this book with the equally Euro-Weird **Caps for Sale**, by *Esphyr Slobodkina* (Ages 4-8). After the latter, you will never see monkeys the same way again. Well, unless the way you see monkeys now as wily acquisitive thieves and plunderers who should all be put in jail forever, no bananas.

I love all *Dr Seuss*, especially **The Sneetches** (Ages 4-7) and the contained masterpiece, best if read in a quasi-Bela-Lugosi voice, "What Was I Scared Of," which contains these classic lines: "I said, 'I do not fear those pants With nobody inside them.' I said, and said, and said those words. I said them. But I lied them."

I also love **Seuss's Sleep Book** (Ages 4-7) which I believe contains the immortal line: "And that's why I'm bothering telling you this," which comes in very handy as a sort of efficiency-mantra in graduate creative writing workshops, as in: Let's not forget to always ask, "Why are we bothering telling us this?"

I'd also recommend, **The Legend of Sleepy Hollow** (on Rabbit Ears books, with audio tape featuring scary-as-heck music, great moody illustrations by *Robert Van Nutt*, and a masterful reading by Glenn Close) if you want to terrify your kids so much that they will never leave home or go outside in autumn and will totally forevermore avoid the Catskills. And pumpkins. And Glenn Close.

Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices, by *Paul Fleischman*, illustrated by *Eric Beddows* (Ages 7-12). This is very cool:

the poems here are presented in two columns. You take one part, the kid takes the other, and you do this sort of fugue-reading together. This, I promise, will bond you. Because even if done correctly, it's sort of embarrassing. Your kid will see what you would have sounded like if you'd gone Total Thespian. But also, the two of you will occasionally blunder into moments of real beauty, and look at each other like: Whoa. And then go: MOM! (or DAD!) Come hear this!

When I was a kid, my grandmother had a bunch of those **Little Golden Books** around and these left a real impression on me. Whenever I rediscover one, it sets off this synesthesia-like explosion of memories of Chicago in the early 1960s (Brillcream + lilacs + warm tube TV, etc etc). I especially remember **I Can Fly**, and **The Poky Little Puppy** and **Mister Dog: The Dog Who Belonged to Himself** (Ages 2-4). There's something about the design and colors of these things that you just don't see anymore - each one its own little unlikely beautiful universe. I think that from these I learned that art does not have to be strictly representational to be deeply and lovingly about the world.

Dear Mili, by *Wilhelm Grimm*, illustrated by *Maurice Sendak* (Ages 4-8), is a sad and deep little book about love and loss and time—a book that is not afraid to go toward dark, nearly intolerable truths. I think one thing I look for in a kids' book is an avoidance of a too-pervasive all-is-well outlook, mainly because it tends to be anti-literary. I mean, a happy ending is all well and good, but many of the books I've recommended here go at

it in a more complicated way, and don't flinch at ambiguity, assuming, correctly, that kids can not only tolerate complexity and ambiguity, but crave them, because in their hearts they know the world is big and scary, and crave sound counsel. Well, that and farting cats who wear suspenders.

And finally, in that spirit (the spirit of sound counsel, not the spirit of a suspender-wearing farting cat—or, as they call them in Germany, "Farten-Katz")—**Once There Was a Tree**, by *Natalia Romanova*, illustrated (again) by *Gennday Spirin* (Ages 4-7). A weirdly Zen eco-tale that doesn't rush

to any conclusion. And the illustrations make me want to move to Russia. In the nineteenth century.

Let me close by saying, from the perspective of someone with two grown and wonderful kids, that your instincts as parents are correct: a minute spent reading to your kids now will repay itself a million-fold later, not only because they love you for reading to them, but also because, years later, when they're miles away, those quiet evenings, when you were tucked in with them, everything quiet but the sound of the page-turns, will, seem to you, I promise, sacred.



I mean a happy ending is all well and good, but many of the books I've recommended here go at it in a more complex way, and don't flinch at ambiguity, assuming, correctly, that kids can not only tolerate complexity and ambiguity but crave them, because in their hearts they know the world is big and scary, and crave sound counsel.

40

Little House Series

by Laura Ingalls Wilder

➔ I think I have spent my entire tenure as a parent attempting to recreate the cozy, happy life of the Ingalls family—homesteaders making their way West in the late 1800s from the Big Woods in Wisconsin to the Great Plains of the Dakotas. It's impossible not to admire their togetherness, their graciousness, their resourcefulness (on page 1 of book 1, Laura is tossing a ball made from a pig's intestines) and finally, their family dinners followed by Pa's raucous fiddling. In addition to providing beautiful storytelling and can-do inspiration, the series proved to be an endless spring of teaching moments. *You're whining about getting more Polly Pockets?! For the first five years of Laura's life the only doll she owned was a corn cob wrapped in a dishtowel!* (Did I say teaching moments? I think I meant lecture moments.)

—Jenny 📖 🌟

41

The Magic Finger

Roald Dahl

➔ It's a long journey in a short book. The main topic is a girl whose neighbors like to hunt, and she so turns them into ducks with her magic finger. Whenever the girl gets frustrated or mad at a person, her magic finger automatically begins to work up. She was born with it. At the end, other neighbors start shooting ducks, and so it starts all over again. It's a combination of girls and boys. Both will like it. It's not like a girly book. —Abby 📖 🌟

42

The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip

by George Saunders

➔ **What You'll Remember About It:** Everything, really. The dreamscape illustrations by Lane Smith, the message about empathy and community and the importance thinking beyond yourself, the heroine's name (Capable—how great is that?), but really: this one, for me, is all about the writing and the humor. “She soon found that it was not all that much fun being the sort of person who eats a big dinner in a warm house while others shiver on their roofs in the dark. That is, it was fun at first, but then got gradually less fun, until it was really no fun at all.” You want a book that gets talked about at the dinner table? This is the one. Deeply wise, generous in spirit. Hard to overstate how much I love it. —Andy 📖 🌟 🌟

43

Owly

by Andy Runton

➔ Well, *Owly* is a picture book. There are no words, only symbols in a speech bubble. It can get a little sad, like when Owly loses his friend, Wormy. Maybe like up to second grade would like it. It's a comic. One of the greatest ones ever. —Abby 📖 🌟

44

Lunch Lady

by Jarrett J. Krosoczka

➔ I totally grew out of this last year, but I liked this series. It's about a lunch lady who is really a superhero but she pretends to be a lunch lady. She has all kinds of cool gadgets and an assistant who makes the gadgets and will go in disguise so she can distract the person they're fighting. Is it funny? No, not very. But you always want to know what's happening next. Boys might like it. It's probably good for seven-year-olds. On the back of each book, it says, “Serving Justice and Serving Lunch.” —Phoebe 📖 🌟

📖 🌟

45

Fantastic Mr. Fox

by Roald Dahl

➔ This is gonna be hard. I love this book so much. It's about a fox. A fox who promised his wife he would never steal a chicken or whatever, what was it called? Yeah, a chicken. No no no no no. It's like a bird? Never mind. But then he secretly goes on a mission to steal chickens with a mole, Kylie, and they have to avoid these three mean farmers, Boggis, Bunce, and Bean. One day, the farmers figure out that the fox is trying to steal their food, so they decide to dig up his home, which is under a tree. Question: how did they know

that he lived in a tree? Well, because he snuck out one night and they shot his tail off, so that's how they knew where he lived. This book has so many interesting emotions. No, no. So many interesting... parts.” On a scale of 1 to 10? 10. —Abby *Abby says: “If there was a 20, I would give this book a 20.” But you can give it whatever you want. “Then give it a 20!” 🌟

46

The Animal Family

by Randall Jarrell

➔ One of our finest poets doing the storytelling, and a young Maurice Sendak providing the woodcutty illustrations? Seriously, what could be better? A perfect little fable, starring a hunter and a mermaid, about the comforts of family. “Below them the white-on-green of the waves was lined along the white shore—out beyond, the green sea got bluer and bluer till at last it came to the far-off blue of the island. There were small seals on the seal rocks, and the little gray spot out above the waves was a big black-and-white osprey waiting for a fish. But no fish came, and it hung there motionless. Everything lay underneath them like something made for them; things got smaller and smaller in the distance but managed, somehow, to fill the whole world.” Now that's writin'! —Andy 📖 🌟

47

A Barrel of Laughs, A Vale of Tears

by Jules Feiffer

➔ You already know how we feel about Jules Feiffer in our house (see #27). In addition to being an iconic *New Yorker* cartoonist and the man who kicked off our daughter's comic book obsession, he also happens to be the author of some really memorable chapter books. Chief among them: the exquisitely-titled *Barrel of Laughs*, the plot of which is too unconventional and playful to explain here. (The reader is part of the narrative, I'll just say that much.) This one breaks open, for young readers, the endless possibilities of storytelling. —Andy 🍌

48

Glister

by Andi Watson

➔ This book is really hard to describe. It's a graphic novel about a troll and a little girl who lives in a house. The house runs away and gets a different room every single day. The bird poops on a guy's head. I don't know. It's kind of complicated to read at first, but you get used to it. It's not scary, just a teensy bit sad. Tomboys would like this. On a scale of 1 to 10? 10. —Phoebe 🍌

49

Matilda

by Roald Dahl

➔ Matilda's a little girl who loves to read books, but her father and mother don't want her to read books. They want her to watch TV *allllllllll* the time. But one day, she feels like, 'I want to go to school.' So her mom drops her off at this school, and then she meets a girl who tells her about the principal [scary voice] Mrs. Trunchbull! She's a really really mean person, and she talks in a really mean way. I can't describe it. Mrs. Trunchbull's daughter is Mrs. Honey, but you only find that out at the end. Don't write that, daddy! You'll ruin it! This book is about how Matilda has a hard life, but is an amazingly smart girl. It's for people who are interested in reading. I don't even want to talk about the movie. —Abby

50

Amelia Rules

by Jimmy Gownley

➔ If your kid likes really really crazy boy characters, get these books. They're starring Pajama Man, Reggie, Kyle, Ed, and a little girl named Amelia who just moved into a new town. Her parents are divorced, and she lives with her aunt and her mom. Her aunt is a rock star. Boys and girls will like it. On a scale of 1 to 10? 10. —Phoebe **Parent note:** There are a few references—and a game of spin the bottle, where Amelia wants to shake hands instead of kiss—that you might want to know about. 🍌 🍌

51

Tales of Desperaux

by Kate DiCamillo

➔ This is one of my most favorite books. It's...sort of like a sad and happy book at the same time. I'd call it adventurous—but it makes you think, too. The plot is complicated. It's about a mouse who's, like, different from all the others—his name is Desperaux. He's different because he's not afraid of anything and he can read. One day, Desperaux talks to a human—the penalty for that is death in mice laws. So he's lowered down to the rats—that's what happens when you do something like that, and the rats eat you. They're scary. I don't want to give it away. Haven't I given you enough? Put it this way: it's a good ending. The book is better than the movie, and that's saying something because that movie is good. —Phoebe

52

Baby Mouse

by Jennifer Holm

➔ Funny! Baby Mouse likes pink and hearts. She has everything in the shape of a heart. She has a clock that's in the shape of a heart. But she hates dodge ball. She hates fractions. And her best friend is Wilson the weasel because she's a mouse. She wants to be the queen of the world. It's silly and Baby Mouse always says "Typical." —Phoebe 🍌 🍌

53

Laika

by Nick Abadzis

➔ Sad, very sad at the end. It's about a dog who goes through a lot of trouble and has mean owners but also finds puppy families and lives with them. One day, a dog catcher catches her and she goes to this place where they send dogs up in space to test the very first Russians to go up into space. The grown-up girl really likes Laika and she doesn't want her to go up into space, and she cries when Laika goes. It's how we treat dogs and how they should be treated a lot better, cause we treat them like barking babies. —Phoebe 🍌

54

Bone

by Jeff Smith

➔ Bone is about three bones who are alive—and no, they don't look like those doggie bones. They have eyes and mouths and they walk into a desert, and then a locust swarm separates them. Then one of the bones wanders into a valley and finds a girl who helps them. It's funny because the other bone is named Phoney and he's tromping in the mud and he eats a stick. Hee hee hee. That's good. The art is very detailed. Watch out for the mean guy, the Lord of Locusts. —Phoebe

Parent note: The depth of imagination here is astonishing. These books — nine volumes plus a prequel (see #55) — occupied Phoebe for a good three months. Adults will like them, too. 🍌 🍌

Daniel Handler

➔ You should have seen the look on Phoebe's face when I told her that Daniel Handler was going to do a book round-up for DALs. It's how I imagine my own face would have looked if, back in 1981, my dad had walked through the door and said, "Hi everyone, yeah, long day at work. I'm just gonna go upstairs and put my bathrobe on. Oh, and Andy: the Rolling Stones are going to play at your birthday party this year." Daniel Handler—and how many people, other than close relatives, can you say this about—has had a genuine, rock star-like impact on our oldest daughter's life. The thirteen books he wrote, under the pseudonym Lemony Snicket (see #92), are the books Phoebe might well remember most when she's old and forty. First of all, she read them all in about two weeks, curled up on the corner of our family room couch, and we basically didn't see or hear from her until she was done. We're talk-

ing serious, deep transportation. Second of all, these books give you faith in the human imagination. They're so beautifully, joyously done. In some ways, they're the books that opened her up to the value of darkness in a story, and of the way good and evil, and life and death, can coexist. "Imagine lemonade," Phoebe said, when I asked her to describe what the books are like. "Only with barely any sugar." Which is exactly how I would have put it, happy as I was to discover these books, too, after so many years of unrelenting cheeriness and pointless plot-iness and overweening cutesiness and, as Phoebe suggests, way too much sugar. (I'm not naming names.) You can never accuse Daniel Handler of ever using too much sugar. We are huge Daniel Handler fans here at DALs, so we were honored that he agreed to get on the phone with us and tell us about his favorite picture books. —Andy



Daniel's Picks

● **Dillweed's Revenge**
by Florence Parry Heide
This one was written a long time ago, and Edward Gorey was supposed to illustrate it, but he pulled a jerk move and died. It's really remarkable, the story of a young man with terrible parents who eventually finds ways to deal with them—through monstrous acts of witchcraft and menace. It was finally illustrated by the amazing Carson Ellis, who's probably best known for the album covers she does for her husband's band, The Decemberists. The art has a kind of abstract, Rothko-y, wet quality to it. It's old-fashioned Victorian meets the dark unplumbable depths of the human soul. For kids!

● **I Want My Hat Back**
by Jon Klassen
I assume this book is for children, but I have yet to find a child who liked it. But I like it a lot. It's about a bear who wants his hat back, and my wife and I sit around and read it together. The thing is, no matter what your favorite book is as an adult, you can never read that book fifty times to see if its greatness sustains. Try that with *Anna Karenina*. On the other hand, you can read this book fifty times, no problem. And I have. And it sustains. This book taps into the kind of focused anxiety you have when a material possession of yours has gone missing. It just happened to me this morning with a CD—and really, how replaceable is a CD

these days? All I had to do was go burn another one—but I couldn't rest until I knew that it was in my house. It taps into that anxiety, and all its comic and tragic possibilities. It ends in death, too. This doesn't automatically make a story better, of course, but a little death goes a long way. I think children like death in books for the same reason adults like death in books. For some reason, we've developed different rules about what's appropriate in books for adults versus books for children, and I find that tiresome. Do we do that with nutrition, for example? Then again, my son is frightened of almost everything. He's seven, and he's scared of everything. He asks me once a week what the Lemony Snicket books are

Daniel Handler con't

about. When I tell him, he just looks at me.

- **Here Comes the Cat!**

by Frank Asch and Vladimir Vagin

This one was re-published by McSweeney's. It was actually first published in the 80s, and it's a collaboration between a Russian artist and an American writer. It's for very young children—I think there's only one sentence in it. There's this relay race of Paul Revere mice warning that the cats are coming, the cats are coming, but when the cat arrives, he's pulling a huge cart of cheese. I love that. The art has a kind of cool, Russian, Constructivist feel to it, with really strict lines. You get to see all these great locations and city streets, which look Soviet to me, but I'm sure they look American if you're Soviet. The theme of the book is right up my alley, too—the idea that the positive and negative aspects of excitement are close together, opposite sides of the same coin. Which feels kind of Cold War-y, too.

- **The Three Robbers**

by Tomi Ungerer

Unbelievably beautiful book. If anyone ever makes an odd, contemplative movie from a picture book again, the way they did with *Where the Wild Things Are*, they should start here. The drawings are beautiful and dark—I mean dark in the light sense—and it's about three robbers who meet to discuss their heists and operate in the dead of night. One day, they come across a carriage and in it is a little girl, and they decide they're going to start kidnapping children. It has one foot in terror—and one foot in the pleasure—of kidnapping. Let me explain: Yes, it would be horrible to be

kidnapped in the middle of the night, UNLESS when you get there, it was this marvelous place full of wonder. Is it scary? I don't think so, I mean... even my terrified son loved it. I just love picture books that manage to capture that hushed quality of a child's view of the night, that feeling when you walk out of your room to go to the bathroom, and step out into that dark hallway...

- **Mrs. Armitage: Queen of the Road**

Written and illustrated by Quentin Blake

The majority of Quentin Blake's reputation is from illustrating Roald Dahl's books, but he's a splendid talent all by himself, and this book shows it. It's about a woman who's driving this ramshackle automobile around, and the automobile keeps falling apart, and yet, she remains full of vim and vigor. What looks like a story about making mistakes turns out to be a story about souping up your car, which I love. I just brought a copy of it to an adult writing class, actually, because the students were suspicious of my speech about how it can be incredibly liberating to take a hatchet to your work; well, this illustrates my point, because as she loses all the parts to her car, one by one, she gets happier and happier, and more free. Visually, it definitely looks like the Quentin Blake we all know and love. It's a great example of a picture book that has no scary content in it at all, but it isn't saccharine, either, so I'm pleased to have it around the house. It's a book that has no scary things, and yet, it's a book that I can stomach.

“

I just love picture books that manage to capture that hushed quality of a child's view of the night, that feeling when you go to the bathroom and step out into the dark hallway...

55

Tall Tales (the Bone prequel!)

by Jeff Smith with Tom
Sniegoski

➔ If you like *Bone*, you'll love this. It's mostly about Big Johnson Bone, who was a gigantic hero in Boneville. It's about when Smiley is teaching Boy Scouts and it's funny because he's always taking orders from a big hat! Seriously! And he eats a sandwich that has peanut butter and pickles on it. It doesn't have, um, Fone Bone or Phoney. I like the monkey named Mr. Pip. He's *fuuuuuuuny*. He talks in his sleep about joining the circus. —Phoebe 🐼
Parent's note: *Whoever this Tom Sniegoski dude is: We like you. We were initially skeptical when we saw your name, next to the great Jeff Smith's on the cover. But you won us over. We believe! For Phoebe to say this is one of the best Bone books yet: the highest possible praise.*

56

Matthew Looney and the Space Pirates

by Jerome Beatty, Jr.

➔ This was my brother's favorite book, growing up, way back in the 1970s. Matthew Looney is an astronaut who blasts off from his home (on the moon, of course) in search of the planet known as Free-

holy. En route, he encounters an evil space pirate named Hector Hornblower, and falls for a princess named Annalunkus. If your kids like *Star Wars* (or any other quirky vintage space entertainment, like *Battlestar Galactica*), they'll like this. —Andy

57

Brain Camp

by Susan Kim, Laurence Klavan, and Faith Erin Hicks

➔ This one is *verrrrry* creepy, but it's also cool. I think this is at least the sixth time I've read it. I can't put it down. It's about kids who go to boarding school and stuff like that. Then a strange man comes one night and takes two of them to a camp called Camp Fielding. One day, while they're there, the other kids' eyes start getting weird, like really wide and strange. Yeah. And they figure out that the camp is using kids to hatch these weird alien birds in their brain. It might sound scary, but it's actually very interesting. Beware of kids vomiting up birds! —Phoebe 🐼
Parent Note: *When Phoebe says she read this six times, she is being modest. I think she's read this 20 times the week she got it.* 🐼

58

The Indispensable Calvin and Hobbes

by Bill Watterson

➔ Positively funny! Calvin's always getting in trouble in school and he's always doing bad on tests and he hates a girl

named Susan and he throws snowballs and acorns and stuff like that at her whenever he can. You can read *Calvin and Hobbes* comic books anywhere. There are lots of other *Calvin and Hobbes* books, too, but this is my favorite. He's a six-year-old, but he knows so many big words. He makes you laugh out loud and inside. —Phoebe 🐼
Parent's note: *This book kicked off an epic love affair with a Gund stuffed tiger that Phoebe had been given by her uncle Nick when she was born...and had never looked at twice. Suddenly, she carried it with her everywhere, put it in her school backpack, and it has occupied a prime piece of real estate, right next to her pillow, every night for three years. We're talking Velveteen Rabbit status.* 🐼

59

The Twits

by Roald Dahl

➔ This book is so funny! You know how it looks short? Well, it has so many stories in it. It's about a woman and a man who hate each other. First the old man puts a frog in the old lady's bed, but then the old lady gets mad. Very mad. So she makes him spaghetti, but she doesn't use pasta. She uses worms. Then, he gets very mad at her, and this is funny: every day when she went to sleep, he would take her cane and make it a little bit longer each night, so it would look like the lady was shrinking. He said to the old lady, 'Oh no, it looks like you've got the shrinks!' But then she's like, 'How do I cure the shrinks?' It's the kind of book that has funny fighting between people. I don't think a four-year-old would understand it. —Abby

60

New Brighton Archeological Society

by Mark Andrew Smith and
Matthew Weldon

➔ This one is very adventurous. It's about four kids who discover that the parents have some club devoted to, like, destroying this fairy guy who wants their library. The library has plenty of important information. So they battle all kinds of yucky monsters and stuff and two Chinese vampires who are their uncles. Then they find out the fairy guy is their grandfather. I like it. It's impossible to stop reading! —Phoebe

61

Amulet

by Kazu Kibuishi

➔ A real adventure story. It's about a little girl with a very very very powerful stone called an amulet. This stone talks to her and warns her of danger, but it's hard to control it. So far, there are three books in the series. In the first one, the girl is in a car crash. Then they find an old house. Then the little girl named Emily finds the stone, which is the amulet. It's kind of scary. It'll give you the chills, but you also get excited when you read it. —Phoebe 🐼 📖

62

Flight Explorer Vol. 1

edited by Kazu Kibuishi

➔ There are a bunch of different stories in here. There's a story by Kazu Kib..ish..umm, a section from a book he wrote called *Copper*. He's the guy who wrote *Amulet*. One of my favorite stories in here is called "Perfect Cat." It's about an Egyptian cat who gets jealous of another cat her owner gets, and it's a little bit funny because it includes a dung beetle. If you like *Amulet* and *New Brighton Archeological Society* you'll like this. —Phoebe 🍷

63

Smile

by Raina Telgemeir

➔ This is a true story about a girl named Raina who has an overbite and a little bit of gum damage and she knocks her permanent two front teeth out. She goes through a lot of trouble at the dentist and her friends make fun of her. It takes place a long time ago, when the author was little. In the book, she's in sixth grade. Boys might like this, but it depends on their style. On a scale of 1 to 10: 10. —Phoebe
Abby rating: 11 (And, yes, that's

out of 10. As Abby says, "I love it because I'm lucky not to have that tooth accident." This coming from someone who had two molars yanked only a few days before this was reviewed.)

Parent note: We realized before it was too late (Abby had already devoured the book 3 times) that there was a page or two of teen talk (body changes, boy crazy girls, etc) that might have been confusing and maybe a tad inappropriate for a seven-year-old. So just be warned. 🍷

64

The Invention of Hugo Cabret

by Brian Selznick

➔ I don't know how to do this one. It's about a little boy who uses his dad's notebook to try to make this machine called an automaton and there's a man across the street who makes toys, and the two things are somehow connected. You just have to read it. I'm not telling you more. The art is AMAZING. It even won the Caldecott medal. It makes me feel like I'm actually there. And P.S. It's not really a comic book.

—Phoebe

Parent note: Wowwowwowwowwow. This book is humbling and transporting and outrageously beautiful. I want to marry this book. Phoebe is right: It's not really a comic book. It's genre-defying. It's like the most beautiful flip-book with words that you've ever seen. (And therefore not surprising that it was turned into an Oscar-winning film directed by Martin Scorsese.) 🍷

65

Wonderstruck

by Brian Selznick

➔ If you liked #64 you'll like this book. I can't really explain it, because this author makes his books really complicated, but it's about a deaf boy and a deaf girl. It makes you think about how hard it must be to be deaf. It's half pictures and half words; the girl's story is all pictures and the boy's story is all words. The writer puts so much feeling into his stories. And there's a surprise at the end, which is always good. On a scale of 1 to 10? 9. —Phoebe
Parent note: Why not a 10? Because Phoebe said it wasn't "quite as good" as *Hugo Cabret*. 🍷

66

Dominic

by William Steig

➔ The lesson here: Life can be hard, but there's a crazy amount of beauty in it, too. This is a chapter book, 146 pages of pure joy. Dominic is a "lively one," a dog who sets out on his own - with a righteous ensemble of hats and his trusty piccolo - to see the world. Along the way, he runs into a roving band of bad guys, known as the Doomsday Gang. They try to lure Dominic over to the dark side. This gang, it turns out, has been stirring up a lot of bad juju out in the larger animal world, and Dominic sets out to make things right. Includes an unbelievably beautiful moonlight serenade of mice carrying Japanese lanterns. That's right. Favorite little moment: "One could not be happy among the good ones unless one fought the bad ones." —Andy 🍷

67

The Unsinkable Walker Bean

by Aaron Reiner

➔ This is a mysterious, strange, creepy book about a little boy named Walker Bean whose father is rich and whose grandfather is sick. His grandfather would tell him stories about being at sea, stories from when he was little, and stories about these sisters who look weird—like lobster crab-creatures, in my opinion. The reason his grandfather is sick is because he once looked at a stolen, enchanted skull—if you look at it, you get horribly sick and cursed. Walker's grandfather tells him to go out to sea to return the skull to its owners, but then...I'm not telling you what happens next. It's exciting, and a little sad.

—Phoebe 🍷

68

The Far Side Gallery 1

by Gary Larson

➔ These comics are, well, each picture is its own comic. They're not stories. They're jokes. I understand most of them, but not all. If I have a question, I ask my parents, but sometimes they can't even figure it out. But the other ones are really funny. —Phoebe
Parent's note: Phoebe discovered this on the book shelf in my childhood bedroom in the house where my parents still live. I didn't think she'd be into it. But she now has three volumes and reads them incessantly and is, as they say, DEEP in the s@&t. 🍷

David Sedaris

➔➔ For seven years, I was lucky enough to have the chance to work with David Sedaris. Those years were some of the best and most fun I ever had, professionally—and personally, too, as David proved as kind and generous a person as he was talented as a writer. Not long ago, we had him over for dinner and he arrived with gifts for the kids: bottle-shaped candles, magnets that looked like leaves, Japanese note cards, and two books: *Strange Stories for Strange Kids* and *It Was a Dark and Stormy Night*. They're two parts of a remarkable three-part series, called *Little Lit* (see #92), which was edited by Art Spiegelman (of *Maus* fame) and his equally talented wife, Françoise Mouly. As much as the kids liked their candles and magnets, it was the books that really stuck: particularly since one of them contained a story by David, illus-

trated by Ian Falconer. The simple yet genius idea of these books was to pair well-known writers and well-known illustrators and then...ask them to create something strange and wonderful. The table of contents alone offers some absurdly high-density creativity: Jules Feiffer, Lemony Snicket, Maurice Sendak, Neil Gaiman, William Joyce, Richard Sala, etc. David's story is called "Pretty Ugly," and it is both strange and wonderful. Here's how Phoebe describes it: "It's about a girl named Anna Van Ogre, and she lives in a world where everything is backwards. Like, you're pretty if you're ugly. These people don't look like people; they kind of look like trolls mixed with pigs." It sounds weird, and it is. And that's also why our kids love it. They wanted to ask David some questions and he was kind enough to oblige. —Andy

Phoebe: How did you get the idea for "Pretty Ugly?"

David Sedaris: I like the idea of a world turned upside. In the U.S., for example, straight teeth are considered attractive while in Japan a woman is considered much prettier if her teeth are jumbled and crammed into her mouth at odd angles. In Africa, it's considered beautiful to have holes the size of dinner plates in your ears while in the US, most of us find that pretty creepy. It all depends on which culture you were raised in. In the ogre culture of "Pretty Ugly," being cute means being hideous, and in ours it's just the opposite.

P: How did you get the famous Ian Falconer to illustrate it?

DS: It was Art Spiegelman's plan to combine writers with illustrators. Well, his and his wife's plan. Her name is Françoise Mouly. She is the art

director of *The New Yorker*, and a co-founder of the group that put the book together. That said, Ian and I already knew each other. He did the sets for the original New York production of "The Santaland Diaries." I remember going to his apartment one day and seeing these great drawings of a pig. He told me that he had a 3-year-old niece named Olivia, and that he was thinking of writing a children's book about her. That book, of course, became *Olivia*.

P: What was your inspiration for this story?

DS: I'd never tried anything like this, so when Art invited me to do it I said yes. "Pretty Ugly" was my third or fourth idea. I don't now remember what the other ones were, but this one ultimately made more sense. When I was young, whenever a kid made an ugly face, his parents would warn

him that if he didn't quit, his face would stay that way. I like it when the girl turns inside out. It seemed that that might be a fun thing to draw.

P: What kinds of books did you like when you were a kid?

DS: I liked biographies of famous people. It didn't matter who it was, if he was famous, I'd check his biography out of the library. What always surprised me was the person wasn't born famous, or born knowing he'd be famous.

Abraham Lincoln or George Washington of Daniel Boone — they were just normal people until lightning struck.

And now, questions from Abby:
Abby: Did you tell Ian Falconer what to draw,?

DS: I'd never tell Ian what to do. He's the artist, and because he puts a lot of thought into what he does, I can assume that his visual ideas will be bet-

ter than mine. Ian illustrated my last book, *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk*, and again, I never made any suggestions.

A: What's the moral?

DS: When nothing else works, you need to go that extra mile.

A: Do you think all kid stories should have morals?

DS: It's nice when it works out, but I don't know that a moral should always be imposed.

Some stories are simply meant to be entertaining, and not necessarily enlightening. Does *Stuart Little* have a moral? I don't remember.

A: Why don't you do more kids books?

DS: I just did this one because Art asked me to. Aside from you and Phoebe, I don't know too many children. What people your age want is a complete mystery to me. That's why I gave you those candles shaped like bottles. What do I know?

69

Astronaut Academy: Zero Gravity

by Dave Roman

➔ This is one of my favorites. I read it like three times on vacation. It's about a school in space and it's cool: they have anti-gravity drills and time-bending watches and things like that. Everything that's impossible on earth is possible there, pretty much. It's funny and adventure-y. My favorite character is Miyumi San because she has a watch that lets her travel in time and because she acts tough. She's like a tomboy. On a scale of 1 to 10? Half 9, half 10. —Phoebe

Parent note: I assume this means 9.5. ^{POW!}

70

The Chronicles of Prydain

by Lloyd Alexander

➔ What You'll Remember About It: The kind of sad fact that, despite all the Newberry Awards and the covers touting "three million copies sold," Lloyd Alexander probably did not get the respect he deserved for this richly imagined, thrilling series—the first series I ever remember tearing through, the first fictional world I remember not ever wanting to leave. If your kid likes Tolkien or Rowling, give this a shot. —Andy ^{POW!}

71

Hereville: How Mirka Got Her Sword

by Barry Deutsch

➔ Okay, this is a tale of knitting and pig-chasing. Weird, right? It's the story of an Orthodox Jewish girl named Mirka who has nine brothers and sisters and she's always wanted to fight dragons and trolls. I know all this sounds really strange, but if you read it, it'll make sense. This is a good book for people who like adventure. It makes you want to go grab your own sword and start fighting some trolls! —Phoebe ^{POW!}

Parent note: Gets our vote for best tagline on a cover ever: "Yet Another Troll-Fighting 11-Year Old Orthodox Jewish Girl!"

72

Rapunzel's Revenge

by Shannon, Dean, and Nathan Hale

➔ This one I like because it shows that girls can be tough, too. Rapunzel is like half-cow-girl, but she's also got a little princess in her. She's named after a vegetable: rapunzel, which is a kind of leaf. She meets an outlaw boy named Jack—who's a bit like the guy

from Jack and the Beanstalk—and they team up and do all sorts of crazy adventures. The kind of people who might like this book are the kind who like stories that show what girls are made of. —Phoebe

Parent note: There's some projection going on here, for sure. ^{POW!}

73

Calamity Jack

by Shannon, Dean, and Nathan Hale

➔ This is the sequel to *Rapunzel's Revenge*, except it's mostly about Jack instead of Rapunzel. It's about a boy who was born to scheme. He stole things, and thought of plans and did all kinds of stuff. Sometimes he would get a little out of hand. It's also about giants who grind human bones to make flour for their bread. Jack and Rapunzel have to beat the giants and save the town. It's definitely thrilling, I'll say that. The end? Well...you have to read that for yourself. —Phoebe ^{POW!}

74

The Yellow M: Blake and Mortimer

by Edgar P. Jacobs

➔ This will definitely remind you of *Tintin*, except it's a little bit more fantasy-ish. It's a complicated story, and you may not get it the first few times you read it. I didn't. But when you do get it, it's a real interesting, cool story.

Blake and Mortimer are detectives. There's lots of other books in this series, too. It's like *Tintin* because they solve mysteries and use guns and, well, if it was a movie, it'd probably be rated PG. The artwork is pretty good.

—Phoebe

Parent note: Phoebe's a tough critic! This art is beautiful, very retro-y and noir, and very—as Phoebe says—*TinTin*. If it was made into a movie, you'd expect to see a young Orson Welles starring in it. ^{POW!} ^{POW!}

75

Esio Trot

by Roald Dahl

➔ So a boy lives, um, wait... start over. No, stop. Okay. Well, an old man lives on top of an old lady in an apartment building. He likes the old lady. She has a turtle named Alfie and she's so proud of him, but she wants him to grow. And the old man thinks of a plan: He wants to do something to make her turtle grow, so he goes to the pet store and gets a turtle that's a couple inches bigger but looks exactly like Alfie, and he switches the turtles the next day. Anyway, at the end of the book, the old lady notices that Alfie has grown *verrrrry* big and she's really happy. The old lady and the man get married and he never tells her about the trick he played. I like this book because the idea is like totally unexpected. And the title is really 'tortoise' backwards. It's like a code." —Abby

Parent note: One of his minor works, for sure, but a total pleasure and can be read in two nights.

76-78

Marvel's The Wonderful Wizard of Oz Book 1

by L. Frank Baum (adapted by Marvel for Eric Shanower and Skottie Young)

➔ Well, I bet you've seen the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. But this story might be a little different. It's about a girl named Dorothy who has a dog named Toto and they were supposed to help in the basement, but Toto went under the bed. So the tornado came too near and they blasted out into the yard. This book is special because the pictures are marvelous, it's better than the movie, and last of all, it's a comic. —Abby Scale 10.

Parent Note: Again, like the *George O'Connor* series (#TK), this one is unbelievably gorgeous and spooky and cool. Capital A art. Both kids loved it when they first picked up at ages 8 and 7. 🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟

The Marvelous Land of Oz Book 2

by L. Frank Baum (adapted by Marvel for Eric Shanower and Skottie Young)

➔ The artwork is very cool. It's about a little boy named Tip who makes a pumpkin head that he names Jack Pumpkin Head. Tip lives with a mean witch. One day, the witch wants to turn him into a marble statue, so Tip runs away with his Pumpkin Head and then he meets all these crazy people and they go to the Emerald City. This is the second book in the Oz series. It looks like the artist just scribbled something down with a pencil, but it's cool. I tried to draw it, but it's impossible to. Kind of like Quentin Blake. My favorite character is the saw horse because he's funny. —Phoebe

Abby's review: She likes to look at the pictures, but claims that "nothing so much happens in it," story-wise. I don't want to say our daughter is wrong, but... she's wrong! 🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟

Ozma of Oz Book 3

by L. Frank Baum (adapted by Marvel for Eric Shanower and Skottie Young)

➔ This is the third book in the series. There's a chicken who's a girl and her name is Bill. Her name is Bill and she's a girl! And there's a robot named Tick Tock, and a little girl named...Dorothy! You know Dorothy. Remember, this is the third book in the *Wizard of Oz* series. What else? Well, look at that. That artwork is awesome. I'd say, if you like good comic books, you'll love this. Yeah. The story continues in the next book, but it isn't out yet!" On a scale of 1 to 10? 10. —Phoebe

***Parent note:** Such a cool series, such weird, otherworldly artwork. I liked, but did not love the L. Frank Baum books. I love these.

🌟🌟🌟🌟🌟

79

City of Spies

by Susan Kim, Laurence Klavan, and Pascal Dizin

➔ It's about Nazis or whatever they're called, and a little girl and a little boy who try to figure out who is a Nazi and tell the police officers so they can put them in jail. But they mess up a lot. It's a great book. I've been reading it a lot lately because I love it. —Phoebe
Parent Note: I know, I know. Nazis? But we promise: it's kid-friendly, very Tintin-ish.

80

Otherwise Known as Sheila the Great

by Judy Blume

➔ This book got us through a sick spell one spring. Abby had a fever and we passed the time by on the patio eating Saltines and reading the entire book together over the course of two or three days. I don't want to say this is the only way to enjoy the classic (a spinoff from *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*), but it offers a perfect illustration of why it's so damn fun to read Judy Blume: Her words go down so easy. A five-or six-year old has no trouble getting lost (and forgetting about a stomach bug) in the story of insecure city girl, Sheila, who spends the summer in the country trying to convince her new girl pals how great she is. Only to realize this isn't the best way to go about making friends. —Jenny 🌟

Pseudonymous Bosch

➔ Every Saturday afternoon, I go for a long run, and Phoebe bikes alongside me, and this is what she says to me the minute we hit the trail: “Ask me a question.” Which is really her way of saying: Ask me a question about a book I am currently reading, and I will summarize the plot for you while you run, which will distract you from the agony of exercising. Some of these summaries are quick, easily dispatched. Family lives on prairie, endures terrible storms, long winters, and much suffering, but survives. Girl deals with embarrassing dental issues, gets braces, endures much teasing, but survives. Handsome man has superpowers, saves world. Recently though, things have gotten a little more involved. “Tell me about this Pseudonymous Bosch guy,” I say to Phoebe, as we set out. “What are those books about, exactly?” Phoebe pedals for a bit, thinking. “Hmmm,” she says. “That’s hard.” “Try,” I say. “Well,” she says, “they’re basically about the five senses: smell, sight, feel, hearing, and taste. There’s a lot of chocolate in the third book. And there’s this group of evil guys called the Midnight Sun, who are trying to figure out The Secret,

which I think is about, uh, immortality. The main characters are named Cass and Max-Ernest and... it’s hard to explain.” She’s often still explaining when we stop, forty-five minutes later.

I first encountered the Pseudonymous Bosch books a few years ago, on one of those gray winter days when the town library is closed and you’re sitting in your house, dying of claustrophobia and getting on each other’s nerves and it’s too cold to do anything outside, so you end up—jail break!—camping out in the kids’ section at Barnes and Noble, trying to avoid spending money on Care Bear sticker books. I found a book and picked it up based entirely on the title (*The Name of This Book is Secret*, see #90) and the beauty of its cover. I flipped to the back flap, to see who was behind it: based on the author bio alone, I wanted to have it. Or, better, I couldn’t wait until our kids were old enough to read a book this weird and fun. Two and half years later, we finally found ourselves in the summer of Pseudonymous Bosch. He was kind enough to take the time to do a round-up of his favorite mysteries for kids. —Andy

As my readers well know, I am a secretive author, desperately afraid not just of the public spotlight but even the smallest penlight. (It’s the batteries—I have trouble replacing them in my remote location.) Nonetheless, I occasionally find myself making appearances at glamorous venues such as elementary school cafeterias and the backs of chain bookstores, most of which seem to close permanently a few days later. Why a phobic character such as myself should choose to expose himself like that is a question best left

to my psychiatrist. (I mean, my publicist). I have, however, learned to come armed with certain provisions to protect myself against the prying public. They are, in no particular order: large scratch-proof sunglasses, emergency chocolate rations, a discreet handheld sound-effects machine (sirens, gunfire, broken glass, farts, etc.), and book recommendations.

Why book recommendations? Because “What books do you recommend?” is almost always the one hundredth question I

get (the first ninety-nine being What is your real name?). Because my books are meant to be mysteries, I usually recommend mystery books. And because my audience is meant to be younger, I usually recommend adult mysteries. I figure somebody else has already recommended The Hardy Boys or Harriet the Spy, so instead I mention Edgar Allan Poe or Dashiell Hammet or Dorothy Sayers (the latter author being a particular favorite of mine when I was a kid). But I fear that you—the reader

of this blog—are most likely an adult. Thus, out of sheer perversity, and also because it was requested, I am going to recommend a few children’s titles that have lately held my interest. One thing that is wonderful about young readers is that they still retain the power to be mystified. As an adult, I find that children’s books help restore my sense of mystery. Hopefully, these books will do that for you, too. And if you have an actual child by your side, all the better. —PS

Pseudonymous Bosch con't

Pseudonymous's Picks



As an adult, I find that children's books help restore my sense of mystery. Hopefully these books will do that for you, too.

● *The Circus in the Mist* by Bruno Munari (only available used)

This almost wordless book was one of my favorites when I was very young and I still love to look at it. Written and illustrated—perhaps the best word is created—by the Italian designer and book-magician Bruno Munari, *The Circus in the Mist* takes the reader on a journey into a “mist,” which is represented by translucent vellum pages. Spare yet playful, each page teases you into turning to the next. In the middle of the book, you are rewarded with a circus, and all its fun and familiar acts, but at the end you are returned to the mist, as if to say that the mysteriousness of the mist itself—not the circus it hides—is the true wonder.

● *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* by Chris Van Allsburg

Soon this unique picture book will be very well-known because an anthology of

stories inspired by it was just recently published, but when I discovered it by accident in a used bookstore I felt as if I'd stumbled on an artifact of a lost civilization. I don't want to ruin the book for you by describing it in detail, but briefly: it consists of a series of strange and enigmatic drawings with provocative captions that are meant not to explain but rather to elicit explanation. In a sense, the reader is the author of the stories that the pictures tell.

● *The Something* by Natalie Babbitt (only available used)

Alas, I did not read this one as a child, but a friend (whom I will not name for her own protection) gave me a copy a few years ago and I treasure it, not least because this particular copy is inscribed by the author—to somebody else! This diminutive picture book tells the story of a monster who is afraid of the Something—a mysterious creature that enters through his bedroom window

at night. Who or what the Something is is the question that animates the book. As in all good mysteries, the answer is at once surprising and inevitable.

● *Nate the Great* by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat

Before there was a middle grade graphic novel series called *Big Nate* there was a series of illustrated early-reader chapter books called *Nate the Great*. Sadly, I didn't know about *Nate the Great* until the other day when, to my delight, somebody handed me the first *Nate* book. In the book, the eponymous kid detective endeavors to find his neighbor's missing painting—this being a painting that the young neighbor herself painted, you understand. Fittingly, the key to resolving the mystery lies in knowing what color two particular colors make when they are mixed. I imagine this would be a perfect first chapter book for a budding young reader—or maybe a second, after *Frog and Toad*.

● *The Egypt Game* by Zilpha Keatley Snyder

The last book I wrote in *The Secret Series*, has an Egyptian theme; so I read this 1967 middle grade novel very recently, looking for ideas to steal. Like many Newbery books (of which this is a lesser-known example), *The Egypt Game* offers a combination of mystery

and fantasy that is grounded in “realistic” family life. (If you suspect I have been studying Newbery winners hoping to discover a hidden formula, well, I'm going to take the Fifth on that.) A multicultural cast of Berkeley, California kids secretly band together to participate in exotic Ancient Egyptian rituals and solve a creepy neighborhood mystery. What fun! Something for you and your kid to read after your copies of *A Wrinkle in Time* and *From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* are all worn out.

● *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie: A Flavia de Luce Mystery*

by Alan Bradley
Officially a book for adults, *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* stars one of the most mordant—and hilarious—pre-teen heroines ever created. Flavia is a brilliant, half-mad chemist bent on revenging herself against all who cross her—most of all her own sisters. I loved the book when I read it last year. I think I would have loved it even more when I was eleven years old, although I might have had to open a dictionary a few times along the way. A great book for a precocious kid whose reading level has way beyond kids' books—but who still enjoys a little childish mischief. I refer, of course, to myself.

81

Magic Trixie and the Dragon*by Jill Thompson*

➔ This is about a little girl named Trixie, and she's a witch but a good witch. She accidentally turns her baby sister named Abby into a dragon. Then her sister flies to the circus and then Trixie flies after her and she and her pet cat try to find her sister and turn her back into a baby. First to second grade kids would like this. It's funny because she has to make the poop in her baby sister's diaper disappear.

–Phoebe 🍌🍌🍌

82

Olympians*by George O'Connor*

➔ People who like Greek myths should read these. They're very adventurous books. The pictures are great! Hmmm. If I look at the pictures before I go to bed, then I get good dreams. On a scale of 1 to 10? 10 –Phoebe

Parent note: *These are incredibly beautiful books and O'Connor plans to unveil a series of 12, one on each Olympian God. Which means, at any given moment in our lives these days, there is one sitting on our Amazon pre-order list, even when it's months and months away. At this printing, there have been four: Zeus, Hera, Hades, and Phoebe's favorite: Hera, which she'd like to give a special call-out to. (See#84.)*

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83

D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*by Ingrid D'Aulaire*

➔ I like Greek myths. This one has every single Greek myth tale in it (pretty much) and the illustrations are really cool, too. My favorite myths are Artemis and Apollo, because they're twins and they have these cool arrows. Apollo's arrows were made to cause painful death, like the rays of the sun. Artemis's arrows were made to be as soft as moonbeams, and brought painless death. That's how they write in the book. They make you think. –Phoebe

84

Hera*by George O'Connor*

➔ You just read about Zeus and Athena, so know about George O'Connor. Well, I waited and waited for this book for about a year. It took forever. Anyway, Hera is one of Zeus's wives and she has a temper, I'll tell you that. Hera is a very jealous wife. She wanted Zeus to only have her as a wife, but Zeus would still try to marry

mortal girls down on Earth. So one day, he married a lady named Alcmene. Together, they had a baby named Hercules. Do you like Hercules? Well, Hera has got a lot to do with him. Hercules's cousin sends him on twelve labors and Hera tells his cousin what sort of labors she wants Hercules to do. She picks really hard, dangerous things. One is to defeat the hydra, a monster with a lot of heads. There are many others, and they're all in this book. In the end, Hercules is lifted to Olympus and Hera grows to like him. –Phoebe 🍌🍌🍌

85

Holes*by Louis Sachar*

➔ Stanley Yelnats, a lonely, overweight kid whose family has been "cursed" for generations (thanks to his "no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather") is falsely accused of stealing sneakers and sentenced to a detention center called Camp Green Lake. Here he is forced to dig holes from morning til night. Though the sadistic warden insists the act "builds character," Stanley quickly figures out he and his fellow prisoners are just pawns in a self-serving, evil plot to dig up something mysterious and valuable. Even though the plot moves fast and was gripping enough to be turned into a movie, just to summarize it does the book a

disservice. What's special here is the dark, moody world that Sachar creates, leaving you to always wonder: Is this real or not? –Jenny

86

I Was a Rat*by Phillip Pullman*

➔ I think that Phillip Pullman is an unbelievably talented writer. This book is a very odd book. If you like odd books, pick this up from the shelf. If you don't, leave it there. It's about a boy who is a rat and we don't know how, but the boy somehow then turned back to a human. What kind of story is this? I would call it an "odd-ball" story. He has so many adventures. He gets treated horribly, then nicely. Then he's treated horribly again. Basically he is a confused child. But we are not confused readers. On a scale of 1 to 10, I would give it a 10. –Abby

Parent Note: *I wish I could translate this for you, but I am completely at a loss. All I know is that after reading this one, she has declared Phillip Pullman a favorite writer. That's gotta be a good sign.*

87

Walk Two Moons

by Sharon Creech

➔ This is a book about a girl named Sal. Her mother has died, and she is driving with her grandparents to see her mother's grave. On the way, she and her grandparents are sharing stories. It's really sad and that makes it interesting to read. This is my favorite Sharon Creech book. It's my favorite because it makes you feel something. Inspired. I get lost in her books when I'm reading them. —Phoebe 🌟

88

The Mouse of Amherst

by Elizabeth Spires

➔ So there's a mouse named Emmaline who lives in the house of Emily Dickinson, who's a very famous young poet apparently. (Well, she *was* young.) One day Emmaline gets one of Emily Dickinson's poems. She writes her own poem on the back and she finds out that she, too, is a poet. She puts the poem outside of her door. Emily Dickinson finds it, looks on the back and sees the poem! She writes another poem and puts it right next to the door. And they keep going back and forth, back and forth. It's my favorite book because it's so sweet. —Abby

89

The Van Gogh Cafe

by Cynthia Rylant

➔ Abby declared this her favorite book recently. (Well, if we're going to be technical about it, she said it was actually tied for first with *The Mouse of Amherst*.) I haven't read the book but the way Abby tells it, *Van Gogh Cafe* is about all the magical things that happen in a restaurant in a small town called Flowers, Kansas. "But the thing is," she says, "nothing really happens. It's just so beautiful. Each chapter is a new story about something really interesting like seagulls." She would also like to point out that Cynthia Rylant (don't make the mistake of calling her Cynthia Rowley, as I have) is a Newbery Medal winner.

—Jenny

90

The Secret Series

by Pseudonymous Bosch

➔ The summer of 2011 in our house will forever be known as the Summer of Pseudonymous Bosch. At some point during the week school let out, we handed Phoebe the first in the mystery series (*The Name of This Book is Secret*) and then pretty much didn't see her again until September. She came up for air only to request Book 2 (*If You're Reading This it's Too Late*), Book 3 (*This*

Book is Not Good For You) and Book 4 (*This Isn't What it Looks Like*). Book 5 was not out yet, thankfully. As Andy mentioned in the Pseudonymous Bosch interview (see page 22), the plots are elaborate, but all four of them deal with uncovering the secret of, well, we still can't quite describe it. As Phoebe says, "The Bad Guys think it's immortality." We're not saying anything else. This series is a natural next step for the kid who is feeling bereft after finishing *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. —Jenny 📖 🌟

91

Tales from Outer Suburbia

by Shaun Tan

➔ A story collection jammed with insanely intricate artwork that a kid (and a grown-up) could get lost in; lonely characters who, in only a few pages, you end up caring about deeply; and absurd scenarios (i.e. a diminutive alien comes to stay with a family on earth) that you accept immediately. This opening line from "Alert But Not Alarmed" should tell you all you need to know: "It's funny how these days, when every household has its own intercontinental ballistic missile, you hardly even think about them." Tan is an Oscar-winning short director who we hope to hear a lot more from. N.B. This book should win some kind of award for the most mysterious, intriguing cover ever. Google it! —Jenny 📖 🌟

92

A Series of Unfortunate Events

by Lemony Snicket

➔ If you think about it, Lemony Snicket is magical. Because the way he tells the story, once you read the first word you are praying it won't ever end. This is not like a Rainbow Fairy book. This has meaning. It's like if you take a puzzle and you think there's only way one way to put it together. But Lemony Snicket finds a way to put the pieces together in a way you'd get a whole different picture. It's too interesting! [Jenny: Well should we summarize it -- say it's about three orphans named Violet, Klaus, and Sunny?] No! You don't need to, just read the book! (For Lemony Snicket's book picks, see page 15) —Abby 📖 🌟

93

Little Lit

by Art Spiegelman & Francoise Mouly

➔ We already sung its praises (see page 19), but this really is a fearsome collection of talent concentrated in one convenient place -- and we've sold more copies of this than any other book we've sold on DALs. If your kid is remotely into comics and/or (the good kind of) weirdness, look no further --Andy 📖 🌟

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Please see
"FRIEND OF DALs"
sidebars on pages
8, 11, 15, 19 and 22.
Picks 122-200: Check back
with us in 2022