

The Best Books for Kids

Gift Choices that Can Open Up Worlds

by Sandra Yeyati



goodluz/AdobeStock.com

Helping children learn to read and love books is one of the greatest parental endeavors. Many kids learn their first words after hearing the adults in their lives sing a lullaby or tell them a nursery rhyme. “Building a child’s vocabulary is the key to reading, and rhymes, singing, word games, synonyms, homonyms and rap are great places to start,” says Claudette McLinn, executive director of the Los Angeles-based Center for the Study of Multicultural Children’s Literature and former librarian, teacher, school administrator and children’s bookstore owner.

A child’s first reading experience will likely involve a picture book. “What’s powerful about picture books is that the illustrations and text intertwine,” McLinn explains. “You can read them aloud together. As the child looks at the artwork, the adult can ask, ‘What is that?’ And the child can use their imagination while you teach them to observe, articulate and start the reading process.”

To encourage childhood reading, it’s helpful to have a variety of books around the house and to set aside reading time every day. “It costs nothing to check out a pile of 25 books at the library, take them home and try them,” says Maevé Knoth, a librarian at Phillips Brooks School, in Menlo Park, California. When buying books, she suggests consulting

librarians and booksellers for recommendations, as well as relying on book awards such as the Newbery or Caldecott medals, and on book lists compiled every year by reputable organizations and committees, notably the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association.

Choosing books for kids should always start by discovering what their passions or interests are and then finding a good book on that subject, says McLinn, adding that encouraging children to browse the shelves and choose their own books is an empowering exercise that builds self-esteem and a love of reading. Whether it’s dinosaurs,

[Sidebar is optional.]

cars or the stars and planets, there's a kid's book about it. "Although fiction is important early on because it increases imagination, nonfiction books help kids learn new information and understand the role of the table of contents, the glossary and index, and informative diagrams," she says, adding that she prefers award-winning nonfiction books because they've been vetted for accuracy.

"Kids often gravitate towards books that are a little bit less challenging," Knoth says. "While I have no objection to those popular books, which are lots of fun, they're not going to give kids a new way to think about themselves or the world. I want my children to have consequential reading experiences with books that offer new points of view where kids can live in someone else's heart and mind for a little while. I want them to know what it might be like to live in a different time period or to grow up in China."

According to Knoth, a great children's book will include an engaging character that has an experience, prompting them to change and grow. "I want it to be well structured and beautifully written, with setting, point of view and all those elements that fit together to create a theme and give you a literary experience," she explains. She looks for nuanced books that invite kids to use their imagination and find their own way. "The reader might be young, but they're not dumb. They just haven't had lots of experiences yet. If a book concludes with one narrow solution to a child's problem, then I would say it's not that useful or successful," says Knoth, a frequent contributor to *The Horn Book*, a resource for children's book reviews and articles.

McLinn believes that kids should be exposed to a diversity of authors and illustrators that explore the lives of all cultures. "We live in silos with the people in our group, and we don't know anything about other groups," she explains. "When you read about other cultures, you learn that we are more alike than we are different. We may eat different foods, wear different clothing and have different customs, but you find out that it's not scary. Kids love to read about heroes that they can identify with and become their friends. Children are

into social justice and fairness. As a child, I loved biographies. I wanted to read about great people and what made them great so that maybe I could be great like them."

Sandra Yeyati, J.D., is a professional writer and editor. Reach her at SandraYeyati@gmail.com.

CHILDREN'S BOOK AWARDS

Newbery Medal: Tinyurl.com/Newbery-Medal-Award

Caldecott Medal: Tinyurl.com/Caldecott-Medal-Award

American Indian Youth Literature Awards: Tinyurl.com/American-Indian-Award

Pura Belpré Award, celebrating Latino culture: Tinyurl.com/Pura-Belpre-Book-Award

Coretta Scott King Awards, showcasing African American values: Tinyurl.com/Coretta-Scott-King-Awards

Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature: Tinyurl.com/Asian-Pacific-American-Award

Sydney Taylor Book Award, portraying the Jewish experience: Tinyurl.com/Sydney-Taylor-Award

CHILDREN'S BOOK LISTS

Rainbow Book List, presenting LGBTQIA+ viewpoints: glbtrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks

Best Books by the Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature: csml.org/best-books-2020

Cooperative Children's Book Center Booklists, various topics: Tinyurl.com/ccbcBookList

Association for Library Service to Children Book Lists, various genres and topics: Tinyurl.com/alscBookList

Notable Children's Books by the Association for Library Service to Children, identifying the best of the best in children's books: Tinyurl.com/alscNotableBooks

GROW YOUR BUSINESS

Secure this ad spot!

Contact us for special ad rates.

555-555-5555



natural
awakenings