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Books for the Younger Reader

Diana Mitchell

Many books are written for young readers as they make the journey from having books read to them to reading independently. The following books, published by HarperCollins, are one series meant for such readers.

My First I Can Read Book for the Emergent Reader

Biscuit by Alyssa Satin Capucilli with pictures by Pat Schories, 1996.

The appealing picture of a little yellow puppy on the cover will make children want to open this book. The story shows Biscuit's little-girl owner trying to get him to bed while he does everything possible to stay up. Children could relate to this theme since Biscuit wants the hugs and kisses and stories that they so often ask for to delay going to bed. The pictures assist the children in the reading by showing what is happening. Context clues are abundant, and although the vocabulary is limited, it all contributes to the meaning and makes sense. The repetition of sentence beginnings should aid children in the reading.

Biscuit Finds a Friend by Alyssa Satin Capucilli with pictures by Pat Schories, 1997.

In this adventure Biscuit finds a little duck. He and his owner return the duck to its home, but not before Biscuit and the duck become friends. Since getting lost and making friends are often concerns of young children, this book will be of interest to them. The illustrations, by not being overwhelmed with detail, work to keep the reader involved in the central aspects of the pictures which contribute to understanding the words. Sentence patterns are introduced and repeated to help the emergent reader gain some control over them. Children will enjoy seeing Biscuit fall into the pond and then shake himself to dry all over his owner. Connections could be made to students' experiences with "accidents," viewing ducks, getting lost, and making new friends.

Sid and Sam by Nola Buck with pictures by G. Brian Karas, 1996.

Sid and Sam sing in the park while readers

enjoy the repetition of the letter "S" and the play on words. At one point the book states, "Sam sang a long song" followed by "Sid sang along with Sam." Later in the story Sam tells Sid his song "is so long." Sam thinks he's saying "so long" as an indication he is leaving. Children will like the cheerful illustrations which radiate the happiness the friends find in being together and singing together. Since it is impossible from viewing the illustrations to determine if the darker shaded Sid is male or female, children might wish to discuss this. In this story the friends are shown spending time in the park and playing so children could discuss what they like to do when they play, whether they've ever been to a park like this, and whether it seems realistic that the friends are there alone.

Level One I Can Read Books for Preschool-Grade 1 Readers

Danny and the Dinosaur Go To Camp by Syd Hoff, 1996.

What could be better than taking a dinosaur to camp with you? Children will enjoy the humor of a huge dinosaur fitting in a camp and trying to do what the children do. Children will find the story funny because it is so improbable, and this will make them want to read the complete story. The illustrations give solid support to children's efforts to make sense of the text, and the vocabulary makes good sense and isn't noticeably limited. Words like "ketchup," "marshmallows," and "pillow" can be figured out through the illustrations. Although the author seemed to stretch it a bit by showing over forty children with one camp counselor, this book can encourage more reading to find out what "real" dinosaurs did, and can open discussions about why going to camp does/doesn't appeal to the children, and how they think their friends would react if they showed up with a very unusual pet.

Happy Birthday, Danny and the Dinosaur by Syd Hoff, 1995.

Every child may secretly wish he or she could have a dinosaur at a birthday party. Children will enjoy reading about other children climbing up the dinosaur's neck to reach the ceiling and affix bal-

loons there; they will giggle when the dinosaur puts his feet out the window instead of on the furniture. Both Mom and Dad are shown helping out at the party and a few faces hint at ethnic diversity. The story could lead children into talking about how birthdays are celebrated and who or what they would most like to have attend their birthday party. If students have ever visited a museum they can discuss what they were most interested in at the museum and what object or animal they would like to have the ability to talk. Discussion could also center around what parents expect of children's behavior inside the house.

Ready, Set, GO! by John Stadler, 1996.

Sasha, one of the cast of dog characters, visits her cousin, Oliver, and asks him to play with her. He thinks she is too little to play with, and then he asks her to build snowmen and snow forts to show how much better he can do because he's bigger. His friend, Juliet, comes along and Oliver and Juliet compete. Finally, Juliet agrees to skate with Sasha and she is surprised when Sasha saves her. Children will identify with Sasha and the refrain of "you're too little." They can share stories of when they have been treated this way and how it makes them feel.

Level Two I Can Read Books for Readers in Grades 1-3

The Great Snake Escape by Molly Coxe, 1994.

Mirabel, the goose, and Maxie, the frog, hear that a snake has escaped from the zoo. Maxie seeks out a newspaper to figure out what kind of snake has escaped so they will know if they are in danger. Finding a newspaper in the trash can, he reads that it is a cobra which only eats lizards and other snakes. But now Maxie is stuck in the trash can and can't hop out. In seeking help for him, Mirabel finds the Cobra. After helping Maxie, the Cobra is assisted in finding his way to the harbor by Mirabel in his quest to get back to India. This story could pique students' interests in knowing more about snakes, about looking at the kinds of information that can be found in a newspaper, and about friends helping friends. Because the snake wants to go back to his homeland, students can talk about how animals in the zoo might feel being kept there.

The Know-Nothings by Michele Sobel Spirn with pictures by R. W. Alley, 1995.

These silly stories are sure to please children who will laugh at the "mistakes" these four friends make. When Doris counts how many of them will be eating lunch, she forgets to count herself and so all four of them look for the "missing" person. In the next story they try to make lunch but have problems since they don't know that noodles need cooking or that bananas need to have their "coats" taken off. Since the "mistakes" these adults make will be apparent to children, they will probably be urging

the Know Nothings on to find the answers to their mistakes in reasoning. These stories provide lots of opportunities for children to see how much they know!

Marigold and Grandma on the Town by Stephanie Calmenson with pictures by Mary Chalmers, 1994.

These four short stories all center on what Grandma and Marigold do one day. They start out by buying Marigold a hat, and even though I feel too much emphasis was put on Marigold's appearance, it did show how adjustments do have to be made for hats when the owners have differences such as ears that will not fit in a hat. Next they go to the park to feed the ducks, and Marigold learns that the wind has to be behind her to help her feed the ducks. Hungry by now, the two go to a restaurant for lunch, and Marigold has trouble with spilling and poor manners. Grandma helps her in a loving manner, and children could talk about what their parents expect of them as far as eating out. In the last story, Grandma and Marigold go into a picture-taking booth and have fun posing with silly looks, grumpy looks, and happy looks. Grandma is shown as a caring, fun-loving person, and children could talk about what their grandmas are like.

Newt by Matt Novak, 1996.

Newt, a friendly salamander, has three adventures in this book. First, he is having such a perfect day he wants to capture a part of it to remember. So he digs up a beautiful flower. He meets a new friend when he decides to return the flower after he discovers it won't be "perfect" in his house. In the next tale, Newt finds a big, fuzzy bug with twenty eyes. He wants his bug to be like the pets his friends have, but only after he accepts his bug as it is, does he find the worth of his pet. In the last story, Newt tries to comfort the moon when he thinks the moon looks sad and scared. This story could open discussion about what makes the children feel better when they are scared.

Silly Times with Two Silly Trolls by Nancy Jewell with pictures by Lisa Thiesing, 1996.

The amusing pictures of the trolls will draw children into the three stories in this book. The first story shows one of the trolls working hard to understand the difference between "here" and "there." In "Ice is Nice" the trolls slip and slide on the ice as they make rhymes about what is happening. The last story shows the trolls trying to understand how time can be passing if a broken clock they found always has its hands on the same numbers. Any of the concepts of word usage, rhyming, and time could be introduced through discussion of this book.

Wizard and Wart at Sea by Janice Lee Smith with pictures by Paul Meisel, 1995.

Wizard and Wart need a vacation and go to the seashore where one mishap after another occurs. Wizard doesn't want to work by using his magic, but

to get the seagulls off of Wart and Wart's food, he mutters quickly devised spells and the beach is filled with goats, the sea with whales, and the pool with monkeys. They find that being back home is much more restful. The illustrations add to the interest of the story and provide the context for words such as "seagulls," "plumbers," and "whales." Children could discuss kinds of vacations they like, what Wart could do differently so as not to attract seagulls, places they would like to go, and how it feels to come home after a vacation.

Level Three I Can Read Books for Readers in Grades 2-4

A Bear for Miguel by Elaine Marie Alphin with pictures by Joan Sandin, 1996.

Set in El Salvador in the 1980s at a time guerrillas were constantly warring against the government, Maria and her father go to market to sell their table, one chair, and other goods so they can bring food home. Maria and her stuffed bear Paco hope they can help Papa. The trading is going well, and she and Papa are getting the flour and sugar they need. But they can't go home without milk and cheese. When Maria is willing to trade her bear along with the table to a couple who have an injured child, she gets the milk, eggs, cheese, and butter her family needs. Giving up important toys and helping others out could be discussed.

Bootsie Barker Ballerina by Barbara Bottner with pictures by G. Brain Karas, 1997.

Lisa talks her friend, Bernie, into going to ballet class with her to help her deal with Bootsie, the terror of the class. Bernie, as the only male, feels out of place but is encouraged to stay in the class by his basketball coach who tells him it will do wonders for his game. Bootsie does everything she can to make the class experience miserable for everyone. Eventually, Bernie and Lisa get even with her. Even though this theme of "getting even" is one children have to deal with in their lives, the whole idea was troubling to me. I was glad to see a person of color, Bernie, in this book, but it seemed stereotypical to me that Bootsie, the troublemaker, was a large, overweight female.

Dust for Dinner by Ann Turner with pictures by Robert Barrett, 1995.

During the Great Depression, Jake and his family must leave their unproductive farm in the Oklahoma dust bowl and journey to California to seek a better future. Told from the point of view of young Jake, readers see the affect of the dust storms on the family and their lives together. Selling everything but their car, their radio, and their dog, the family takes to the road. This book could raise interest in learning more about the causes of the dust storms and the Depression. Children could talk about what they do with their families, how they would feel if they had to sell all their belongings and move, whether or not their

family would have valued a dog enough to give up a job rather than the dog, and how they think they and their family might react to hard times.

The Golly Sisters by Betsy Byars with pictures by Sue Truesdell, 1994.

In these five short tales, the Golly Sisters meet whatever adventure comes their way with gusto and energy. Although they often do silly things, their enjoyment of each other comes through loud and clear. The stories offer children something to think about and talk about including these topics: can we cause our own "bad luck," is going on vacation really about "getting away," how can we settle minor arguments, and why might we want to revert back to the behavior of our younger days?

Snowshoe Thompson by Nancy Smiler Levinson with pictures by Joan Sandin, 1992.

Danny is disappointed to find that he can't send a letter to his dad in the gold fields of Nevada because the snow is too deep for the mail carrier to get through on horse. John Thompson, a man new to town, tells Danny he will make sure his dad gets the letter. Thompson invites Danny to help him make a pair of skis, something never seen in these parts before. Thompson undertakes the five-day journey with upwards of 100 pounds of mail on his back. He returns with a letter for Danny and earns the gratitude of the people of Placerville, California. Communicating with relatives in distant places, how skis are made, and winter survival are themes that could be researched or discussed.

I Can Read Chapter Books for more independent readers. These books have short chapters and pictures to support the text.

Billy the Ghost and Me by Gery Greer and Bob Ruddick with pictures by Roger Roth, 1997.

Sarah, a young girl in a Western town, has a ghost only she can see as her side kick. When the bank is robbed, Sarah offers to help the sheriff catch the robbers, but she is told she is too young to help. As the sheriff and his posse ride off, Sarah and Billy notice two suspicious-looking "old women" with hairy arms and boots on their feet. They figure out the "old women" must be the robbers in disguise. One plan Sarah and Billy devise to capture them backfires, but eventually they are successful, and when the sheriff returns, he makes Sarah a deputy. Children will like the adventure in the story and will laugh at the poor judgment of the robbers. Children can discuss what they wish they were able to do and what they wish adults knew about their capacities and abilities.

First Flight: The Story of Tom Tate and The Wright Brothers by George Shea with pictures by Don Bolognese, 1997.

One morning while fishing near his home on the beach at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, twelve-year-old Tom Tate meets Wilbur and Orville Wright.

Tom was intrigued by the machine the brothers hoped would fly. The next day, because he weighed less than any of the men helping, he got to fly in one of their first creations—a kite-like contraption. Tom helped out for the next two years as the brothers returned to Kitty Hawk to try out their improvements in Kitty Hawk which boasted of high winds and soft sands. This true story gives children interesting information about how the first airplane got off the ground as it gives Tom Tate credit for his place in this historic event.

Trophy Chapter Books are intended for more independent readers who are ready for longer chapters and more text, but who need less support from illustrations.

A Dolphin Named Bob by Twig C. George, illustrated by Christine Herman Merrill, 1996.

This terrific story is about a dolphin, called Bob, who overcomes great odds and becomes a star in an aquarium by doing it his own way. The reader will be fascinated by the factual information embedded in the story. We find out about saving beached dolphins, about the personalities of the dolphins, about their group and social behavior, and about how they can be trained. Readers also come away from the story with new appreciation for the hard work done at aquariums to keep these mammals healthy. This book could spark interest in further studies about dolphins or other sea life.

The Creature Double Feature (The Black Cat Club #9) by Susan Saunders, illustrated by Jane Manning, 1998.

The four members of the Black Cat Club regularly hunt ghosts and have even found one who follows them around and “helps” them. In this adventure they try to lose Alice, their ghost, by going to an ancient movie house to watch old monster movies. There they are surprised when they feel ocean breezes on their faces and hear a fish slurping right next to their ears. Then they feel slime actually sloshing around their feet. Amazed by these special effects, they at first don’t suspect that the effects are provided by the ghost of the man who used to own the theater. When they return the next Saturday and two of the children get splashed by monster ooze, they aren’t ready to deal with the fact that they now glow in the dark. Children will be willing to read this one to the end to see how they cope with this turn of events.

Drew and the Bub Daddy Showdown by Robb Armstrong, 1996.

After breaking his wrist in an attempt to copy

his daredevil brother, eight-year-old Drew is suddenly able to draw cartoons like a professional artist. This delightful story, peopled by African American characters, shows how young Drew tries to help out his very respected brother through his cartooning. Children will love the cartoons throughout, the accomplishments of young Drew, the sibling relationship, Drew’s doubts and worries, and how Drew is able to help his brother. This book, the first in a series, is a winner because young people’s feelings are taken seriously and because it is so entertaining.

One Day in the Desert by Jean Craighead George, 1983.

This book, while mainly about all that lives in the desert, is set in a story about one of the hottest days (121 degrees!) in the Sonora Desert and how the heat and ensuing rain affects the animals, plants, and two people. The reader learns what the desert animals do to survive and how they have adapted to the desert dryness. The complexity of desert life and how the animals and plants interact with each other is well shown. Because the density of the information presented makes it difficult to absorb it all, it would make an excellent introduction to a whole-class study of the desert if each child was responsible for focusing on only one animal or plant mentioned in the book.

The Weebie Zone #1—Gerbilitis by Stephanie Spinner and Ellen Weiss, 1996.

This is the first in a series of Weebie Zone books in which Garth, after taking home the class gerbil and forgetting to feed him, gets bit and can then understand the talk of all animals! This ability, which he keeps throughout the series, leads to some tense but interesting moments. In this story he and his mom and dad go camping, even though his parents are at odds with each other because of Garth’s mom’s workload in completing an advanced college degree. Although I liked that the mom was shown as having goals for herself, the story did seem to focus more on the negative effects of her work on the family. I just wondered if stories are ever written in which men’s workload is seen as causing family disharmony. Aside from this issue, the stories in this series are ones children will like because it’s so much fun to hear what animals think about what humans are doing. Discussions of animal conditions and animal rights might be piqued by reading books in this series. Children can also be encouraged to write a story from their pets’ points of view.