Don’t Miss These: The Best Books of 2014 and What to Look forward to In 2015

Nonfiction


Story of the true Ivan who was captured in the Congo as a baby gorilla and brought to America where he would eventually spend 27 years in a concrete box at a mall until children and customers protested. He lived out the rest of his life at the Atlanta Zoo with other gorillas, grass, etc. He died in 2012. A great book to pair with Applegate’s fictional piece about the gorilla and to share with the National Geographic documentary, Urban Gorilla.


Cece shares the story of a childhood illness (meningitis) that would render her deaf and the struggles and insecurities centered around school and making friends.


Bolden searches out the truth about a young African American girl living in Indian Territory who has made a fortune when the oil companies find oil on her land but has gone missing.

Burns, Loree Griffin. *Handle with Care: An Unusual Butterfly Journey*. Photos: Ellen Harasimowicz


Just when you think you’ve learned everything you need to know about butterflies, you haven’t. Burns visits a Costa Rican butterfly farm, one of many that provides butterflies to museums, science centers, etc. for exhibits. During this visit, she takes the reader through the life cycle of the butterfly and the process of “farming” them. Great back matter.


Looks at the world of microbes in an easy to understand format.

The tale of almost 100 Army and Navy nurses who were taken prisoner in the Phillipines during WWII.

Fleming, Candace. The Family Romanov: Murder, Rebellion, and the Fall of Imperial Russia. New York: Schwartz & Wade Books, 2014. Gr. 8-12, History/Social Studies (Russia, WWI, Communism)—947.0830922 Fle
Details the fall of the Romanov Family of Russia, the peasant overthrow of government, and the rise of Lenin and Communism.

Gr. 2-5, Science
Highlights the story of animal adaptation, specifically the last longneck tortoise who died in 2012 at 100 years old.

Highlights the time when the US was experimenting with nuclear bomb testing and knowingly chose to test in the Bikini Islands, putting thousands of lives at risk. Highlights the aftereffects of this testing on island inhabitants even today.

Jarrow, Gail. Red Madness: How a Medical Mystery Changed What We Eat. Honesdale, PA: Calkins Creek, 2014. Gr. 6-12, Health, Science, History—616.393 Jar
Explores Pellagra, how the disease swept across the U.S. and how scientists worked to discover its cause and its cure.

Explores the work of the scientists who are studying the animals and vegetation that survived and appear to have thrived in the exclusion zone of the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown which occurred in the 80s.

Sandra Markle follows several scientists in their discovery that the once highly populated brown bats are dying at an alarming rate and their quest to discover the reason and a cure.

In her trademark beautiful illustrations, Morales provides a tribute to Frida Kahlo, her art and the way that she lived her life. Although it falls under biography there are no details in the book and the afterword has very few.


Gr. PK-1, Science (Camouflaging)—591.4 Mun

Informative text about the different habitats that animals live and camouflage themselves in. The text is perfect for this age group. The wow factor are the photos and the reader’s attempt to find the animals disguised in their habitats. Fun book for kids and adults.


Multicultural (African American, Middle Class), might would have to push as Marilyn Nelson is not necessarily as well known as some other AA authors—811.54 Nel

In a series of poems, Nelson shares the experiences of her childhood in a military family and how she came to know and love poetry.


Biography, Multicultural author and illustrator (African American)—B Cash

Shares the early years of Johnny Cash’s life and his struggle to become the performer/man we all know today. Written in free verse.


Isatou Ceesay saw how garbage, and especially plastic bags, were wreaking havoc on her community. She came up with a clever plan to rid the community of the waste and help women raise funds for themselves and their community.


The author reflects on his childhood battle with stuttering and his love of animals (particularly big cats). With animals is the only time Rabbinowitz does not stutter and this ultimately leads to his career in animal research and big cat conservation. The emotion that is conveyed, particularly the adults’ responses to him is very powerful.


Explores the great white sharks that swim into the Farallon Islands once a year to feed on the seals there. This is one of very few opportunities that scientists get to look at sharks up close.

Raina reflects back on her childhood, her desire for a sister, and the consequences of actually having one. Along with flashbacks, covers a summer when the pre-teens are on a road trip with mom and brother to Colorado for the family reunion.


Traer photographs nocturnal creatures and provides information about their habits and habitats.

Wittenstein, Vicki. *For the Good of Mankind? The Shameful History of Human Medical Experimentation*. Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2014. Gr. 7-12, **Cross-Disciplinary—174.28 Wit**

Wittenstein covers the history of medical experimentation in the United States and internationally. She reveals many shocking cases and horrific injustices done to children, minorities, and the disabled. Brings up amazing questions. Good back matter and invites discussion with questions for each chapter.


**Multicultural (African American), Beautifully written in verse**

Woodson’s memoir of growing up in the south and the north during the Civil Rights Movement.

**Historical Fiction/Historical Picture Books**


This is the story of Richard and Mildred Loving, a white man and an African American woman who were arrested in Virginia because they married one another. This is the story of the lengthy amount of work it took to strike down laws making interracial marriage illegal in the Supreme Court.

A young African American girl dreams of becoming a ballerina but doesn’t know if she will ever be allowed to dance on stage with white dancers; that is, until she and her mother see Janet Collins, the first African American prima ballerina to dance at the Met Opera House.


An allegorical tale about a favorite villager and his student who played the hurdy-gurdy and did everything possible to keep the music alive despite the circumstances of Nazi occupation. The hidden hurdy-gurdy is eventually found and immigrates to America where it is played, loved, and retains the memory of the villager and his student.


Ella Mae is shocked and hurt when she realizes that she can’t try on the shoes at Johnson’s Shoe Store. Her mother has to trace a picture of her foot and Mr. Johnson sizes the shoe with that. Ella recognizes this as a huge, unnecessary indignity, and she and her cousin, Charlotte, devise a plan so that she and no other black person will have to suffer the indignity ever again.


The storms arrive and Sebah/Sheba is swept away in a flood. She manages to survive with the help of her new husband for weeks but finally must stow away on Noah’s ark where she struggles not to be caught by Noah and his family.


Astri’s father has sailed to America for a better life, leaving his two daughters with their aunt until he earns enough money to bring them to America. But, the aunt sells Astri to a cruel goatherder. Astri and her sister ultimately manage to escape aided with folktales and unexpected surprises. Very atmospheric, the folktales are wonderful, melancholy, leaves you a bit sad at the end as other surprises about Astri’s birth and childhood pop up in the story.

Contemporary Realism

Josh and Jordan are the twins of a famous former pro basketball player who is in denial about
his declining health. Along with the typical issues of growing up and middle school (their mom is
the principal of their school), they are also hoping to win the state basketball championship.


(Gender/Sex-Role Stereotyping), Contemporary Realism

Morris is teased by his classmates because he loves playing dress up and wearing the orange
dress and heels that clack. He manages to work through the disappointment and loneliness on
his own and ultimately is embraced by his classmates.

Realism—P Bla

A little boy finds out that he is going to have a sibling and throughout his busy days asks various
friends and family members where babies come from. He gets a lot of confusing answers, but
his parents ultimately help him to understand. Includes back matter about discussing the topic
with children.


Gr. PK-3, Multicultural (African American, etc.)—P Bol

As a child says his prayers, he remembers many others and many world situations.

Contemporary Realism (Hunger, Poverty)—P Bra

Very well done! Two friends play and challenge each other on the playground until one grows
hungry. She runs to her best friends house only to discover that her best friend has no food in
the fridge, and what she does have she saves for her little brother. Sworn to secrecy, Sofia tries
to think of ways to help feed her best friend. Finally, she realizes that in order to truly help and
be a friend she must tell. Beautiful cartoon-like illustrations that put a true face on
hunger/poverty and what it really looks like.

Surrealism (Socializing, First Party)—P Bro

Joe is worried about attending his first party. He thinks of everything that could go wrong as he
and his mom walk the neighborhood searching for the right house (they have lost the address).
His mom reassures him only to have her own fears later after she finally drops him off. But,
upon return and picking him up, mom finds Joe is has had a great time and is ready for his own
party.

Realism—P Cas
In warm illustrations, Castillo depicts a hip grandmother who convinces her young visiting grandson that the city is not a scary place but one full of wonder and play.


A young boy highlights his ninja skills and equipment to steal a cookie and a glass of milk from his little sister. When things don’t go as planned, he decides it’s time to train his sister in the art of ninja as well.


Theo has a lot to overcome (an eating disorder, an inappropriate romantic relationship) in the midst of the return of her best friend who had been kidnapped 4 years ago. The scary part is the discovery that the guy that she dated at the time is much older than she realized and is, in fact, her best friend’s kidnapper.


Smick the dog has a mighty adventure with a stick and a chick.


Gr. 2-5, Realism—P Dav

A young girl in a desolate urban setting must fulfill a promise after trying to steal an old woman’s bag. The promise is to plant whatever is in the bag. The young girl does and, over time, trees grow and the city becomes less desolate. But, she has moved on from city to city to plant more trees and greenery. And, when a young child attempts to steal from her, the promise is continued.


A young clown falls from a train as it passes the fields of a farmer. The farmer cares for the young clown and adds some companionship to his life until the train returns to pick up their lost little one. *Kind of melancholy but beautifully done. The loneliness of the farmer and the growing relationship between him and the little clown are clearly apparent in this wordless picture book.*


Kameeka’s goal is to beat Jamara at Hula hoopin and to become the queen of hula hoopin on her street. But, it’s Miss Adeline’s birthday on the day of the contest and Kameeka must help her mom prepare for the party. Although Kameeka shirks one of her most important duties, the party still goes off without a hitch.

Matilda’s cat likes to do a lot of things or does she? Typical Gravett style beautiful illustrations, short sentences, repetition. Reader begins to wonder which cat is actually Matilda and thinks she knows until the end.

Hole, Stian. *Anna’s Heaven*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Books, 2014. Gr. 4-8, **Contemporary Realism (Death, Grieving)—P Sti**

A young girl helps her father to cope with his grief when she asks questions and imagines heaven and the experiences that her mother must be having there. By far his most beautifully illustrated work. Heavy but hopeful.


A dog goes on an adventure past native plants and animals on the California shore as he fetches his red ball.

___________. *Nest*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014. Gr. PK-1, **could be used in a science lesson—P Hur**

One word per page shares the life/nesting cycle of a family of robins. Author’s note provides more information about the birds. Endpapers are pretty robin’s blue eggs.

Lockhart, E. *We were Liars*. New York: Delacorte, 2014. Gr. 7-12, **Magic Realism—F Loc**

Cadence, who spends every summer on her grandfather’s island off of the coast of Massachusetts with her cousins, tries to figure out what happened the summer that she was injured, the injury that has blocked her memory.


A black and white cat loves to climb to the roof and observe the world until he falls from the roof and loses his confidence. After a visit to the vet to ensure nothing is broken, the cat eventually finds his way back to the roof.

Martin, Ann. *Rain Reign*. New York: Feiwel and Friends, 2014. Gr. 4-6, **Contemporary Realism (High Functioning Autism, Hurricane/Flooding, Dogs)—F Mar**

Rose has a difficult time functioning in her classroom and connecting with her single dad who has a bit of an alcohol problem. But, her dog and her uncle help her to cope and comfort her. After a major storm, however, the dog goes missing and Rose sets out to find her dog and put all things back to the way they should be.

A wordless picture book that makes a huge impact. Beautiful sepia/brown/beige illustrations highlight a young girl and her small brother as she tries to raise/earn money to buy a green bike in the store window. After a year of helping her neighbor with various chores (passing of seasons and seasonal chores depicted in the illustrations) the young girl finally has enough money to buy the bike. However, when she arrives at the store, the bike has been sold. The young girl uses her hard earned money to purchase her brother a tricycle. But, when she arrives home, her next door neighbor has a wonderful surprise for her as well.


Based on his life experience, Rocco tells the story of a family that is snowed in during a blizzard and how the youngest goes on a quest to replenish food supplies for the whole neighborhood. Great illustrations, cozy.


In this nearly wordless picture book, a young boy and a host of others, including a dog, wait anxiously at the airport for their loved ones who are returning from active duty.


Kara, a girl with a deformed hand, is abandoned in China but raised there by an American woman who has let her Visa expire. The American raises her for 12 years in secret with funds sent to China by relatives, but an unfortunate incident, forces the secret into the open and Kara into a new family.


Rose, a preteen, spends every summer at the family’s beloved summer cabin where she meets up with her summer friend to enjoy the sun and frolick. This year is a little different though as she manages the inklings of puberty, her first crush, her parents constant fighting, and her mother’s deep grief and depression.

Raina reflects back on her childhood, her desire for a sister, and the consequences of actually having one. Along with flashbacks, covers a summer when the pre-teens are on a road trip with mom and brother to Colorado for the family reunion.


In this laugh out loud book, the protagonist is prepared for the class talent share because he has practiced. But as he gets closer to his turn to perform his anxiety builds.


Beautifully illustrated (scratchboard) portrayal of a summer thunderstorm on a farm with a climax and gently falling action which completes itself with the whole farm settling down for the night.

Fantasy/Science Fiction


Fantasy, Manners—P Ant

Mr. Panda offers his doughnuts to several animals but only one ends up getting them and the whole box at that. The facial expressions on Mr. Panda are outrageously fun.


Sam and Dave are sure that if they continue to dig a hole they will eventually find treasure. What their dog and the reader knows, however, is that they keep missing the treasure because they make the decision to dig differently just before reaching the treasure. The dog continues to dig to find a bone and all three fall down a hole to end up back at home. Or, is it home?


The protagonists from Journey are on a quest to save a wizard by traveling through various lands, collecting colors of the rainbow.


Nick Bruel shares with his readers the process of creating a story, defining and demonstrating elements like plot. Bad Kitty, however, is not at all happy about the twists and turns in this story which has her going on a turnip diet to lose weight. Good/fun way to demonstrate the elements of story.

**In 1930s (?) city, Easy reader 2nd grade—P Cur**

Elliot is a polka-dotted elephant that lives in the big city. His small size in the big city can make everyday life details hard. But, he meets a mouse, smaller than he, and realizes that things aren’t so bad for him after all. Elliot and the mouse help each other out and forge a new friendship.


Jack goes into the city to ask the king for a house to live in in the city. Along the way he meets various animals who would like to accompany him. When he arrives in the city, the king offers him a house that needs repairs but Jack happily takes on this task and the reader discovers a neighborhood of brightly painted, renovated homes. Note the background illustrations throughout the book—various nursery rhymes and folktales are fractured there—fun.


Gaston is born into a family of poodles and is raised to be like his family until one day in the park it is obvious that a mistake has been made. Gaston, a French bull terrier is switched with an Antoinette, the poodle. The two dog families switch pups; but, it’s just not right, and the next week Gaston and the poodle are switched back to their rightful places. And, when Gaston grows up and Antoinette the poodle grows up, they have a family and the pups can choose to be whoever they want. Wonderful illustrations. Chuckle out loud narrative without being complicated. Absolutely wonderful.


Dot the bunny can’t understand why her parents are completely receptive to the little brother, a wolf, that was left on their doorstep. She knows that he will ultimately try to eat them, but her parents and neighbors can’t imagine. But, one day, when her little wolf brother is threatened by a bear, Dot has a huge change of heart.


Dog and Cat are adopted from animal shelters and brought to their new home to live together in one room. When they realize that it isn’t possible, they attempt to compromise by building a wall. Once they realize that they miss each other, they make another compromise. And, once the Buttons bring in a new baby dog and cat work extra hard to find an even better solution.

It begins with two bears who don’t want to share a large pair of underwear and various other animals join suit with their own items until the piggies demonstrate how much more fun sharing can be for everyone.

Guettier, Bénédicte. *I am the Wolf...and Here I Come!* Transl. Penelope Todd. Wellington, New Zealand: Gecko Press, 2015. Gr. Everyone, *Fantasy/Folklore, Favorite, Boardbook*

The big bad wolf puts on each piece of clothing and the reader watches with anticipation only for a surprise ending.


Flora is at it again. This time with a penguin. Flora and the penguin figure skate together until the penguin is utterly distracted by a school of fish under the ice. He dives and returns with a treat for Flora who is utterly annoyed. The two tiff and make up with wonderful teamwork effort in the end. *Illustrations of blues and yellow chill the reader, wonderful facial expressions on both Flora and the penguin.*


Bird wakes up in the hospital and remembers nothing of the last of the events of a party that put her there. But, in the wake of wars against other countries and a v-flu pandemic that is a suspected bioterrorist attack, Bird will learn that much of what happened at the party that night is not the fun and games of high school.


Two bear-like creatures compare their sizes, resulting in a shouting match until the “relative” solutions drop down from the sky. The bears realize that size is, indeed, relative and move on with their day. *Fun, fun book for young kids and can definitely be used to share the concept of degrees of size.*


A young boy travels through the city in search of his dragon but always seems to miss him although readers will not. Wonderful black and white illustrations with colored illustrations for


Bow-Wow’s neighbor(s), cat-like ghosts steal his pillow. The reader is delighted with the spooky shenanigans that take place as he attempts to retrieve his pillow.
the counting aspects of the book. Kids will have fun with this book.


Chai and TsTs head off to find their friend Jed who was captured by a hawk and then dropped into the woods “far” from their home. Very funny! I laughed out loud throughout and well written. This says a lot as I hate animal fantasy for this age group.


Ted the dog has been in the pet store for a long time. He can’t seem to find his person or his place. After a short time attempting to find his place he runs into Dot who is looking for a furry friend who will like long walks and ball games. Ted goes home with Dot where he believes he finally belongs and despite the surprise ending (20 cats also live there) he knows he does.


Beekle lives in the land of imaginary friends, where he waits patiently for someone to imagine him for a long time. Finally, Beekle takes matters into his own hands and enters the human world. After what seems like a non-productive search, the perfect human comes along just in time.


A young bird and an old bear are the best of friends through 3 years. But, when Bird returns to the meadow in the spring of the fourth year, he finds that his friend Bear has died and misses her dearly. But, Bear’s grandson is there to comfort Bird and forge a new friendship.


Van Allsburg illustrates the life and many manifestations of a hamster who is moved from home to home, not carefully cared for, and eventually left to die outside in the snow.


The pigeon is up to his usual antics. He desperately needs a bath but refuses to take one. He is eventually convinced, however.

Set in an English boarding school in an isolated countryside, children and adults clamor for survival as mysterious creatures bite and overcome humans within seconds, transforming them into similar creatures.


Bear finds a lost stuffed bunny and cares for it but knows that he must find its owner. Once the owner is found it is hard to part with bunny. But, maybe he won’t have to.

**Concepts/Numbers/Alphabet**


**Nice illustrations—P Sav**

Ten pumpkins are carried away by various Halloween creatures and the reader is encouraged to countdown as they disappear.


As usual, Tullet proves that books are meant to be fun. With engaging text the reader uses a flashlight and the book to create magnificent shadows on the wall.

**Folklore**


The Grimm Brothers version of Little Red Riding Hood/Cap. The illustrations are die cut pages that accommodate the narrative so beautifully, both front and back. NICELY done!


A young man makes an overcoat for his wedding day and over four generations reconfigures the material into something new and loveable.

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