The Teachers’ Choices logo that Chris Van Allsburg created (see above) illuminates the idea that good books reach out and tap us on the shoulder to get our attention.

Each year since 1989 the International Reading Association’s Teachers’ Choices project has identified outstanding trade books published for children and adolescents that teachers find to be exceptional in curriculum use. Parents, also, will find books from the Teachers’ Choices list good for reading aloud at home and for background information on questions that arise from tours to a farm, aquarium, or museum and from other shared family events such as television viewing.

The selection is accomplished through a national field test of over 300 newly published books submitted by North American trade book publishers. Seven teams, made up of a regional coordinator, field leaders, teacher reviewers, and trainees for the project, try out the books in classrooms and libraries to select those that meet the established criteria. Regional coordinators circulate copies of the books among teachers and librarians who use them with students. The coordinators record educators’ reactions to each book and tabulate their final ratings. Each book is read by a minimum of six teachers or librarians in each region, although some books have been read by as many as 200 people in a single region.

Ratings from the seven regions are collated to produce the national list. Books are grouped into Primary (K–2, ages 5–8), Intermediate (Grades 3–5, ages 8–11), and Advanced (Grades 6–8, ages 11–14) levels.

Criteria for selection include:
• Books that reflect high literary quality in style, content, structure, beauty of language, and presentation.
• Books that might not be discovered or fully appreciated by children without introduction by a knowledgeable educator or other adult.
• Books that have potential for use across the curriculum. Teachers incorporate such strategies as reading aloud, displays, group projects, and art/music/drama productions. All curriculum areas are covered in the selections.

Regional coordinators for the 1998–99 field test were Cyndi Giorgis, Las Vegas, Nevada (trainee: Marjorie Arnett, Redlands, California); Teri Lesesne, Huntsville, Texas (trainee: Anna Heatherly, Little Rock, Arkansas); Kimberly Young, Topeka, Kansas (trainee: Diane Nielsen, Lawrence, Kansas); Pamela Farris, DeKalb, Illinois (trainee: Judy O’Brien, Dowagiac, Michigan); Betsy Barnett, Eads, Colorado; Pamela Dunston, Athens, Georgia; and Mary Ellen Redden, Batavia, New York. Sandra J. Imdieke, Marquette, Michigan, and Carol Lynch-Brown, Tallahassee, Florida, coordinated the project.

Annotations contain bibliographic data, including ISBN (International Standard Book Number), number of pages, and price. If a publisher has both a library and trade edition, the ISBN for the library edition is included. Information about paperback editions is provided when known. The letter F indicates that the paperback edition is not available in 1999 but is forthcoming. Publishers furnished price information as of late spring 1999; prices are subject to change without notice. The letters CU indicate suggestions for Curriculum Use. Regional coordinators and trainees who wrote the annotations are identified by their initials following the review.
Black Cowboy Wild Horses: A True Story
Julius Lester.
Ill. by Jerry Pinkney.
Bob Lemmons, a former slave, became a cowboy renowned for his tracking ability. This beautiful picture book tells how Lemmons, on his horse Warrior, runs with a small herd of wild mustangs until they accept his presence. Artwork and text combine to capture the rugged beauty and the struggle for survival on the Texas frontier. CU: The book is a wonderful read-aloud. An exciting storyline builds slowly, but the teacher’s voice can hold student interest as the main character battles nature to take over the wild horses and bring them to the corral. MA

Boom Town
Sonia Levitin.
Ill. by Cat Bowman Smith.
This sequel to Nine for California tells the further adventures of a family’s move to California. While father seeks his fortune in the gold fields, Amanda finds hers baking gooseberry pies. The story of her booming business is told in the first person. Amanda also takes credit for the growth of an entire town because she encourages other settlers to start businesses. Animated watercolors with a cartoonish flair help bring the frontier town to life. CU: An excellent introduction to California history during the Gold Rush or to the study of U.S. frontier towns during the 19th century. AH

Drummer Boy: Marching to the Civil War
Ann Turner.
Ill. by Mark Hess.
This poignant story of a drummer boy during the U.S. Civil War conveys the realities of war: fear, sadness, and death. The emotions and little-known role of the drummer boy—to raise spirits and convey officers’ orders by way of varied drumbeats—are conveyed in the tight text and realistic illustrations. CU: Beyond its use as an introduction to the Civil War, this book could stimulate discussion of bravery, the many roles of children in history, and the impact they can have on society today, such as in community service. DN

Emma and the Silk Train
Julie Lawson.
Ill. by Paul Mombourquette.
Emma dreams of having some silk of her own as she watches the high-speed trains roar past the station where her father works. Based on a derailment in 1927 on the banks of the Fraser River in British Columbia, Canada, this story takes Emma to the
river in search of silk that has fallen from the train. CU: Author’s endnotes provide background information to support discussions of the historical and economic importance of the railroad. Students may wish to learn of speed records set by other modes of transportation. JO


My Freedom Trip: A Child’s Escape From North Korea
Frances Park and Ginger Park
Ill. by Debra Reid Jenkins.

As a tribute to their mother’s escape from North Korea, the authors recount her touching story as she was led by her guide to the free land of South Korea. Leaving her own mother behind, Soo must face the effects that war has on families. The illustrations depict the bright days before the occupation and the dark days of war and separation. CU: Appropriate for the study of Korean history and culture (Korean words in characters included) the book could be used as a springboard to a unit on Korea. Prewar freedoms and war-related restrictions might be compared. MR


Raising Yoder’s Barn
Jane Yolen
Ill. by Bernie Fuchs.

The spirit of tradition and cooperation is celebrated in this heartwarming story of an Amish barn raising. When the Yoder’s barn is struck by lightning and burns, neighbors arrive within days to “frolic” and build a new one. Yolen shares a story of human resilience through poetic language, while luminous oil paintings capture the excitement and joy of a community working together to accomplish a goal. CU: Students get a glimpse of Amish life in Pennsylvania through text and illustration. A study of Fuchs’s use of color, perspective, and light properties will help students understand how artwork can enhance and extend the text’s meaning. CG


Soaring With the Wind:
The Bald Eagle
Gail Gibbons.
Ill. by the author.

Brilliant watercolors accompany a simple text that relates plenty of information about the bird that has been the emblem of the United States since 1782. At one time, these powerful birds were endangered; careful conservation measures have increased their numbers so that a new generation may behold the majesty of these raptors. CU: The obvious curriculum connection is the science classroom, yet geography teachers will find this book as useful. For English classrooms, use Gibbons’s text as a model for research report writing. TSL


The Summer My Father Was Ten
Pat Brisson.
Ill. by Andrea Shine.

A father reminisces with his daughter about an incident from his youth that started as innocent fun but destroyed an elderly neighbor’s prized garden. The father recalls the sense of responsibility that led him eventually to join the neighbor in rebuilding the garden as well as the friendship. CU: Use this story to talk about choice and consequence, about decisions and the role they play in developing character. SI


Thank You, Mr. Falker
Patricia Polacco.
Ill. by the author.

The frustration, self-doubt, and shame a little girl feels as she struggles to learn to read are poignantly described in this autobiographical account. It pays tribute to the insightful fifth-grade teacher who discovered Polacco’s secret and helped her. Large, colorful illustrations emphasize the emotional trauma experienced by a struggling reader. CU: Teachers can use the book to motivate reluctant readers and to involve proficient readers in tutoring activities within their school and community. Students can predict outcomes as they read the book and then discuss the effects of illiteracy. PD


This Is the Sea That Feeds Us
Robert F. Baldwin.
Ill. by Don Dyen.

From the delightful opening verse of this poetic nonfiction book, the reader learns the important concept that plankton is the first link in the ocean food chain. The rhyming text continues and covers each link—the shrimp who eats the plankton, the sea bass who eats the shrimp, and the humans who catch the sea bass for dinner. Illustrations depict a thriving ocean ecosystem, and informational sidebars explain important facts on plants and animals in the ocean. CU: This is a wonderful resource for studies on ocean plankton, habitats, and food chains. Using the book as a model, students could research their own topic, write poetry to explain it, and include sidebars of facts and figures. BB


Illustration copyright © 1998 by Patricia Polacco. Used by permission of Philomel, Penguin Putnam from Thank You, Mr. Falker by Patricia Polacco.
Intermediate

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone
J.K. Rowling.
Orphaned when an evil wizard kills his parents, Harry goes to live with his aunt, uncle, and spoiled cousin. He is rescued from their outrageous neglect when an owl messenger delivers a note inviting Harry to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. There he proves his worth as a young wizard. Turn the typical Cinderella story inside out, upside down, shake it hard, and you get Harry Potter’s story. CU: This is a great introduction to fantasy for intermediate students. It has a coming-of-age theme and will speak to late bloomers or children who prefer to be different from the crowd. KY

I Have Heard Of a Land
Joyce Carol Thomas.
Ill. by Floyd Cooper.
Inspired by the westward journey of the author’s family to Oklahoma, this book is written in the style of rhythmic poetry. It is a tale of an African American woman’s search for land, because land symbolizes freedom. This pioneer’s hardships and joys are illustrated both in words and pictures. Her hope is emphasized by the repetition of the title on each page. CU: For language arts classes, this book is rich in metaphor, personification, and vivid vocabulary—a definite read-aloud. A valuable resource on the settling of Oklahoma in the late 1800s. MR

If I Forget, You Remember
Carol Lynch Williams.
Elyse anticipates summer vacation with hopes of sleeping in, reading books, and writing a novel. However, her grandmother is in the early stages of Alzheimer’s, and Elyse’s mother feels compelled to have Granny come and live with the family. This sensitive novel explores both adolescent behavior and the effects of a devastating disease. Williams presents realistic characters and situations. CU: Use this book as a springboard for discussing and researching the effects of Alzheimer’s disease or to prompt discussion for adolescents dealing with self-identity. CG

Joan of Arc
Diane Stanley.
Ill. by the author.
Stanley’s careful research captures the medieval world of the 15th-century peasant girl who led the French army to victory against the English. Gilded illustrations are reminiscent of the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages. The reader meets Joan as a simple peasant girl in a humble French village and follows her from the battlefields to the dark prison cells and her death sentence by the Inquisition. CU: Use this biography for social studies, as a read-aloud, a reference, or for independent reading. The afterword, an excellent framework for discussion, guides students to look at historical events from different points of view. MA

Journey to Ellis Island: How My Father Came to America
Carol Bierman.
Ill. by Laurie McGraw.
This is a biography of 12-year-old Julius Weinstein who sails with his mother and sister from Russia in 1922. The immigrant experience at Ellis Island, New York, is told from this young man’s point of view, and his adventures do not end with the ocean voyage. CU: Social studies teachers will appreciate the simple narrative detailing the immigrant experience. For readers wanting lengthier reading, recommend the Ellis Island trilogy of novels by Joan Lowery Nixon or Janet Bode’s non-fiction selection, New Kids in Town: Oral Histories of Immigrant Teens. TSL
Hyperion. 48 pp. ISBN 0-7868-0377-0. US$17.95; CAN$24.95.

The Last Safe House: A Story of the Underground Railroad
Barbara Greenwood.
Ill. by the author.
The Last Safe House: A Story of the Underground Railroad
Barbara Greenwood.
Ill. by Heather Collins.
Told in short chapters, this dramatic story of the Underground Railroad is seen through the eyes of two young girls—Eliza, a runaway slave from Virginia in the U.S., and Johanna, whose family provides a safe house in Canada for runaways. After slaves escaped to Canada, they then had to learn how to live free. The signs, symbols, songs, and the logistics of the underground railroad are described and illustrated. A glossary of terms is included. CU: Thematic connections include 19th-century North American history, the Underground Railroad, and slavery. AH

Mary on Horseback:
Three Mountain Stories
Rosemary Wells.
Ill. by Peter McCarty.
This outstanding biography of Mary Breckenridge, founder of the Frontier Nursing Service in the Appalachian Mountains of the U.S., begins in Kentucky in 1923. Through three different families, to whom Breckenridge and her fellow nurses brought needed medical care, we learn how determination, integrity, and compassion when linked with a vision can make a difference in people’s lives. CU: This book would be a wonderful introduction to historical biography. Teachers could use any one of the stories to discuss character education, women in history, regions of the U.S., or health issues. KY

Popcorn
James Stevenson.
Ill. by the author.
The ordinary is transformed into the extraordinary through these short, thought-provoking poems. Hidden among these poems about picnic tables, abandoned vehicles, and cluttered backyards is the author’s story of loving and losing a pet. Lettering styles, type fonts, layout effects, and watercolor and ink illustrations add meaning and spirit. CU: Students can identify author techniques that breathe life into inanimate objects, transform animals into humans, and fire imagination. They can compare and contrast these techniques with those of other poets and then write their own poems about everyday events and objects. PD

Safari
Robert Bateman and Rick Archbold.
Ill. by Robert Bateman.
Thirteen African animals, from the familiar elephant to the lesser known kudu, are featured in elegant paintings and brief text. Bateman captures the color, texture, stance, and movement of each one. The book closes with a call to stop the uncontrolled killing of these beautiful beasts. CU: This book, read aloud or independently, introduces the variety of animals in Africa. Captivating illustrations and unusual tidbits of information woven into the text urge young researchers to dig deeper. DN

Seeing Stars
James Muirden.
Ill. by various artists.
Most notable in this book is content organization. Each double-page spread has a trivia question for young students plus a numbered sidebar of information laid out like a flow chart. The last page not only has a simple index, but also answers to the trivia questions with explanations. CU: It’s an obvious resource
for teaching units on stars or space. However, media specialists and teachers could use the book’s format and design to teach research skills such as note-taking, information organization, and presentation. BB


Standing in the Light: The Captive Diary of Catherine Carey Logan
Mary Pope Osborne.

One in the “Dear America” series, this book is a fictionalized account of an adolescent Quaker girl’s capture in 1763 by Lenape Indians in the Delaware Valley of Pennsylvania. The story, told in diary format, reveals Catherine’s conflict in clinging to her Quaker background while slowly yielding to the warmth of her captors. CU: Extensive historical endnotes add authenticity and background for today’s readers; the notes include maps, paintings, Lenape chants, steps for candle making, and other information that will add to U.S. history studies. JO


Advanced

Classic Poetry: An Illustrated Collection
Selected by Michael Rosen. Ill. by Paul Howard.

Rosen includes such well-known poems as Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” and Emily Dickinson’s “I’m Nobody, Who Are You?” Photographs of authors, short biographies, and general information about poetry forms are included. Notes explain each poem’s sociological, literary, and historical background. CU: This is an invaluable resource in many study areas. The works by prominent female authors could be used in studies of women’s history or women’s issues. BB


From Slave Ship to Freedom Road
Julius Lester. Ill. by Rod Brown.

Exquisite paintings help readers share the pain and suffering on the slave ships of the Middle Passage. Taken from family and chained in cramped ship’s quarters, African slaves were sold again once they reached the U.S. Lester challenges readers to imagine not only their harsh conditions and grief, but also the optimism and uncertainty that freedom ultimately offered former slaves. CU: Students can reenact what it was like to be a slave or ponder the joy and uncertainty of freedom. PJF


Kidbits

Blackbirch Press Staff. Ill. by Bob Italiano.

Where do most kids do their homework? What’s the coolest kind of music for teens? What’s the fastest animal in the world? These and thousands of other facts, presented in graph format, make fascinating reading. CU: Have each student select a category from the book, poll classmates or the entire school, and then make a graph of the results. Display the results throughout the school. PJF


The Maze
Will Hobbs.

How someone deals with adversity is a true measure of character. Without family and forced to be self-reliant, 14-year-old Rick faces a modern maze full of dead ends. He reaches a turning point when he escapes a detention center and meets a bird biologist studying condors in Canyonlands National Park, Utah, USA. CU: Use this book in character study and as an excellent resource on endangered species programs. It’s also a good introduction to hang gliding. MR


Return to Hawk’s Hill
Allan W. Eckert.

To escape an evil trapper determined to have revenge on his family, 7-year-old Ben hides in a rowboat

on the Red River. Having no oars, he is swept downstream and into Indian territory. Set in Manitoba, Canada, this suspenseful story deals with history of the province and the prejudices early settlers held toward Indians. Eckert includes a variety of Cree words. CU: Teachers can have students analyze character traits by considering the motivation behind characters’ actions. Students can develop their own Cree-English dictionaries. This book will enrich social studies of Canada or of its indigenous peoples. PD


Riding Freedom
Pam Muñoz Ryan. Ill. by Brian Selznick.
Charlotte Parkhurst grew up in a U.S. orphanage. The first chance she had, she ran away and got a job doing what she loved best—working with horses. Using the name Charley and a cleverly developed plan, she assumed a boy’s identity and became a legendary stagecoach driver in California. One of her many remarkable feats was being the first woman to vote in California and probably the United States. CU: This well-told biography of a spirited heroine could be used in women’s studies or in U.S. history of the westward movement. It’s a terrific literature response book; students can try to anticipate Charley’s every move and her reactions to each of many hardships. PJF


Soldier’s Heart
Gary Paulsen.
When Charley is 15, he enlists in the First Minnesota Volunteers and heads off to fight in the U.S. Civil War. Little does he know what horrors, challenges, and fears he will face. Charley leaves the service at 19, already old beyond his years. Paulsen presents an intense and riveting account of the experiences of many young men who return from war irrevocably changed. CU: This book is a must for study of the U.S. Civil War or war in general, and it’s an ideal addition to the history classroom. TSL


Ten Queens: Portraits of Women of Power
Milton Meltzer. Ill. by Bethanne Andersen.
Ten essays focus on women who have held tremendous power in the world—Esther, Cleopatra, Elizabeth I, Catherine the Great, and others. Meltzer describes the women’s accomplishments without glossing over their ruthless tactics. Andersen’s dramatic oil paintings depict the women in battle, captivity, or seeking revenge. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index provide additional information and historical context.

CU: A terrific book to use in a study of women in history. Students will gain insight into political and social perspectives by comparing these 10 queens with women in power today. CG


Witnesses to War: Eight True-Life Stories of Nazi Persecution
Michael Leapman. Ill. with photographs.
Based on the firsthand accounts of adult survivors and on historic documents, these eight true stories tell of children who experienced horror and suffering in World War II. Historic black-and-white photographs punctuate the reality and gravity of the time and events. The underlying message celebrates the human spirit and will to survive. CU: Use this book in social studies to present the human side of war and to draw parallels with recent events in Europe. Language arts teachers can discuss point of view, fact and opinion, and primary sources before having students interview other survivors. PD

Offprints of this annotated 1999 Teachers’ Choices list (publication #9108) are available from the International Reading Association. The list is available for viewing in PDF format at www.readingonline/reviews/choices/choices_index.html. Order bulk copies online at bookstore.reading.org or by phone with a credit card, call (in the U.S. and Canada only) 1-800-336-READ, ext. 266, or send order to Order Department, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139, USA.

Compilations from earlier years
IRA has also compiled several books that provide a handy reference to the most recent years of Teachers’ Choices and Young Adults’ Choices annotations.


Order either book online at bookstore.reading.org or call 1-800-336-READ, ext. 266 (outside North America call int. +1-302-731-1600, ext. 266). IRA members deduct 20%. Shipping: please add $3.00 U.S., $5.00 Canada, $15.00 all other countries.

The International Reading Association (IRA) is a nonprofit, professional organization of classroom teachers, reading specialists, administrators, teacher/educators, reading researchers, parents, librarians, psychologists, and others interested in improving reading instruction and promoting literacy worldwide. The Association encourages the study of the reading process, research, and better teacher education. It promotes the development of reading proficiency to the limit of each person’s ability and an awareness of the need for and importance of reading.

International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139, USA
www.reading.org