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BEST OF THE DECADE LIST

2000-2009

By **Judy Freeman**
READKIDDOREAD Book Reviewer
(www.JudyReadsBooks.com)

I read a lot of children's books each year—thousands of them, actually—some great, some good, and some not so wonderful. Here's my average: out of every 20 books I read, one will be wonderful, rising to the top like cream. When I find a book I love, I want to crow about it and share it with everyone. Nevertheless, I urge you not to take my word for it when I say a book is special. Compared with the under 12 set, I'm really, really old. How do I know what children will find unputdownable? I give it my best shot, though, reading as if I were 6 or 10 or 14, and am always elated when children agree with some of my choices.

Each year, I pull together all the new books I've fallen for, and head off to several local public schools to test them out on the people for whom these books are intended—real kids—to see if they like them, too. Sometimes I get it right, sometimes not. By the end of each year, I put together my list of my 100+ best books of the year. (See if your library has *The Winners! Handbook*, a new edition of which I publish each year, with annotated lists of my choices.)

In the list below, I've gone back through my best books lists for the past decade and selected my very favorite picture book, fiction, young adult, poetry, and nonfiction book for each year. Singling out the books that I found most successful, provocative, fresh, child friendly, beloved, and pleasurable to read aloud has been an instructive and intriguing exercise. Coming up with just one book per category can be agonizing. (Check *More Books Kids Will Sit Still For* on page 23 for the "Freeman's Favorites" from 1984-1994 and *Books Kids Will Sit Still For 3* on page 67 for my choices from 1995-2005.)

My choices from the past decade, are as follows:

2000:

Picture Book: *Olivia* by Ian Falconer (Scholastic; Suggested Ages: 3-7)
What a zest for life this versatile and creative little piglet displays.



Fiction: *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan (Dial; Suggested Ages: 10 and Up)

In the 1920's, a poor little rich girl flees Mexico with her mother and becomes a migrant worker in California.



YA: *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging: Confessions of Georgia Nicolson* by Louise Rennison (HarperCollins; Suggested Ages: 12 and Up)

Bridget Jones for the tween set; first in a British series that is dead funny.



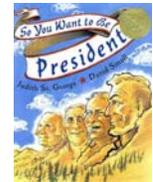
Poetry *Casey at the Bat: A Ballad of the Republic Sung in the Year 1888* by Ernest Lawrence Thayer, illus. by Christopher Bing (Handprint; Suggested Ages: 8 and Up)

Kids don't know this classic poem anymore, and Bing's handsome version, which won him a Caldecott Honor, will be a revelation for baseball fans.



Nonfiction: *So You Want to Be President* by Judith St. George, illus. by David Small (Philomel; Suggested Ages: 7 and Up)

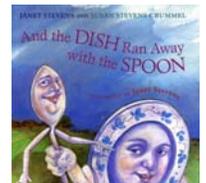
Revealed are the foibles, features, and fortunes of every POTUS, along with their caricatures, in this jaunty Caldecott winner.



2001:

Picture Book: *And the Dish Ran Away with the Spoon* by Janet Stevens (Harcourt; Suggested Ages: 3-7)

When Dish and Spoon disappear, Cat, Dog, and Cow set off to find them.



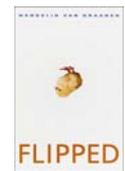
Fiction: *Love That Dog* by Sharon Creech (HarperCollins; Suggested Ages: 9-12)

Through poetry, a boy named Jack reflects on the life and death of his beloved dog, Sky.



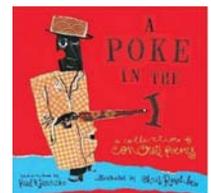
YA: *Flipped* by Wendelin Van Draanen (Knopf; Suggested Ages: 11-14)

Juli loves Bryce, Bryce thinks she's crazy.



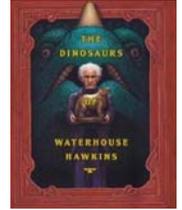
Poetry: *A Poke in the I: A Collection of Concrete Poems*, selected by Paul Janeczko, illus. by Chris Raschka (Candlewick; Suggested Ages: 8-13)

A very cool set of thirty concrete or shape poems, with wild and jazzy collage illustrations.



Nonfiction: *The Dinosaurs of Waterhouse Hawkins* by Barbara Kerley, illus. by Brian Selznick (Scholastic; Suggested Ages: 7-11)

No one knew what dinosaurs looked like until 1853, when Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins built the first life-sized models in England.



2002:

Picture Book: *I Stink* by Kate McMullan (HarperCollins; Suggested Ages: 2-7)

Narrated by a tough guy NYC garbage truck with real attitude.



Fiction: *Time Stops for No Mouse* by Michael Hoeye (Putnam; Suggested Ages: 9-13)

Mild-mannered watchmaker mouse, Hermux Tantamoq, becomes embroiled in a dangerous mystery.



YA: *Big Mouth & Ugly Girl* by Joyce Carol Oates (HarperCollins; Suggested Ages: 13 and Up)

Loner, Ursula Riggs, comes to the defense of class clown, Matt Donoghy, when he's accused of making threats against their high school.



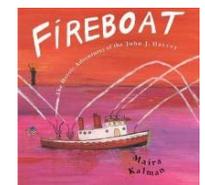
Poetry: *FEG: Stupid (Ridiculous) Poems for Intelligent Children* by Robin Hirsch, illus. by Ha (Little, Brown; Suggested Ages: 9-13)

Two dozen nimble wordplay poems employ palindromes, spoonerisms, and other clever games and puzzles for tenacious readers to figure out.



Nonfiction: *Fireboat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey* by Maira Kalman (Putnam; Suggested Ages: 6-12)

Astonishing and moving true picture book about the crew members of the John J. Harvey fireboat who helped fight the fires in lower Manhattan on 9/11/01.



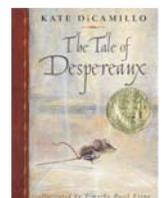
2003:

Picture Book: *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* by Mo Willems (Hyperion; Suggested Ages: 3 and Up)

“Can I drive the bus?” wheedles the Pigeon. Your kids, no matter what age, will talk back to him sternly and say, “No!”



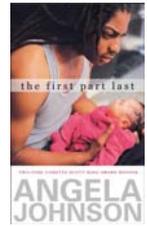
Fiction: *The Tale of Despereaux: Being the Story of a Mouse, a Princess, Some Soup, and a Spool of Thread* by Kate DiCamillo, illus. by Timothy Basil Ering (Candlewick; Suggested Ages: 8-13)



Oh, the drama, when big-eared mouse, Despereaux, is sentenced to death for talking to the human princess he reveres.

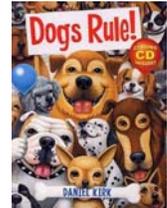
YA: *The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson (Simon & Schuster; Suggested Ages: 13 and Up)

Sixteen-year-old Bobby is trying to raise his baby daughter, Feather, on his own.



Poetry: *Dogs Rule!* by Daniel Kirk (Hyperion; Suggested Ages: 4-11)

Twenty-two spirited poems, about and narrated by dogs, can even be sung with the accompanying CD, which you can download at www.danielkirk.com.



Nonfiction: *The Man Who Walked between the Towers* by Mordicai Gerstein (Roaring Brook; Suggested Ages: 5-Adult)

French aerialist, Philippe Petit, walked on a cable stretched between the just-completed Twin Towers in New York City on August 7, 1974.



2004:

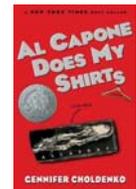
Picture Book: *Knuffle Bunny* by Mo Willems (Hyperion; Suggested Ages: 3-7)

Toddler, Trixie, says her first word when her beloved stuffed bunny goes missing as the laundromat.



Fiction: *Al Capone Does My Shirts* by Gennifer Choldenko (Putnam; Suggested Ages: 10-13)

In 1935, when Moose Flanagan's father gets a job at Alcatraz prison, the family moves to the twelve-acre rock island in the middle of San Francisco Bay.



YA: *Airborn* by Kenneth Oppel (HarperCollins; Suggested Ages: 10 and Up)

Aboard the airship, Aurora, riding high above the Pacificus, fifteen-year-old cabin boy, Matt Cruse, helps to rescue an unconscious man in a hot air balloon.



Poetry: *Technically, It's Not My Fault: Concrete Poems* by John Grandits (Clarion; Suggested Ages 9-12)

Get to know sixth grader, Robert, through his concrete or shape poems about school, his sister, skateboards, talking backwards, and bloodcurdling screams.



Nonfiction: *Actual Size* by Steve Jenkins (Houghton Mifflin; Suggested Ages: 3 and Up)

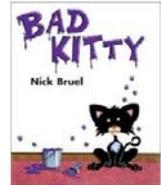
Eighteen animals, or parts of animals, from the tiny goby fish to the man-eating saltwater crocodile, are shown actual size in this spectacular science picture book.



2005:

Picture Book: *Bad Kitty* by Nick Bruel (Roaring Brook; Suggested Ages: 3-7)

In an alphabet book of bad food and even worse behavior, a black cat takes revenge when her people run out of kitty food.



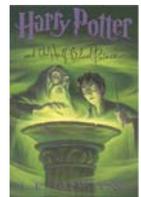
Fiction: *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan (Miramax/Hyperion; Suggested Ages: 9 and Up)

Percy Jackson, troubled, dyslexic, ADHD kid has a bit of a problem on his sixth grade class field trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.



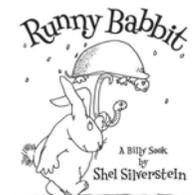
YA: *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* by J. K. Rowling, illus. by Mary Grandpré (Scholastic, 2005; Suggested Ages: 10 and Up)

Every Harry Potter book is evocative, but book six, which I read on a beach in Puerto Rico, had me shivering in spite of the beautiful weather.



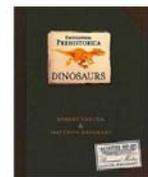
Poetry: *Runny Babbit: A Billy Sook* by Shel Silverstein (HarperCollins; Suggested Ages: 7-12)

There are tworty-foo feally runny pyming rhoems about Runny Babbit and pots of his lals in this bazy crook.



Nonfiction: *Encyclopedia Prehistorica: Dinosaurs* by Robert Sabuda and Matthew Reinhart, illus. by Robert Sabuda (Candlewick; Suggested Ages: 5-12)

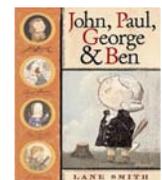
While the intricate and inventive watercolored pop-ups will make dinosaur lovers gasp, there are meaty chunks of information on each page as well.



2006:

Picture Book: *John, Paul, George & Ben* by Lane Smith (Hyperion; Suggested Ages: 6-9)

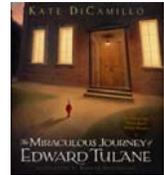
Follow the fictional childhoods of bold John Hancock, noisy Paul Revere, honest George Washington, clever Ben Franklin, and independent Tom Jefferson.



Fiction:

The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane by Kate DiCamillo, illus. by Bagram Ibatoulline (Candlewick; Suggested Ages: 8-12)

A self-centered china rabbit learns the hard way about the importance of love.



YA:

The Book Thief by Marcus Zusak (Knopf; Suggested Ages: 14-Adult)

Death himself chronicles the life of Liesel Meminger, a 9-year-old foster child in a small town outside Munich, during World War II.



Poetry:

Frankenstein Makes a Sandwich: And Other Stories You're Sure to Like, Because They're All About Monsters, and Some of Them Are Also About Food. You Like Food, Don't You? Well, All Right Then by Adam Rex (Harcourt, 2006; Suggested Ages: 7 and Up)

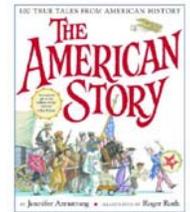
Get to know all those fabulous old movie monsters in a collection of 20 poems and pictures that will have you screaming with laughter.



Nonfiction:

The American Story by Jennifer Armstrong, illus. by Roger Roth (Knopf; Suggested Ages: 8 and Up)

In a handsome and hefty volume that children and adults will pore over and reread is a dazzling chronology of 100 stories from American history.



2007:

Picture Book: *Knuffle Bunny Too: A Case of Mistaken Identity* by Mo Willems (Hyperion; Suggested Ages: 3-8)

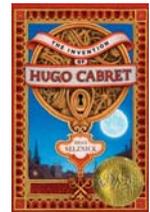
Trixie and Sonja's almost identical stuffed Knuffle Bunnies get switched.



Fiction:

The Invention of Hugo Cabret by Brian Selznick (Scholastic; Suggested Ages: 8-12)

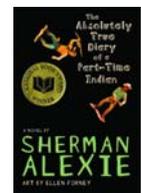
This 500+ page Caldecott winner, about an orphan trying to survive alone in a Paris train station, is a magical combination of words and pictures.



YA:

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie, illus. by Ellen Forney (Little, Brown; Suggested Ages 13-Adult)

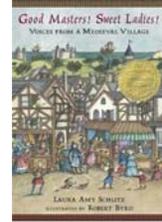
Adult author Sherman Alexie's first YA book, loosely autobiographical, is hard-hitting, heart-breaking, wildly funny, sometimes raunchy and profane, and unforgettable.



Poetry:

***Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!: Voices from a Medieval Village* by Laura Amy Schlitz, illus. by Robert Byrd (Candlewick; Suggested Ages: 10-14)**

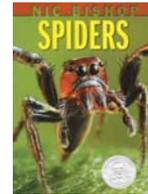
This Newbery Medal winner, a collection of 22 children's narratives in poetry, transports readers to an English manor house and village in 1255.



Nonfiction:

***Spiders* by Nic Bishop (Scholastic; Suggested Ages: 4-9)**

Even kids who think they hate spiders will be entranced by Bishop's color photos and fascinating, fact-filled, easy-to-absorb text.



2008:

Picture Book: *A Visitor for Bear* by Bonny Becker, illus. by Kady MacDonald Denton (Candlewick; Suggested Ages: 3-7)

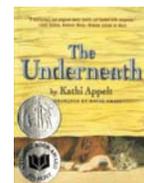
Bear thinks he doesn't like visitors until Mouse pops up, small and bright-eyed.



Fiction:

***The Underneath* by Kathi Appelt, illus. by David Small (Atheneum; Suggested Ages: 9-13)**

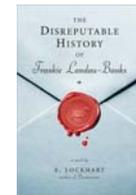
In an East Texas swamp are an abandoned cat, an abused dog named Ranger, a trapper called Gar-Face, two kittens, Grandmother Moccasin, and a 100-foot alligator.



YA:

***The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* by E. Lockhart (Hyperion, 2008; Suggested Ages: 12 and Up)**

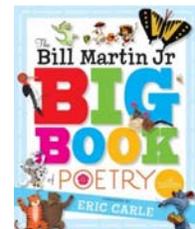
High school sophomore, Frankie, infiltrates the all-boys secret society at her boarding school.



Poetry:

***The Bill Martin Jr Big Book of Poetry* by Bill Martin, Jr, and Michael Sampson, illus. by Steven Kellogg and others (Simon & Schuster; Suggested Ages: 3-8)**

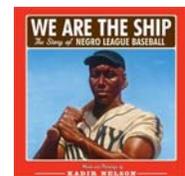
This big, brash, and beautiful volume is stuffed with almost 200 poems from 50+ poets, and illustrated by 13 well-known children's book illustrators.



Nonfiction:

***We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball* by Kadir Nelson (Hyperion/Jump at the Sun; Suggested Ages: 8 and Up)**

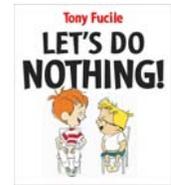
For all the sports lovers in your family, this is a breathtaking tribute to the Negro League players, some of baseball's greatest heroes.



2009:

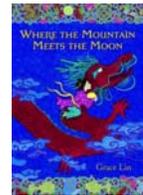
Picture Book: *Let's Do Nothing!* by Tony Fucile (Candlewick; Suggested Ages: 5-8)

Best friends, Sal and Frankie, prove that doing nothing isn't as easy as it seems.



Fiction: *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* by Grace Lin (Little, Brown; Suggested Ages: 7-10)

In a riveting quest novel, laced with Chinese folktales, Minli sets out to change her family's fortune.



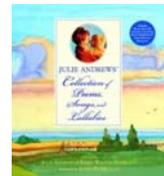
YA: *Leviathan* by Scott Westerfeld, illus. by Keith Thompson (Simon & Schuster/Pulse; Suggested Ages: 12 and Up)

In a steampunk version of the events leading up to WWI, it's Austrian Clanker machinery versus the English Darwinist biotech airbeast, Leviathan.



Poetry: *Julie Andrews' Collection of Poems, Songs, and Lullabies* by Julie Andrews and Emma Walton Hamilton, illus. by James McMullan (Little, Brown, Suggested Ages: 5-11)

A diverse and beautifully illustrated collection of 136 poems, including classics, current verse, and even lyrics to famed show tunes.



Nonfiction: *Redwoods* by Jason Chin (Roaring Brook/Flash Point; Suggested Ages: 6-9)

Readers will relish the use of imagination and you-are-there illustrations in an innovative picture book-within-a-book about redwood trees.



JUDY FREEMAN'S BEST OF THE BEST OF THE DECADE:

If I had to pick my one favorite picture book of the past decade, it would have to be Mo Willems's insouciant Caldecott Honor winner, *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*, in which children young and old engage in conversation with that persistent Pigeon. When I read it to a class of three- and four-year-old preschoolers at the Antioch School in Yellow Springs, Ohio, they were unrelenting and vociferous, not cutting Pigeon a bit of slack in refusing his ever-hopeful attempts to drive that bus. Note that there are three Mo Willems books in my lists over this past decade, and all are well-deserved Caldecott Honor books. I am ever astonished by the power of Mo to captivate children with his words and pictures.

For fiction, my top pick for the past many years was *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the first in a series which has changed children's reading and adults' reactions to children's books forever, we hope. After 11 years, it is time for a new fave: *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* by the amazing Brian Selznick. What a groundbreaking book this is, with its masterful silent movie-like

pencil illustrations that tell half of the story. One librarian dubbed it “cinematic fiction.” I was at the award announcements at ALA when this book won the Caldecott. A 500-page novel won the medal for most distinguished contribution to American illustration for children? There was screaming and shouting and cheering and clapping and foot stomping (and a lot of that was coming from me). I also was fortunate to hear Brian Selznick deliver his Newbery Speech six months later at the Newbery-Caldecott dinner, and it was spectacular. You can read the speech and watch the ebullient hand-created video he showed along with it here at http://www.theinventionofhugocabret.com/slideshow_flash.htm.

Young adult books had me stumped. Should I pick *The Book Thief*, which is such a hard-hitting, emotionally wrenching book about the Holocaust and World War II? It has such a compelling narrator—Death—who says, “I can be amiable. Agreeable. Affable. And that’s only the A’s. Just don’t ask me to be nice. Nice has nothing to do with me.” I also haven’t stopped thinking about E. Lockhart’s *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* since I first read it. Frankie wants to transcend her family’s image of her as Bunny Rabbit and to prove herself a force. Is she heroic or just obsessed in her venture to be recognized as the equal of the privileged boys in her school? I’m still pondering this. The book that made me laugh and howl and gasp was *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, which, with its mixture of cartoons and text looked and read like nothing else I had ever experienced. Knowing that Junior’s story was loosely autobiographical made it all the more wrenching and outrageous and courageous. I’ll go with this one, though I could be persuaded to change my mind.

Poetry proved difficult as well. There is the general hilarity and the gorgeous monster-themed illustrations of Adam Rex’s *Frankenstein Makes a Sandwich* with its running gag about the Phantom of the Opera who can’t get certain pop songs out of his head, and dizzily funny poem titles like “Dracula Doesn’t Know He’s Been Walking Around All Night with Spinach in His Teeth.” Then there’s the elegant and eloquent *Good Masters, Sweet Ladies* by Laura Amy Schlitz, a book kids might not pick up on their own, but one that gives me goosebumps every time I read one of the narrative poems aloud to kids. It looks like an illuminated manuscript. Do I go for the laughs or the goosebumps? Depends on my mood, I guess. Call me indecisive. See if you can decide. I fiercely love both titles.

For nonfiction, *Actual Size* is a book I always to use with children when I do school visits and assemblies; it never fails to wow ‘em. I love to give it as a present for all the cousins and nieces and nephews when they turn six or so. To see all those animals, actual size, from the 12” eye of the giant squid to the gate-folded page of the saltwater crocodile that opens to reveal its toothy snout, is thrilling and just a bit scary for kids. They find it titillating. So do I.

You can tell a lot about a person by the books he or she loves. Your own list would most likely be vastly different from mine, so feel free to agree or disagree with me on any of my choices. I urge you to try compiling a list for yourself, and then ask your kids to come up with lists of their past favorite books. Teachers and librarians: post these lists around the room for children to find new choices of books to read. Parents, read the books on your children’s lists, too. Talk about why you picked each book. Favorite books are best when shared.

JUDY FREEMAN (www.JudyReadsBooks.com), ReadKiddoRead reviewer, is a well-known consultant, writer, and speaker on children's literature, storytelling, and all aspects of librarianship. She is a visiting lecturer at the School of Information, and Library Science at Pratt Institute in New York City, where she teaches courses on children's literature and storytelling. Judy served as a member of the 2000 Newbery Committee and the 2008 Sibert Committee. Judy's book, *Once Upon a Time: Using Storytelling, Creative Drama, and Reader's Theater with Children in Grades PreK-6* (Libraries Unlimited, 2007), won the 2009 Anne Izard Storyteller's Choice Award. Her mega-books, *Books Kids Will Sit Still For 3* (2006) and its popular companions *Books Kids Will Sit Still For: The Complete Read-Aloud Guide* (1990), and *More Books Kids Will Sit Still For* (1995), are indispensable resources for literature-based classrooms and libraries. Judy also writes the yearly *The Winners! Handbook*, reviewing her top 100 children's books of the past year.