



The Sunshine State Young Readers Award Junior Book list with Publisher Reviews 2024-2025

Picture Books:

Mr. S: A First Day of School Book written and illustrated by Monica Arnaldo

Booklist starred (April 15, 2023 (Vol. 119, No. 16))

Preschool-Grade 3. It's the first day of school for the kindergartners in Room 2B, but something's missing: their teacher. Some kids rejoice, "No rules!" Others insist, "Absolutely not!" A sign reading "Welcome to Mr. S's Class" leads them to wonder where he is. But after noticing the sandwich (with googly olives for eyes) on the teacher's desk, they start pondering what he is instead, murmuring, "Mister Sandwich?" Spooked, they become model students, conducting their own art class, music lesson, and storytime. The kindergartners haven't noticed the drama that's unfolding in the parking lot below their windows, involving a man's car, a falling tree, a lightning strike, a blazing fire, and firefighters. A man wearing a wet, smoking jacket enters their classroom, introduces himself as the principal, and hurriedly leaves. Warm, bright, and energetic, the digital illustrations feature a diverse cast of wide-eyed children and a weirdly convincing sandwich teacher. Not mentioned in the text, the parking lot disasters are revealed only when viewing the illustrations up close, and kids will enjoy every detail. The tale's genuinely absurd situation, the mystery of the teacher's identity, and the deadpan storytelling make this a memorable read-aloud choice. A genuinely funny story that teachers and parents will enjoy sharing with children.

Kirkus Reviews (May 1, 2023)

One dreary day in room 2B, a class of kids embraces a sandwich as instructor. On the first day of school, a light-skinned man carefully writes the words Mr. S on the blackboard and then, noticing that a tree has crashed on his car, dashes out to the parking lot, leaving behind a stack of papers and a sandwich. When a dozen or so big-eyed students arrive, they argue about what to do in the absence of their teacher, but when a ruler falls to the floor with a mysterious "THWACK!" the kids come to a conclusion: The sandwich is their instructor. Held together with a toothpick pierced through two green olives, Mr. Sandwich appears to glare at them, so they get to work, with a day of learning centered on (you guessed it) sandwiches. Attentive readers will delight in following the parallel plot through the classroom window as a series of disasters continue to befall the car and will enjoy the satisfying and creative twist. Salmon-colored walls invoke an appropriately unsettled feeling. Everything about the narrative is playful, and readers will be sucked in by a seriously funny question: Can a sandwich be a teacher? The students are racially diverse; one uses forearm crutches, while another uses a wheelchair. (This book was reviewed digitally.) Far from stale and ripe for repeat reading. (Picture book. 4-7)

Our Incredible Library written by Caroline Crowe and illustrated by John Joseph

School Library Journal (February 1, 2023) K-Gr 3-Naliah, a little girl of Vietnamese heritage, is excited for her school's international festival, and eager to share a traditional Vietnamese Fan Dance with her classmates; she is dismayed to discover, though, that she has outgrown her special áo dài, and her mother's is so large that she trips on it and rips it during practice. Naliah is afraid she is in trouble, but instead her mother sews a patch over the rip and tells her the áo dài's legacy as being one her grandmother wore. Bui's debut picture book is inspired by her daughter and mother-in-law. Her hope in an author's note is that "all children recognize that their family stories matter and see themselves between the pages of the books they read." Vietnamese culture is beautifully honored through Phan's expressive, cheerful watercolors. Naliah's joy and fear are clear on her face and the áo dàis are rich with details. A glossary is included at the end defining some of the words and cultural celebrations. VERDICT Naliah's story teaches readers about the importance of family and culture in forming identity. Purchase where books on identity and culture circulate well; this would pair especially well with Eva Chen's I Am Golden, Joanna Ho's Eyes that Kiss in the Corners and Nabela Noor's Beautifully Me.-Heidi Dechief © Copyright 2023. Library Journals LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Media Source, Inc. No redistribution permitted.

Booklist (February 1, 2023 (Vol. 119, No. 11)) Preschool-Grade 3. Naliah looks forward to her school's International Day, when she will dance a Vietnamese fan dance that she has learned "from her mother, who had learned it from her mother." She tries on her old yellow áo dài, a traditional Vietnamese dress, but it's now too tight for dancing. Taking a beautiful heirloom áo dài from her mother's closet, she hikes up the skirt, cinches it with a belt, and practices the dance until, tripping over the skirt, she hears it rip. Initially she hides it, but later she tells her mother, who recalls ripping the very same áo dài as a child. Her mother had embroidered over it, and she will too. It's a moment of healing within a heartwarming narrative inspired by Bui's memories of International Day as a Vietnamese American child. Phan, who is also a Vietnamese American, contributes a series of lovely illustrations, using subtle colors and graceful lines to define the characters and express Naliah's shifting emotions, concluding with joy and contentment. A picture book celebrating immigrants and their families' cultures.

Carina Felina written by Carmen Deedy and illustrated by Henry Cole

School Library Journal (August 1, 2023) K-Gr 3-What could possibly go wrong with a parrot falling in love with a cat? In spite of Pepe the parrot's best efforts-making 100 Cuban crackers and coffee-Carina Felina, the cat, is not only ungrateful but still really hungry, and swallows the parrot! In an add-on story, Carina Felina travels the city, devouring all who cross her path. Can two little crabs find a way to stop this ravenous eater? Deedy and Cole animate this tale in a most wonderful way. Deedy's text, which includes English and Spanish words, tell the story, and Cole's vivid illustrations clearly show the deliciously villainous cat with all the living things that she's devoured inside her belly, giving children a lot of details to pore over as they go. Readers will also enjoy the way Deedy carefully crafts the text so even non-Spanish speakers will be able to figure out those words. Back matter includes a glossary and a recipe for Cuban crackers. This fun folktale will delight readers of all ages. VERDICT An excellent choice for libraries needing folktales and Spanish bilingual books.-Debbie Tanner © Copyright 2023. Library Journals LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Media Source, Inc. No redistribution permitted.

Horn Book Magazine (September/October, 2023) In this folktale retelling, Pepe the parrot doesn't know what he's getting himself into when he invites his crush, Carina Felina, over for some homemade Cuban crackers. Carina, a fluffy aqua-colored feline with a Cheshire Cat grin, immediately polishes off all one hundred crackers. When Pepe protests, she proclaims, "Why, I'm Carina Felina! / I do what I like and / I eat what I wish. / Step out of my way, / or be my next dish!" and snarfs him down too. Carina then struts through town, eating anyone who doesn't heed her warning. She grows comically larger with every meal, and the cartoonlike illustrations show the people and animals inside her belly. The mayhem finally stops when two cangrejos -- crabs who have been watching the whole time -- goad her into eating them. In her

stomach they declare, "¡Basta! Enough!" They snip themselves and everyone else free, and Carina is left to stitch herself up. Deedy's catchy text is clever through the final playfully gruesome scene. Cole emphasizes the humor in the tale with pencil and digital illustrations that feature expressive townsfolk and animals. Storytime listeners will be chanting along with Carina's refrain by her second snack and will enjoy going back to search for the two cangrejos in each encounter. Back matter includes information about the folktale (told in many cultures), a glossary of Spanish words, and a recipe for Cuban crackers -- bake at your own risk.

Rick the Rock of Room 214 written by Julie Falatko and illustrated by Ruth Chan

Kirkus Reviews (June 1, 2022) A rock wants to rock his world. Rick, a specimen residing on the Nature Finds shelf in Classroom 214, dreams of life outdoors after hearing the teacher describe the power and importance of rocks in nature. The acorn, the moss, and the bark who sit on the shelf with Rick try to convince him simply to stay with them, but Rick is bored with his sedentary existence; he wants adventures! Cleverly figuring out how to escape life as a mere shelf sitter, Rick finds himself outdoors among others of his kind but soon learns their lot isn't so hot (though their existence was the result of very hot circumstances—exploding out of volcanoes)—nor is it exciting or dangerous. In fact, it's dull and lonely. Luckily for Rick, a student rescues him, returning him to his shelf and grateful pals. Rick has a rock-solid epiphany: Life in Room 214 is more rewarding than he'd realized. This sweet, gentle tale reinforces for children the reassuring idea that it's OK to try new things and explore new paths, but it's equally OK, not to mention comforting and important, to return to familiar territory. The charming digital illustrations, many set in panels, are delightfully expressive and deeply appealing; young readers will appreciate the costumes worn by the inhabitants of the Nature Finds shelf, presumably concocted by the students, who are racially diverse. One child wears a hijab. (This book was reviewed digitally.) This story rocks.

Publishers Weekly starred (June 27, 2022) Rick, a lumpy gray rock with googly eyes and a sweet smile, has been sitting on Room 214's Nature Finds shelf "for as long as he can remember" while on-the-move human students, portrayed with various skin tones, have all the fun, drawing and reading and singing. During a geology unit, Rick learns that his kind "hold up the world," and becomes convinced that he's made for adventure, just like the rocks that form imposing outcroppings and exploding volcanoes. Hitching a ride in a student's backpack, Rick, who sports a gold star and a green splodge, lands among a whole field of outdoor rocks, asking, "When do we explode out of volcanoes?" But the rocks, who "have never had glitter glue spilled on them," are sedentary in the extreme, wanting nothing more than to sit in silence ("We already exploded. Other times. We're done with that now"). Mixing laugh-out-loud narration with comics-style framing, previous collaborators Falatko and Chan (*The Great Indoors*) earn a gold star for comedy cooperation. And by restoring Rick to the shelf with a new understanding of how he inspires the students' learning and art-making, the creators show that adventure is really what you make it-and who you make it with. Ages 4-8. Author's agent: Jennifer Laughran, Andrea Brown Literary. Illustrator's agent: Rebecca Sherman, Writers House.

My Pet Feet written by Josh Funk and illustrated by Billy Yong

Kirkus Reviews (June 1, 2022) What would a world without R's look like? When a brown-skinned child awakens, they greet their pet feet, Doodles, who's in apparent distress. Wait. Pet feet? This is all wrong! Something is missing, but the young narrator cannot immediately identify what it is. A glance at the alphabet artwork on the bedroom wall reveals a telltale gap. Readers in the know will quickly identify the missing letter R; the stolen letter no longer exists in this world. The child decides to hunt down the missing letter but must dodge silly obstacles of R-less mayhem along the way. The child seeks the help of a friend, but without the R finds a fiend in his place. Flying cows (cows with bovine bodies) attack. Then Doodles runs away, or rather is leading the way to the R thieves! Featuring delicious wordplay, this tale hits all the right notes for early primary audiences; parents and educators will appreciate this engaging story's many opportunities to build phonemic awareness and letter knowledge among early readers and

writers. Depicting wide-eyed characters and busy scenes bursting with sight gags, the digital illustrations also provide many opportunities to explore the impact of an R-less world. (This book was reviewed digitally.) Silly and playful alphabet fun.

Got Your Nose written by Alan Katz and illustrated by Alex Willan

Follow your nose on an adventure! Becky, a tan-skinned girl with poofy dark hair and a missing tooth, loves playing with her Grandpa Max, who is bald with tan skin. But when Grandpa Max attempts to play a final trick on Becky as he is leaving for the day, our heroine soon discovers that the “got your nose!” joke is no laughing matter—her nose is tucked unknowingly into Grandpa Max’s pocket! She runs after Grandpa Max—or “Mampa Max,” as Becky has to pronounce it now—to tell him what’s going on, and the nose takes off, leaping out of Grandpa Max’s pocket and growing arms and legs. The nose leads them on a merry chase across town before returning back to Becky’s face thanks to a combination of luck and smart thinking. As the duo are about to part, Becky’s game of “got your ear!” starts the mischief all over again. It’s a clever idea, but some clunky choices along the way impede the story. Becky’s mispronunciations sans nose are amusing, but some don’t work. This becomes apparent when reading the story aloud: “We mustn’t mive up mope,” says Becky, but anyone plugging their nose can easily pronounce give and hope. Additionally, the nose’s motivations—initially it seems to seek out its favorite smells—give way quickly to less logical activities like minigolf and swimming. (Who likes getting water up their nose?) The digital images do a lot of heavy lifting humor wise, but they can’t save this story. (This book was reviewed digitally.) Lost by a nose. (Picture book. 4-8) Kirkus Reviews (November 1, 2022)

Grades K-2. Becky thinks she’s too old for her beloved grandpa Max’s classic nose-snatching trick, until he does it one more time, and she discovers that her nose is actually gone! Worse yet, the nose leaps out of his pocket and, being “extremely runny,” proceeds to lead its two pursuers on a merry chase. Endowed with stick limbs in Willan’s cartoon illustrations, the snub but speedy schnoz blows past onlookers (comments one: “If I could pick any nose, I’d certainly pick that one!”) until Grandpa at last resnatches and reattaches it. Grateful Becky finally agrees with his conclusion—a proposition that Katz has been preaching for many years—that “you’re never too old for silly fun.” Storytime audiences will be delighted to go with the flow, particularly in pairings with similarly perambulatory proboscises, such as Jason Eaton’s *The Day My Runny Nose Ran Away* or Catherine Cowan’s adaptation of the surreal Nikolai Gogol’s *The Nose*. Booklist (November 1, 2022 (Vol. 119, No. 5))

The Duck Never Blinks written and illustrated by Alex Latimer

Grades K-2. Becky thinks she’s too old for her beloved grandpa Max’s classic nose-snatching trick, until he does it one more time, and she discovers that her nose is actually gone! Worse yet, the nose leaps out of his pocket and, being “extremely runny,” proceeds to lead its two pursuers on a merry chase. Endowed with stick limbs in Willan’s cartoon illustrations, the snub but speedy schnoz blows past onlookers (comments one: “If I could pick any nose, I’d certainly pick that one!”) until Grandpa at last resnatches and reattaches it. Grateful Becky finally agrees with his conclusion—a proposition that Katz has been preaching for many years—that “you’re never too old for silly fun.” Storytime audiences will be delighted to go with the flow, particularly in pairings with similarly perambulatory proboscises, such as Jason Eaton’s *The Day My Runny Nose Ran Away* or Catherine Cowan’s adaptation of the surreal Nikolai Gogol’s *The Nose*. Booklist (November 1, 2022 (Vol. 119, No. 5))

Kirkus Reviews (May 1, 2023)

Despite the best efforts of the narrator—and readers—the titular duck just won’t blink. Like Mo Willems’ Pigeon books, this tale plays effectively with narrator-reader dynamics. Speaking directly to children, Latimer opens with, “You see that DUCK over there? I’ve been watching that duck all day and it hasn’t

blinked.” The narrator proceeds to suggest ideas for getting the duck’s eyelids to move: shouting, telling a sad story, sharing a joke. Nothing works, of course, until the narrator heads home for a nap and the duck finally closes its eyes. The delighted squeals of children will ring out as this book is read aloud; little ones are sure to love being in on the fun of trying to make the duck blink—and catching it in the act. The duck is the only thing we see in the book, its eyes wide, almost googly circles with pinprick pupils. It sheds a tear and cracks a smile, and though there’s nothing else to look at, the duck is nevertheless captivating. A well-done tight grid across two pages shows the duck in each rectangle, unblinking, unmoving, even as night turns to day and a leaf fluttering past nods at seasons changing. This will undoubtedly be a fun read-aloud for a lap-sitting child or a room full of preschoolers. (This book was reviewed digitally.) Simple and effective, sure to elicit glee. (Picture book. 3-5)

Don’t Eat Bees: Life Lessons from Chip the Dog written by Dev Petty and illustrated by Mike Boldt

Preschool-Grade 2. This romping read-aloud, by the duo that produced the popular *I Don’t Want to Be a Frog* series, stars a mutt with a message for all other dogs: “Don’t eat bees.” The mutt, Chip, who has a wide circle around one eye and a huge snout, first establishes that he’s smart. Chip knows that you can dig 30 holes for 30 bones or put all 30 bones in 1 hole. Experience has taught him that just about everything is on the menu for dogs, except for bees. Chip has an expansive list of what’s fine for dogs to eat, including socks, homework, and the Thanksgiving turkey, but each cluster of “OK” foods is followed by the refrain “But not bees.” Readers will start to suspect that Chip is a little obsessed with bees, and there’s a comic sequence toward the end that shows just how Chip got that way. The bright, bouncy illustrations carry the hilarity; scenes like the wreck of the Thanksgiving dinner table abound. Funny and involving. Booklist (May 1, 2022 (Vol. 118, No. 17))

A dog’s guide to what to eat. Oblivious to the amusement—or, considerably more often, outrage—of the beige-skinned family in the background, an overstimulated pooch proudly tallies the “dog things” they know. These begin with “how cats are awfully self-important for animals who poop in a box” but go on quickly to proven or potential yummys, from socks and homework to cat food (“Who’s a dumb dog now, Mittens?”), furniture, unguarded sandwiches, a whole turkey snatched off the table, and Grandpa’s teeth. There are some no-nos, though, including lemons, lit candles, and most especially bees: “No sir! Never...ever...ever...//...again.” Boldt brings suitable ballyhoo to his depictions of wild domestic carnage, and though he dials down the perpetrator’s reaction to the bee experiment from realistic anguish to sheepish embarrassment, the scene with the dentures is hilarious, and the dog’s expression after munching on a lemon will dry up plenty of viewers’ mouths in sympathy. “I am a smart dog,” the flop-eared foodie repeatedly proclaims. Readers seeing the pooch eagerly eyeing the potted cactus in the final picture may side with Mittens. (This book was reviewed digitally.) A chewy treat for dog lovers. (Picture book. 5-7) Kirkus Reviews (May 1, 2022)

We Are Going to Be Pals written and illustrated by Mark Teague

Booklist (June 1, 2023 (Vol. 119, No. 19))

Preschool-Grade 2. An African cattle egret tries to talk a reluctant rhinoceros into a friendship in this humorous take on a symbiotic relationship. After landing on the huge, one-horned, tiny-eyed rhino, the egret launches into a sales pitch on friendship. A big flaw in the plan emerges as the egret talks about what the rhino can do for the egret but, oddly, never gets around to saying what it can do for the rhino (consume the ticks that the rhino can’t get at, squawk off predators). The egret is comically chatty and pesky, throwing out bromides about friendship (helping each other, doing things together, communicating) that this bird is just not doing. The climax, in which the egret gets stuck in quicksand at a watering hole and the rhino pulls it out, says more about true friendship than all of the egret’s platitudes. The lively

illustrations, done in acrylics, depict realistic animals and landscapes. Somewhat vague about symbiotic relationships, with the egret's descriptions of friendship seeming tacked on, but entertaining overall.

Kirkus Reviews (April 15, 2023)

Egret and Rhino need each other, but will they really be pals? When an egret lands on a rhino, the egret is certain they will be friends. The rhino is noncommittal. Egret says they'll have a symbiotic relationship ("It means...We are going to be pals!"). "Perhaps you are thinking, 'I am not the friendly type,' " says the egret. "I understand. I will teach you." The talkative egret starts suggesting things they can do together. Chase the jackals? Rhino doesn't seem inclined. Eat grasshoppers? Rhino's not interested. A ride on the rhino's horn? The rhino really doesn't like that, and the egret says that's a teachable moment about recognizing boundaries. The rhino goes about their day as the egret keeps proposing activities. When the two each enjoy some alone time, the egret gets stuck in quicksand, and the rhino comes to their aid. With the egret safe, the friendship (such as it is) continues. The egret's loquacious lesson in friendship includes some large words that may take some explaining, and their barrage of bad animal puns will be lost on the youngest listeners. Teague's acrylic illustrations are as beautiful as ever, but the egret's nonstop blather verges on bullying. (This book was reviewed digitally.) A bit of a miss for an accomplished author/illustrator. (Picture book. 4-7)

Out of the Blue written by Robert Tregoning and illustrated by Stef Murphy

Booklist (April 1, 2023 (Vol. 119, No. 15))

Preschool-Grade 2. In a town where everything is painted blue—even grass, trees, and school buses—lives a boy who loves yellow. When he and his classmates are outside the school picking up trash and throwing non-blue items into garbage bags, he secretly tucks a yellow rubber duck in his pocket. Troubled and afraid to tell his father, he hides it in his closet with other yellow treasures. Late that night, he pulls them out. Dad walks in. Realizing his son's predicament, he reassures the boy that he loves him, and shows it by painting their house yellow overnight. The neighbors, initially confused, then thoughtful, begin repainting their homes and belongings, creating a more cheerful, colorful, accepting environment for all. The illustrator makes good use of the colors mentioned within the story as well as the contrast between the shades-of-blue scenes and the vividly colorful ones. The rhyming text clearly conveys the boy's shifting emotions. The last lines encourage children (and by extension, their parents, caregivers, and teachers) to embrace and celebrate the differences that make them unique.

Kirkus Reviews (March 15, 2023)

A boy likes different colors. An unnamed "worried little boy" with light skin and messy brown hair lives "in a very BLUE house, / on a very blue street." In his monochrome world, skin and hair tones remain natural, but there are "workers / painting trees and grass" to turn them blue, and diverse children on litter duty toss anything otherwise colored into the trash. There's little explanation about the hows and whys of this tame dystopia, and the limits of the clunkily metered rhyme prevent the story from going into any depth. The boy loves the color yellow but keeps it a secret, because "in his heart he felt that / loving YELLOW must be / BAD." He hides all the yellow things he can find in his closet—many adults will see this framing as a metaphor for queerness. At night the boy throws all his yellow things around his room and dances amid the chaos. His father catches him, and though the boy is initially afraid, Dad comforts him, and with his influence, the town eventually becomes multicolored. It's a contrived attempt to talk about conformity and diversity. The unanswered questions raised by the idea of an all-blue world are potentially interesting but ignored in favor of the familiar "be yourself" message. (This book was reviewed digitally.) Attempts to convey a much-needed lesson, but the execution is as monotonous as its palette. (Picture book. 4-7)

Independent Readers:

Henry Like Always written by Jenn Bailey and illustrated by Mika Song

Horn Book Magazine (March/April, 2023)

Henry, a boy on the autism spectrum (first introduced in the 2019 picture book *A Friend for Henry*, rev. 5/19), likes everything about school. Life in Classroom Ten is entirely predictable. Mrs. Tanaka posts the schedule for the week, and Henry can count on -having Music on Wednesdays, Free Choice every Thursday, and Share Time on Fridays. So when Mrs. Tanaka announces that the class will hold a special parade on the upcoming Friday in place of Share Time, Henry responds with dismay. All week, Henry objects, but to no avail. On the big day, Henry hands his teacher his Quiet Card and enters the classroom closet to regroup. There, he encounters classmate Samuel, who is unhappy about the parade for a different reason. Henry finds a solution to Samuel's discomfort, a way to keep Friday as a time to share, and a comfortable place for himself in the parade. The ending of this short chapter book, heavily illustrated and with a format and content to appeal to new readers, is as satisfying as Bailey's understanding prose and Song's gentle, friendly illustrations. Henry is an extremely sympathetic hero -- relatable and authentic. His open face expresses anxiety, calm, distress, or delight with just small changes to his eyebrows or mouth. Readers will recognize Henry as a child who succeeds in adjusting to what is, for him, an enormous challenge. Maeve Visser Knoth March/April 2023 p.62

Kirkus Reviews starred (January 1, 2023)

Change is hard for everyone. Classroom Ten has a Big Calendar, and Henry likes how it never changes. But this week, the teacher, Mrs. Tanaka (who presents as East Asian), announces that their diverse class will have a parade on Friday. Henry points out that Friday is Share Time, so Mrs. Tanaka makes space for the parade by moving Share Time to Thursday. Henry, whose behaviors fall on the autistic spectrum and who presents as East Asian, has an especially hard time adjusting to this alteration in the schedule. The rest of the week involves preparations for the parade, but Henry's dread just keeps growing, so much so that he feels like there is a volcano in his stomach. Not even his friend Katie (who is brown-skinned) can make him feel better. On Friday, as the class gets ready for the parade, Henry seeks refuge in a quiet space and discovers a solution that will help someone else's mood as well but, most importantly, also allow everyone to participate in their "own way." This balanced, well-crafted chapter book, based on *A Friend for Henry* (2019), includes moments of wry humor, if readers are paying attention. In gentle ink lines and muted-blue washes, the illustrations simultaneously convey the upset feelings brought on by these events and the directness of Henry's desires, all handled with respect and empathy for the protagonist. Deeply relatable reassurance for readers unnerved by change. (Early chapter book. 4-8)

The Greatest in the World written and illustrated by Ben Clanton

Booklist (November 1, 2022 (Vol. 119, No. 5))

Grades 1-3. Rot Poe Tater, a mutant potato, thinks he is the greatest in the world. But then he is challenged by his brother, Snot, to a Greatest in the World contest—a potato sack race through Barrel Bottom Bog past the Moldy Mounds to the top of High Hill—which will be judged by their little sister, Tot. When they tie, they must compete in a second contest, a high-speed roll of Hot Potato Hill, and then a third and final competition: a laugh-off until there's only one tuber left standing. Chock-full of spudtacular puns and a feel-good surprise ending, Clanton offers a delightful laugh-on-every-page early chapter book for kids ready to tackle longer stories but with very simple text and visual context clues. The graphic novel elements interspersed throughout the standard illustrated text will hold great appeal for young readers. The artwork, done digitally, combines watercolor in mustard yellows and moldy greens with (quite brilliantly) potato printing to create some truly disgusting and lovable antiheroes.

Kirkus Reviews (September 15, 2022)

One grumbly day, two mutant tater brothers vie to determine who is the greatest in the world. It's goofy-looking Rot Poe Tater, with an awesome unibrow and "surprisingly sturdy stick legs," versus big brother Snot, a sleepy, upset couch potato with bedhead. Tot, their "usually super chipper" little sister, acts as the judge. The first challenge, a potato sack race with shades of "The Tortoise and the Hare," ends in a tie. The second contest is Hot Potato Hill, where the brothers must roll down a hill after Tot. No one wins, and the third contest is a laugh-off. Rot declares he's laughing so hard that he needs to pee his pants but then remembers he doesn't wear pants. When Rot and Snot are laughed out, Tot is still giggling. That's when the plot twists and twists again. The text, primarily boastful speech-bubble banter between Rot and Snot, also contains songs, cheers from an enthusiastic worm, and fun wordplay, including alliterative places names like Barrel Bottom Bog and the Moldy Mounds. Text in a smaller typeface alternates with graphic panels, keeping the action moving. Expressive potato faces make the action and emotions clear. Fans of the picture book *Rot: The Cutest in the World* (2016) will enjoy seeing the protagonist again; Clanton relies on the same simple yet expressive cartoon illustrations and humor. This tater trio, and worm, will keep readers laughing, singing, and cheering from the first page to the last. (pictures of other taters who have excelled in the Hot Potato Hill challenge, facts about potatoes, lesson on how to draw Rot) (Graphic novel. 5-7)

Evergreen written and illustrated by Matthew Cordell

Booklist starred (January 1, 2023 (Vol. 119, No. 9))

Preschool-Grade 1. Evergreen is a fearful little squirrel. But when her mother, who makes delicious, healing soup, asks her to take some to Granny Oak, she can't refuse. Walking through Buckthorn Forest, she helps a rabbit who is trapped between two rocks. Afterwards, a red-tailed hawk snatches Evergreen, carries her aloft, and asks her to pull out the thorns that are hurting him. Though suspicious, she complies and earns his gratitude. Next, she rescues a little toad who has hopped to a stepping stone midway across a stream but is too frightened to hop back. Finally, she sees an enormous bear crash to the ground. Granny Oak! After reviving her with Mama's magical soup, Evergreen returns home with new confidence, ready for another adventure. The writing is concise and direct, and the episodic narrative is divided into six parts: one to introduce the characters and set up the drama, one for each of the four major challenges that Evergreen meets during her journey, and one to conclude her adventures. Drawn, shaded, and occasionally crosshatched with black Micron pen and tinted with watercolors in yellow, tan, brown, rose, and pale blue hues, the beautifully composed illustrations give this picture book a handcrafted look that suits the timeless story.

Horn Book Magazine (January/February, 2023)

Young squirrel Evergreen is afraid of just about everything. When Mama asks her to deliver soup to Granny Oak, Evergreen sets off through the woods with trepidation. Her journey is full of unexpected incidents: she extricates a rabbit trapped between boulders, removes briars from a red-tailed hawk's feathers, and rescues a stranded young toad. Cordell's (*Cornbread & Poppy*, rev. 3/22) picture book, with its longer-than-usual text, is broken into six engaging parts, and his fine-lined pen-and-ink drawings are colored with a soft watercolor palette of browns and greens. The varied page layouts convey both the coziness of Evergreen's world and the tension of life as part of the woodland food chain. Evergreen arrives safely with the soup, and a rewarding character reveal allows her to complete her task and fulfill her promise. By the time she's back home, after so many pages of adventure, Evergreen realizes that she is brave and she can solve problems. Maeve Visser Knoth January/February 2023 p.59

Awesome Orange Birthday written by Mitali Ruths and illustrated by Aailya Jaleel

Booklist (January 1, 2023 (Vol. 119, No. 9))

Grades K-3. A young entrepreneur chronicles her burgeoning party-planning venture in this upbeat early chapter book series opener. Priya's guiding principles include "making people happy and helping animals." Her first client, Layla Aunty (Priya's mom's best pal), offers an excellent opportunity to attain both goals. The thoughtful, eco-friendly girl organizes a bespoke birthday bash complete with pumpkin-filled samosas, decorations handmade from recycled paper, and an invitation to contribute a donation to save endangered quokkas. Priya's infectious enthusiasm shines through the diary format of this book, as does her relatable anxiety when unexpected surprises inevitably arise. Jaleel's full-color, eye-catching digital cartoons feature illustrated to-do lists, a neighborhood map, and washi-taped, annotated photographs. Definitions are woven seamlessly into the conversational text: "Now that I have my own business, I want to be professional. That means I have to figure out what I need to do. Then I have to get it done." DIY instructions for making a paper-chain curtain are included, along with discussion questions. This series opener gets an enjoyable party started for beginning readers.

Kirkus Reviews (December 15, 2022)

When Priya Chakraborty starts her own party-planning business, her community comes through to help her succeed—and to calm her anxiety. Priya, a young South Asian American girl, loves crafts, her best friend, Melissa (depicted as light-skinned in the illustrations), and quokkas, fuzzy Australian animals in danger of extinction. What she doesn't love are surprises. So when her mother's best friend, Layla Aunty, asks Priya to throw her birthday party, Priya uses her diary to stay organized and avoid the unexpected. While she's excited about Layla Aunty's orange-themed party, she's also anxious and overwhelmed: There are orange snacks to prepare, orange decorations to make, and orange invitations to deliver. Luckily, Priya doesn't have to do any of this alone: Melissa helps her deliver invitations, her Dida helps her make snacks, and, on the day of the party, her mother's friends help her decorate. Thanks to Priya's creativity, the day is a resounding success—such a success, in fact, that it leads to even more business for Priya's Parties. Priya is a well-rounded, nuanced protagonist whose enthusiasm and anxiety will resonate with readers, and the narrative, peppered with bright images, is fast-moving. The text offers pronunciation guidance for potentially unfamiliar words, such as quokka or the various snacks for the party (jalebi, chevdo, etc.). A layered, upbeat tale starring a determined, relatable protagonist. (Chapter book. 7-10)

Worm and Caterpillar are Friends written and illustrated by Kaz Windness

Kirkus Reviews starred (November 1, 2022)

Besties Worm and Caterpillar share lessons on friendship in this graphic novel for early readers. While pink and purple Worm tends to notice what the two pals have in common, green and orange Caterpillar is fast to point out that they're not the same. They may both be afraid of birds, but Caterpillar loves leaves while Worm eats dirt. Worm crawls on their belly, but Caterpillar has legs (16 of them!). Keen readers will understand quickly why Caterpillar is concerned—Worm says they're best friends "because we are the same!" and Caterpillar knows that things are bound to change. In fact, as Caterpillar spins their chrysalis, Worm is already worrying about their altered buddy. And by the time Caterpillar is ready to emerge, they fret that Worm may no longer like them. When Caterpillar (now Butterfly) pops out, Worm is initially afraid, but with care and trust, Worm is able to accept and love Butterfly for who they've always been. Worm learns along with readers that love is not a surface-level emotion and that true connections bind us deeply to each other. The art is joyful, colorful, and expressive, with emotions reading perfectly on the cartoon insects' faces. Overall, it's an appealing read with a message of acceptance that caregivers will be able to easily apply to real life. Warm and delightful, this tale will stay with readers long after they turn the last page. (Graphic early reader. 4-8)

School Library Journal Xpress (January 20, 2023)

PreS-Gr 2-Windness's comic for young readers explores the nature of evolving relationships with gentle humor. The titular earth-bound friends carry out a simple, flowing conversation as they idyll through a fall day. Worm assumes they understand a static set of facts about their friend, and Caterpillar patiently and deliberately challenges their assumptions. Worm tries to discuss the similarities between themselves and Caterpillar, like their lack of legs (Caterpillar has legs!), their dirt-based diet (wrong again!), and their mutual fear of birds (this one's true!). But while Worm clings to the present moment, Caterpillar carefully tries to prepare them for the future, since caterpillars, of course, must change in a rather dramatic fashion. Though the direction of the plot is well-worn-a caterpillar becomes a butterfly-the emotional interplay between a friend seeking surface similarities and a friend nourishing a deep connection is subtle and satisfying. What sets this title apart from similar tales of animal amity are Windness's full-page watercolor backdrops, deep and rich with purple, green, and orange, conjuring a magical, fading fall twilight. Windness also brings a buzzing energy to her characters, with raised eyebrows and body language between the pair doing as much work as words. VERDICT A straightforward, satisfying treatise on friendship weathering difference and change, with richly colored, lively illustrations, this title offers a lovely, light reading experience for early readers.-Emilia Packard © Copyright 2023. Library Journals LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Media Source, Inc. No redistribution permitted.