

## Birthday Book Recommendations as Best of PK-2 Grade List:

- ÁGUILA, María Dolores. ***Menudo Sunday***. illus. by Erika Meza. Dial. ISBN 9780593462256.

K-Gr 3—So many books attempt to talk about family, community, bonds of sharing, of gathering. This required reading—also a counting book—may instigate new rituals in the homes of readers who encounter it.

- AWAN, Jashar. ***Every Monday Mabel***. S. & S. ISBN 9781665938150.

PreS-Gr 2—For anyone who has ever been or loved the weird little kid who always does her thing, Awan's spare story will resonate. Mabel's ritual is carried out in an illustrative style reminiscent of Taro Gomi's work; even better, the sanitation truck is right on time, and readers find that Mabel's not such an outlier after all.

- BURGESS, Matthew. ***Fireworks***. illus. by Cátia Chien. HarperCollins/Clarion. ISBN 9780063216723.

PreS-Gr 1—Chien gloriously translates sound and feeling to the page, offering children and adults a sensory experience of the inexplicable thrills of exploding lace and rocket bursts in the sky. Burgess provides a steady text that vibrates with the excitement surrounding the displays.

- CORDELL, Matthew. ***To See an Owl***. Random House Studio. ISBN 9780593649893.

PreS-Gr 2—Majestic, simple, studied drawings bring the protagonist face-to-face with the natural world. Cordell's certainty of purpose, to show the value and vivid adventures available to those who "look," makes this book impossible to put down.

- FORSYTHE, Matthew. ***Aggie and the Ghost***. S. & S./Paula Wiseman. ISBN 9781534478206.

K-Gr3—Those readers with an annoying, want-to-be-included younger sibling will readily settle into this version of haunting. Aggie can't escape the ghost, and Forsythe's taut sentences and expressively blocky, atmospheric scenes never give away his hand. Deserving, witty, complete.

- GOADE, Michaela. ***Moon Song***. Little, Brown. ISBN 9780316461634.

Gr 1-4—In alliterative language as lyrical and atmospheric as the moonlit accompanying scenes of northern forest, water, and sky, Goade evokes both the wonders of the natural world and her own Tlingit and Haida cultural background.

- HAN, Sally Soweol. ***Nightsong***. Bloomsbury. ISBN 9781547615063.

PreS-Gr 3–Soft drawings feature hard sounds, ephemeral and yet captured by onomatopoeia, as a boy discovers that the whole world sings to him, if only he is still and listening. From the raucous to the sacred, from city to country, Han’s illustrations have the look of watercolors brushed across clouds.

- HANNIGAN, Jess. ***The Bear Out There***. HarperCollins/Quill Tree. ISBN 9780063289482.

Gr 1-4–In blocky, color-splashed acrylic collage, a narrator becomes that self-possessed, hysteria-inducing voice of campfire stories and urban legends, constantly threatening a visitor with dreadful scenarios of what may come. Groups will lean into every delicious word.

- HARRIS, Shawn. ***Let’s Be Bees***. Holiday House/Neal Porter. ISBN 9780823457090.

PreS-Gr 2–Father and child cycle through funny imaginative leaps, to be buzzing bees, or chirping birds, or rustling trees, and more. There is no “what does it mean” to this riot of sound effects and crayonlike, ebullient scratchy scenes, but just the lingering need to share this work.

- JUDGE, Lita. ***Old Blue Is My Home***. Abrams. ISBN 9781419771521.

Gr 1-4–An old-school picture book in the best sense, the story of a child’s longing amid housing insecurity to belong to a more conventional, settled world. Based on the author’s childhood, the book comes with iridescent watercolor and colored pencil scenes of home in a snug blue van.

- KANG, Angie. ***Our Lake***. Penguin/Kokila. ISBN 9780593698235.

Gr 1-4–Kang’s story happens to be about a death in the family, and it happens to be about a lake, but the book weaves new notions of time and space: time together, time to heal, and the space to build memories. Glowing gouache paintings move from sunlight to shadows to show tentative recovery from a devastating loss.

- LUYKEN, Corinna. ***The Arguers***. Penguin/Rocky Pond. ISBN 9781984814425.

PreS-Gr 2–The heir-apparent to Edward Gorey, Maurice Sendak, and Hilary Knight, Luyken offers up a brand-new fairy tale that feels as old as time and is relentlessly funny. Children will understand the joy of arguing, as well as its downside, in a book that needs both group-sharing and one-on-one deep dives.

- MANOLI, Costantia. *The Fig Tree*. illus. by Leah Giles. Roaring Brook. ISBN 9781250763136.

K-Gr 3—Without sentiment but infused with the emotional vibration of a country torn in two, the elegant story of a fig tree in the times before a conflict that led to the dividing of the Republic of Cyprus (Greek Cypriot) from Turkish Cypriot. Collagelike scenes contrast sculptural figs and the thorns of barbed wire.

- MATA, Niña. *New*. HarperCollins. ISBN 9780063318250.

K-Gr 2—A young Filipina wearing hand-me-downs on the first day of school stars in a resonant and comic story, offering empathy for other newcomers and a lesson in compassion for onlookers. The story never sinks into tropes as it shows how pushing through is far better than staying behind.

- PEÑA, Zeke. *Sundust/Polvo solar*. Penguin/Kokila. ISBN 9780593700112.

K-Gr 3—Two children, one with a fade, the other with a long looping braid, jump over the wall into the wilder desertscape where chasing sundust and imagination turns into a marvelous adventure. Spare storytelling and all the colors of the Southwest combine into a long, languid, revelatory day. Available in Spanish and English.

- RANSOME, James. *A Place for Us*. Penguin/Nancy Paulsen. ISBN 9780593324882.

K-Gr 4—Ransome’s diplomatic note about this heartrending wordless book explains that he hopes to amplify the conditions of those without resources. What readers will find in this effusive day-in-the-life story is a Black American family and how they cope with limited money, the public library, and a park bench to create their own version of “shelter.”

- SARDÀ, Júlia. *The Witch in the Tower*. Candlewick Studio. ISBN 9781536243017.

Gr 2 Up—Exquisitely stylized artwork keeps pace with the deliberate, winding text of the ephemeral companion to *The Queen in the Cave*. For readers of longer form picture books, this is eye-filling and exquisitely told; a visit to these pages requires only a passport of the imagination.

- SHARPSON, Neil. *Don’t Trust Fish*. illus. by Dan Santat. Dial. ISBN 9780593616673.

PreS-Gr 3—Readers learn up-close the role of the “unreliable narrator” in this hilarious satire, with deadpan delivery, art and text that take sophisticated liberties with the page, and a jab at the dark side of the internet. Misinformation or good advice? Let children decide.

- STEAD, Rebecca. **Anything**. illus. by Gracey Zhang. Chronicle. ISBN 9781797215150.

K-Gr 3—Through white pages, room angles, black lines, and a judicious use of rainbows, Zhang’s art effusively conveys the implied losses of the story, as well as tentative steps forward for a father and daughter in their new life.

- STERER, Gideon. **We Are Already Haunting Here!** illus. by Charlie Mylie. Union Square Kids & Co. ISBN 9781454960478.

K-Gr 4—A small ghost in a bowler hat leaves the family haunt to go find a perfect perch of its own. But what it finds? Heartbreak, hauntings, and hope live rent-free in a cannily affecting story of homecoming.

- TABOR, Corey. **Cranky, Crabby Crow (Saves the World)**. Greenwillow. ISBN 9780063373587.

PreS-Gr 1—Tabor takes on the superhero trope and sends it into space with this glimpse of stealth friendships among a curmudgeonly crow and the animals it tries to keep at a distance. Choosing a blocky art style and leaving out needless explanations that might ruin the humor, the author knows that the best heroes keep their accomplishments to themselves.

- TEBO, Mary. **Sparrow**. illus. by E.B. Lewis. Astra. ISBN 9781635926880.

PreS-Gr 3—A resonant story about Jerusalem that doesn’t mention Jerusalem; here is Sparrow, at home in a crack in the Western Wall but something is missing. In perfect prose and suspense-building scenes, the story follows a small bird through a day full of promise and offers children a view of a landmark through the prism of hope.

- WENZEL, Brendan. **Good Golden Sun**. Little, Brown. ISBN 9780316512633.

PreS-Gr 3—In scenes that are direct descendants of Eric Carle’s tissue-paper gems, a blissfully childlike version of the “what” and “how” of the ever-present sun as it casts a glow over our days; in Wenzel’s hands it becomes a paean to mindful interactions with nature.

## Birthday Book Recommendations for Transitional Grades 1-4

- AGOSTINI, Alliah L. ***We Dig Fossils***. illus. by Joelle Murray. Random. ISBN 9780593812532.

PreS-Gr 1–Ava and her family take a trip to a fossil park, where, after a long day of digging, Ava’s hopes of finding a fossil are finally realized. Great with repetition and onomatopoeia, this humorous story is unique and fun.

- AHN, Angela. ***Julia on the Go! The Big Splash***. illus. by Julie Kim. Tundra. ISBN 9781774882078.

Gr 2-4–Julia returns to her community’s swim team after a hiatus to find that the sports program is in danger of being cut, all while her favorite coach has been replaced by a much harsher one. With pitch-perfect dialogue, Ahn presents a resonant, slice-of-life chapter book about friendships, pushing past first impressions, and conflict resolution.

- ATINUKE. ***Love from Anna Hibiscus!*** illus. by Lauren Tobia. Candlewick. ISBN 9781536239515.

Gr 1-3–Nigerian youngster Anna Hibiscus’s worldview is changed when she vacations with her grandparents at their childhood village. In this lovely series addition, Atinuke covers topics like child abandonment and socioeconomic disparity in an age-relevant way and offers examples of kids inspiring the adults in their lives by doing good on a local scale.

- BAILEY, Jenn. ***Henry’s Picture-Perfect Day***. illus. by Mika Song. Chronicle. ISBN 9781797230252.

Gr 1-3–Henry returns in this sweet, funny tale of embracing imperfection and authenticity on class picture day. Prose and illustrations excel in their trademark expressive simplicity. Young readers on the autism spectrum may relate to Henry’s musings and his wry skepticism of the “rules” around an important event.

- BROACH, Elise. ***Bulldozer & Friends: Bulldozer Goes to School***. illus. by Kelly Murphy. Little, Brown/Christy Ottaviano. ISBN 9780316564199.

Gr 1-3–The delightful construction vehicle makes his school debut. Broach and Murphy continue their longtime collaboration to deliver this stirring and accessible early chapter book about the power of friendship and determination to overcome every challenge.

- CYPRESS, Leah. *Miriam's Magical Creature Files: The Truth About the Tooth Fairy.* illus. by Sarah Lynne Reul. Abrams/Amulet. ISBN 9781419772405.

Gr 2-4—Youngest sibling Miriam is convinced her family is fibbing about the tooth fairy, and she's going to prove it with science. Full of endearing art, including charts, doodles, and field notes, Cypress's novel is a hilarious account of a charismatic Orthodox Jewish girl who will charm kids and adults alike.

- HAYDU, Corey Ann. *Zoomi and Zoe and the Sibling Situation.* illus. by Anne Appert. Quirk. ISBN 9781683694601.

Gr 1-3—Fuzzy monster Zoomi and her favorite human Zoe navigate the trials of big sisterhood. Haydu's tender prose and inventive vocabulary capture the delight and frustration a new baby sibling brings; Appert's sweet, colorful art highlights an imaginative world of fun words and creatures readers will adore visiting.

- HIGUERA, Donna Barba. *The Unlikely Aventuras of Ramón and El Cucuy.* illus. by Juliana Perdomo. Abrams/Amulet. ISBN 9781419777424.

Gr 2-4—The Newbery author's first chapter book series centers a young cucuy (Latine boogeyman) and his first assignment to terrorize a naughty human boy who is more homesick than mischievous. Perennial themes, clever worldbuilding, quirky characters, and Perdomo's adorable art blend perfectly in this just-right, silly entry.

- LYONS, Kelly Starling. *Ty's Travels: Super Ty!* illus. by Niña Mata. HarperCollins. ISBN 9780063083721.

PreS-Gr 1—With a makeshift cape and mask, Ty becomes Super Ty, using his imagination and kindness to save the day—until he faces a problem he can't solve, prompting his older brother to become a superhero, too. This joyful, empowering early reader celebrates imagination, family, and small acts of heroism.

- MEDINA, Juana. *Elena Camps.* Candlewick. ISBN 9781536216424.

PreS-Gr 2—Determined elephant Elena struggles to set up her camping tent. Medina's signature art, the short text, and the playful onomatopoeia and humor in this engaging story will show emerging readers the values of perseverance and emotional regulation.

- PIZZOLI, Greg. *Earl & Worm #1: The Bad Idea and Other Stories.* Knopf. ISBN 9780593649664.

PreS-Gr 2—New neighbors Earl and Worm become best friends over the course of three short stories. Similar to *Elephant and Piggie* and *Frog and Toad*, this duo will quickly find its place as a staple on young readers' shelves.

- RYLANT, Cynthia. **Mouse & Spoon: Owlets and Tarts.** illus. by Janna Mattia. S. & S./Simon Spotlight. ISBN 9781665962186.

K-Gr 2—At the Mouse and Spoon bakery, three determined mice help a pair of exhausted owls and their babies fall sleep with their delicious treats. Cozy art in a soft palette, paired with brief sentences and a gentle narrative, make for a satisfyingly sweet early reader, perfect for bedtimes.

- SKENE, Pat Lamondin. **One Beaded Earring.** Natalie Laurin. Orca. ISBN 9781459841598.

Gr 1-5—When Delia brings her mom’s cherished beaded earrings to school and loses one, she strives to make things right and learns about her Métis heritage along the way. Monochrome illustrations depict a loving family bonding over traditions in a rich, accessible narrative of a multigenerational family reconnecting with their Indigenous roots.

- SNEVE, Virginia Driving Hawk. **The Summer of the Bone Horses.** illus. by Steph Littlebird. Abrams/Amulet. ISBN 9781419759550.

Gr 1-3—A Dakota boy spends the summer with his grandparents at a reservation while his father undergoes a serious operation in this spare and moving early chapter book. Through cultural touchstones and resonant themes, Sneve and Littlebird sensitively capture the uncertainty of familial challenges and the resilience found in intergenerational bonds.

## Birthday Book Recommendations as best of Middle Grades 4-8<sup>th</sup> grade

- APPLEGATE, Katherine. ***Pocket Bear***. illus. by Charles Santoso. Feiwel & Friends. ISBN 9781250904362.

Gr 4-6—Created to sit in a soldier's pocket, Pocket Bear now runs the Second Chances Home for the Tossed and Treasured. When a new teddy bear with a fascinating past shows up, he and his feline friend Zephyrina discover even more about courage, love, and the enduring effects of war.

- BLANKMAN, Anne. ***The Enemy's Daughter***. Viking. ISBN 9780593623046.

Gr 4-7—It's 1915, and after surviving the Lusitania attack and her father's capture on suspicion of being a spy, Marta's perilous journey home to Germany forces her to question loyalty, war, and prejudice. A powerful historical fiction adventure fusion of friendship and survival.

- BRINER, Karen. ***Starry, Starry Heist***. Holiday House. ISBN 9780823456444.

Gr 4 Up—When Max meets the mysterious DZ, who reveals that time travel is real and Max can do it, he must choose: go back to correct his biggest mistake or save the painting The Starry Night from never existing. This science fiction story skillfully weaves in grounded elements that make it appealing to all readers.

- CHU, Kyle Casey. ***The Queen Bees of Tybee County***. HarperCollins/Quill Tree. ISBN 9780063326958.

Gr 6 Up—When Derrick Chan's basketball plans fall through, a summer with his grandmother in Georgia leads him to new friendships, self-expression through drag, and a deeper understanding of his late mother. This book demonstrates courage in the face of challenging situations—even when it's family who poses the biggest obstacle.

- EDGMON, H.E. ***Defanged***. Feiwel & Friends. ISBN 9781250874009.

Gr 4 Up—Vampires are out of the coffin, and a cure is now available, but Lux Priddy doesn't want to be cured. So, he runs away to find the rumored city of Nox Urbus, where he can be himself. With a cast of lovably odd characters, this is a deliberate yet engaging look at the way society vilifies groups who are different from the so-called norm.

- GLASER, Karina Yan. ***The Nine Moons of Han Yu and Luli***. HarperCollins/Allida. ISBN 9780063284432.

Gr 5 Up–Told in alternating timelines between ancient China and Depression–era New York, the story follows Han Yu, who travels the Silk Road alone when his family falls ill, and Luli, who is desperate to save her family restaurant. A beautiful, moving story about bravery and the power of art.

- IDIL, Raidah Shah. ***How to Free a Jinn***. S. & S./Salaam Reads. ISBN 9781665982634.

Gr 4–8–When Insyirah moves to Malaysia, she’s shocked to learn that the spirits from her grandmother’s stories are very real and alive there. This thrilling and rich fantasy centers on a girl with the gift to see and control jinn.

- KIM, Graci. ***Dreamslinger***. illus. by Drew Alott. Disney/Hyperion. ISBN 9781368104777.

Gr 5 Up–Aria Loveridge, a Dreamslinger haunted by her mother’s death, infiltrates Seoul’s kingdom-training program to expose its secrets. She uncovers truths that could reshape her destiny and the world’s. Surprises abound that will have readers guessing to the very end and begging for a sequel.

- KING, Wesley. ***Benny on the Case***. S. & S./Beach Lane. ISBN 9781665937696.

Gr 4 Up–When thefts threaten to shutter the Newfoundland retirement home where he lives, Benny launches an investigation to save it. This charming mystery, set against a refreshingly unique backdrop, balances an engaging whodunit with rich emotional depth, themes of friendship and acceptance, and a rare portrayal of a protagonist with Mosaic Down syndrome.

- MANDANNA, Sangu. ***Vanya and the Wild Hunt***. Roaring Brook. ISBN 9781250899835.

Gr 4 Up–When a mythic monster attacks her home, Vanya is swept into a hidden world of magical books, mythical beings, and long-buried family secrets. This fast-paced fantasy weaves globe-spanning traditional folklore with themes of belonging and self-acceptance, creating a rich, inclusive world where a neurodivergent protagonist finds courage and community.

- MEJIA, Tehlor Kay. ***The Better to Eat You With***. Delacorte. ISBN 9780593647073.

Gr 5–8–Evan can’t wait to escape her parents’ arguing (and her mother’s food restriction) at Sonrisa resort with her friends. But something fearsome is terrorizing the camp, and Evan realizes it’s as hungry as she is. Mejia sensitively weaves a harrowing yet hopeful tale of parental-induced anorexia with a heart-pounding creature feature.

- MESSNER, Kate. ***The Trouble with Heroes.*** Bloomsbury. ISBN 9781547616398.

Gr 3-8—Climbing the Adirondack Mountains is not Finn Connelly’s idea of fun, but after his anger manifests in vandalism, his sentence is to hike the entire range. Through Finn’s poetry and letters detailing his thoughts on grief and adolescent angst, readers join in his breathtaking and deeply satisfying journey.

- NELSON, Vanda Micheaux. ***Radiant.*** Dutton. ISBN 9780593855782.

Gr 4-7—In 1963 Pittsburgh, Cooper navigates being a Black girl amid turmoil on a personal and a national scale. Nelson’s powerful verse novel centers a tween learning to love herself; readers will appreciate the seamless infusion of notable historical events into a perennially relatable narrative of self-acceptance and compassion.

- PAULINO, Jasminne. ***The Extraordinary Orbit of Alex Ramirez.*** Putnam. ISBN 9780593859315.

Gr 5 Up—Seventh grader Alex loves science and space, but in his self-contained classroom, he doesn’t learn much about either. When his teachers tell him he’s not ready to join the regular science class, he decides to be his own advocate—and maybe even prove he can be extraordinary.

- PYRON, Bobbie. ***Octopus Moon.*** Penguin/Nancy Paulsen. ISBN 9780593616291.

Gr 3-7—All the change that fifth grade promises sends Pearl spiraling. When she is diagnosed with depression, she is excited to have an explanation and course of action, but the stigmatization that comes with it leads to more challenges. This novel in verse is one of the most authentic and honest portrayals of depression for this age group.

- RANSAW, Rosalyn. ***Smoke and Mirrors.*** Abrams/Amulet. ISBN 9781419770135.

Gr 4 Up—After being unfairly blamed for a barn fire, Andy agrees to help a reclusive old man restore a decaying mansion with ties to a vanished magician and an unsolved murder. Fast-paced and layered, this mystery deftly explores race, bias, and trust through the eyes of an emotionally complex narrator grappling with his father’s incarceration.

- REARDON, Joan. ***Dad Rock Dragon Quest.*** S. & S./Aladdin. ISBN 9781665963367.

Gr 3-8—Zadie takes after her rock and roll–obsessed dad, so she can’t wait to spend a week with him; if only her mom’s boring boyfriend wasn’t tagging along. When poachers invade and kidnap her dad’s dragon, an epic magical adventure ensues. Readers will love this fast-paced yet emotional exploration of family dynamics.

- ROMERO, R.M. *The Tear Collector*. Little, Brown. ISBN 9780316578066.

Gr 4-8—Malka and her brother Ezra live on an island with the few survivors after the Flood. When Ezra gets the island's illness, Malka is desperate to find a cure. Readers will root for Malka to save the infected islanders in this dark and powerful dystopian tale that is infused with hope.

- SMITH, Sherri L. *Candace, the Universe, and Everything*. Putnam. ISBN 9781524737931.

Gr 5 Up—Candace Wells feels unmoored by changing friendships at the start of eighth grade, but her world expands dramatically when a mysterious time-traveling bird flies out of her new locker. This intergenerational story delivers a captivating blend of science fiction and coming-of-age storytelling that explores friendship, identity, and wonder.

- STEMPLE, Heidi E.Y. *The Poetry of Car Mechanics*. Astra/Wordsong. ISBN 9781662660214.

Gr 5 Up—Dylan, 15, struggles to connect with his grandfather and his toxic masculinity after his mother's three-year absence due to her mental health. Stemple's artful writing will have readers flying through the pages, though the emotional depth will cause them to pause and savor each word.

- SUMNER, Jamie. *Please Pay Attention*. S. & S./Atheneum. ISBN 9781665956079.

Gr 5-8—When a school shooting threatens her sense of well-being, Beatrix, who has cerebral palsy, must learn to reclaim her bravery and sense of safety through equine-assisted therapy and love. Told in verse, this important novel explores the resulting emotions and struggles when the unimaginable happens and you can't protect yourself.

- WATSON, Renée. *All the Blues in the Sky*. Bloomsbury. ISBN 9781547605897.

Gr 5 Up—Sage has been grieving since her 13th birthday, when her best friend died in a freak accident. She can't imagine how she'll go on, especially because she blames herself. Written in verse, the story is a beautiful testament to the power of love and community in healing.

- WOLF, Allan. *Junius Leak and the Spiraling Vortex of Doom*. Candlewick. ISBN 9781536217452.

Gr 4-9—Set around the 1980 Lake Peigneur Disaster, this historical fiction novel, told by the lake and Junius Leak, has it all: pirates, environmentalism, family complexity, and mental health struggles. When Junius is exiled to spend 12 days with a previously unknown uncle in Louisiana, he'll end up having a life-changing adventure.