

The Redeemed Reader offers insight into how to build discernment in children *and* provides practical tips, examples, and booklists for their literary journey. Passionate about shepherding imaginations and young hearts, the authors read ahead so that you can confidently choose books for your children.

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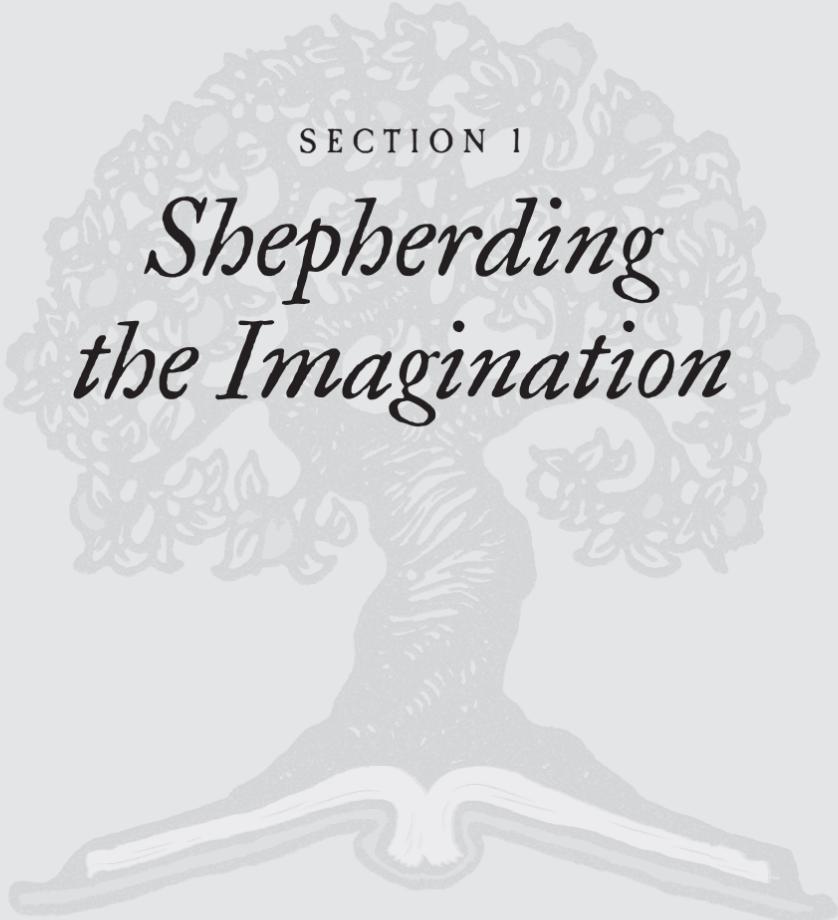
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SECTION 1



*Shepherding
the Imagination*

FOUNDATIONS: DISCOVERING TRUTH AND STORY

“It isn’t Narnia, you know,” sobbed Lucy. “It’s you.
We shan’t meet you there. And how can we live, never meeting you?”
“But you shall meet me, dear one,” said Aslan.¹

—C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*

Although Megan was indisputably the most voracious reader in her family, somehow she managed to graduate from high school having read only *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* out of the entire Chronicles of Narnia. Maybe it was the ’70s style cover art with the weird line of people who seemed to be falling upward on the cover of *The Magician’s Nephew* that turned her off to the rest. Yes, children do judge books by their covers.

It wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy reading fantasy. Her librarian grandmother had sent *The Magic Bicycle* by John Bibee and *The Tower of Geburah* and *The Iron Scepter* by John White, and she loved reading the delightful stories with redemptive themes that were reminiscent of the single Narnia book she had read.

While Megan’s younger sister, a slower reader, admired Puddleglum in *The Silver Chair*, Megan rushed through volumes of inspirational historical fiction and swooned over the *Anne of Green Gables* TV miniseries instead of

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (Harper Collins, 1980), 247.

reading the books. It wasn't until her senior year at Covenant College, when she and Betsy were taking a children's literature class taught by Ethan Pettit, that she finally got around to finishing *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Mr. Pettit, the assistant librarian, was known for serving tea to students who visited his office. Having been influenced by Francis Schaeffer and Madeleine L'Engle, he explained the difference between capital "T" Truth versus lowercase "t" truth and capital "S" Story versus lowercase "s" story to the class. Combining Truth with Story is very different than Truth and "story" or "truth" and Story, and "truth" with "story" lacks substance.

One of the assignments was to keep a reading journal of children's books. So, Megan worked her way through picture books and middle grade novels, including the familiar story of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, followed by *Prince Caspian*, then *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

Sitting on the floor of her room, leaning against the bottom bunk, she read the last chapter in which Edmund and Lucy arrive on shore and find a Lamb waiting for them on the beach. The Lamb invites them to join him for breakfast, then transforms into their beloved friend, Aslan. But their joy turns to sorrow when Aslan reveals that this is their last visit to Narnia.

"It isn't Narnia, you know," sobbed Lucy. "It's you.

We shan't meet you there. And how can we live, never meeting you?"

"But you shall meet me, dear one," said Aslan.

"Are—are you there too, Sir?" said Edmund.

"I am," said Aslan. "But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there."²

As Megan tells it now, "I stopped. I read the words again. I read them a third time, tears flowing down my cheeks. Tears still come to my eyes when I

2. Ibid.

remember that day because my life has never been the same. I had professed faith in Christ for years, but for the first time, I was beginning to realize the power of children's literature to speak Truth to me through a Story, and I could hear Christ, through Aslan, calling me 'Dear one.'

The more we read, the more we discover that the voice of His Truth not only speaks through books that are written, published by, and marketed to Christians, but also in other many kinds of literature because the Holy Spirit breathes through common grace. Truly, every good gift and every perfect gift is from above (James 1:17).

THE UNFORMULA

What is Truth? What is Story? Definitions are elusive because there is no formula. There are essentials and common elements, but each author brings a unique voice and experience to his or her writing.

We're using capital "T" Truth here to refer to the ultimate Truth found in God's Word, and capital "S" Story to mean the grand biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Fragments of Truth and echoes of the great Story can be found even in secular works, owing to God's common grace. As we explore these ideas, we recognize that each of us is accountable to his or her own conscience (Rom. 14:12), and our personal experiences will shape how we read and understand Truth and Story.

TRUTH

There are two ways of looking at Truth in literature. When we speak of God's Truth, what the Bible calls wisdom, manifested through creation and redemptive history as God has ordained it, we capitalize the "T" for emphasis. Anywhere we read of goodness, hope, light, loving one's neighbor, good triumphing over evil, forgiveness and redemption, healthy family relationships, friendships, and beauty and order in creation, we see Truth, and our hearts rejoice. Because we were made in God's image, we cannot help but love what God loves.

We find examples of Truth in picture books like *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña, in which a boy's grandmother opens his eyes to love his neighbor and practice kindness. In *Heckedy Peg* by Audrey Wood, a mother's

love for her children makes her bold and wise.

Bartholomew and the Oobleck by Dr. Seuss is a wonderful story of pride and humility, and *Yellow and Pink* by William Steig shows the absurdity of evolution.

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not only show that
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but that there is a
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Books that hold the most Truth not only show that we need a savior, but that there is a Savior, and therefore we have hope. They point to our deep desire for peace with God and with one another.

Stories that reflect the fallen nature of our world reveal Truth wherever a redemptive ending unfolds. A broken family finds forgiveness in *The Star That Always Stays* by Anna Rose Johnson, and a lazy, alcoholic father is converted at the end of *Strawberry Girl* by Lois Lenski. A boy without parents is taken in by a father figure who cares for him in *The Season of Styx Malone* by Kekla Magoon, and a proud rabbit is humbled and becomes a Christ figure in *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* by Kate DiCamillo. In the Rabbit and Robot books by Cece Bell, friendship undergoes tension and reconciliation.

Truth in nonfiction may be found in books that explain how to solve a math problem or that joyfully describe nature, leading us to delight in God's creation. Recent trends in picture book biographies and nonfiction have turned bland facts into engaging literature such as *The Day-Glo Brothers* by Chris Barton, *The Boys in the Boat* by Daniel James Brown, *Fallout* by Steve Sheinkin, or *The Girl Who Drew Butterflies* by Joyce Sidman.

truth

Many crowd-pleasing, trite-but-harmless books such as branded spin-offs, books by celebrities, or watered-down fairy tales, only contain “truth,” not real Truth. Although these may be heavily promoted by marketing departments, they don’t leave a lasting impression on the audience. They often feature pop-culture characters and offer positive affirmation and “character training” rather than bestowing delight.

Such “truth” may also be found in popular stories that are clean of sex, foul language, and violence such as a fun mystery series. These may be fun for young readers and are generally harmless, even if they don’t nourish the soul. There is nothing objectionable about the I Spy or Where’s Waldo books, and *Mr. Fox’s Game of “No!”* by David LaRochelle or *The Monster at the End of this Book* by Jon Stone are interactive crowd-pleasers.

Other books that claim to present “truths” clearly oppose God’s Truth. Half-truths and falsehood masquerade as “truth” in books that claim there is no real goodness in the world and there are no trustworthy allies among adults. Books that promote gender fluidity or same-sex relationships are contrary to God’s design for men and women that is revealed in Scripture.

WINSOME VESSELS

Do you have a collection of mugs? How do you decide which one to use for your favorite morning beverage? Do your children have particular favorites?

In the same way that there is no formula for the Truth/Story framework, no formula can guarantee the design of a perfect vessel. You could drink tea out of a ceramic cup with a promotional logo instead of a thoughtfully fashioned pottery mug and it would still be comforting. Part of our subjective preference is the objective quality of workmanship, and part of it is personal taste.

Does it matter if you drink homemade chai or locally roasted coffee in a Styrofoam cup? Although the difference in taste might not be discernible to everyone, much of the pleasure is lost by drinking from a generic, disposable cup.

What if you chose one of your favorite mugs and prepared a cup of store-brand hot chocolate mix using water instead of milk? Could the smooth curve and fond memories of a well-crafted vessel redeem the flavor of a watery, artificially flavored, overly sweet beverage? Absolutely not.

Likewise, Story is the winsome vessel of Truth.

STORY

Scripture sets the standard for the best Story elements that draw us in. God begins His narrative thread with creation in which He opens history, showing delight in a beautiful setting and in enjoying fellowship with the people He made.

Plot twist: Eve was deceived and desired the fruit she wasn't supposed to have because the serpent desired to destroy God's plan.

Inciting event: God expected this and had already arranged a deeper, richer Story.

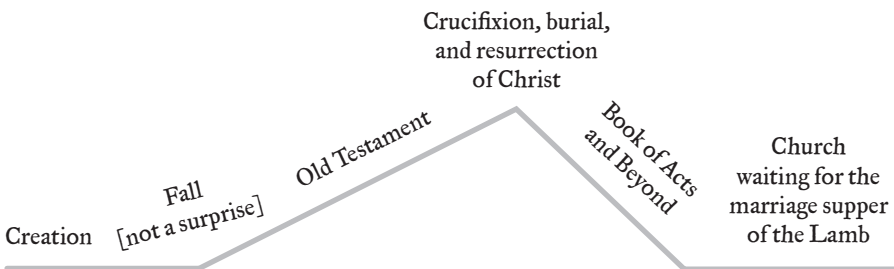
Rising action: The Old Testament, in all its interwoven genres.

Climax: Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and particularly His resurrection.

Falling action: The book of Acts, continuing through the last two millennia to the present.

Conclusion: The people of God are living in the denouement, waiting for the marriage supper of the Lamb.

PLOT DIAGRAM OF SCRIPTURE



Story, at its core, reflects the experience of the human condition, while Truth within the Story points to God's ultimate reality. In the midst of this grand narrative that centers on the glory of Jesus Christ, the Bible provides many Stories within the whole Story including character sagas (Abraham, David, Paul), cautionary tales (Lot's wife, Achan), romance (Boaz and Ruth), and vivid historical events (the ten plagues, Daniel in the lions' den, Esther rescuing her people), as well as poetry, wise sayings, parables, and even trickster tales (Jacob, Delilah, or Hushai in 2 Sam. 16). Sometimes it is hard to see how God is working, but because we know that God is sovereign, we anticipate a redemptive ending. For example, although God is not specifically mentioned in the book of Esther, His providence is clear in the midst of exile, and we see reflections of God's justice in the execution of Haman and the exaltation of Mordecai and Esther.

In literature we find many examples that echo the Story of the Bible. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* clearly mirrors the Story of Jesus who redeems sinners living under the curse through a mediator's atoning death and resurrection. Fairy tales emphasize motifs that we also find in Proverbs, such as the consequences of wise and foolish behavior. Picture book biographies, thoughtful narrative nonfiction, and intricate descriptions in nature lore (whether or not it's identified as "creation") invite our young readers into the Story that God is weaving through people and places. Engaging memoirs abound for young people. Some of our favorites include *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson, *El Deafo* by Cece Bell, and *Everything Sad Is Untrue* by Daniel Nayeri.

Sometimes it is hard to separate Stories from Truth because the Story narrative can be exceptionally well-told. Even when the conclusion is flawed, we can still delight in the craftsmanship. Neal Shusterman's young adult Arc of the Scythe trilogy has strong Story elements because it grapples with the nature of humanity, but it contains "truth" that does not reflect God's Truth.

story

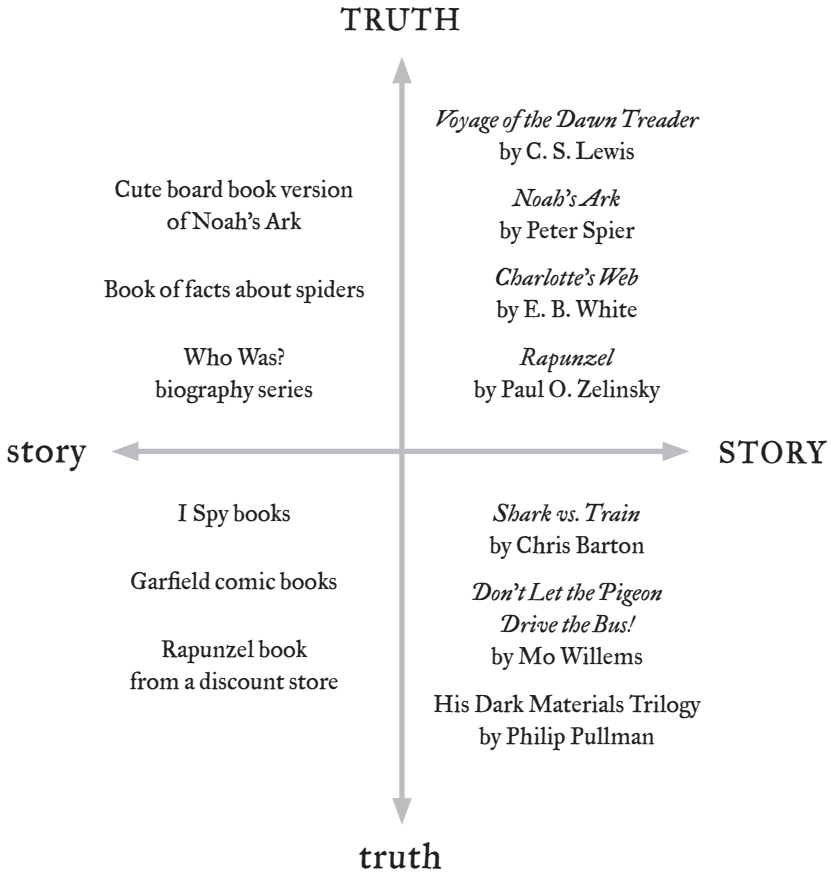
Not every book has to be a Story to be worthy of reading. Some readers might delight in a “story” that others don’t appreciate, and some “stories” offer little more than simple pleasure or interesting subject matter. These are appropriate as appetizers or dessert in your family’s literary menu. A little is fine, but not really satisfying.

Sometimes a “story” suffers from too much good intention. Inspirational picture books and novels may try too hard to communicate Truth while the author’s care in storytelling falls short of richness, beauty, and depth.

Some excellent literature is cheated of greatness when it is simplified, with mediocre results. This is common in retellings of Bible stories, fairy tales, and in franchised “new adventures of” popular characters such as Thomas the Tank Engine, Clifford, Curious George, Little Bear, etc. Modern easy-reader variations such as the newer Little House on the Prairie stories sacrifice rich language for controlled vocabulary, which is no delight to read.

Certain “stories” are not without value when they are used to encourage young readers to gain confidence and discover a desire to read more. Do Garfield comics contain Truth and Story? No, but humor in a few panels can motivate a young reader to persevere in decoding words. Continuing to surround him with a variety of books that are rich and delightful is part of the process of learning to appreciate better Stories as he matures.

The axis in the following graph demonstrates how books may be arranged in different quadrants based on certain criteria, while allowing for personal taste.



In the upper right corner, we find easily recognizable examples of Truth revealed through Story in *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and a gorgeous wordless picture book version of *Noah's Ark*. *Charlotte's Web* is a beloved classic that weaves themes of friendship and loyalty with the deeper Truth of sacrificial love. *Rapunzel*, retold and illustrated by Paul Zelinsky, enriches a well-known fairy tale full of symbolism with lavish illustrations and tender emotion.

Moving down, we find "truth" and Story in *Shark vs. Train*, a picture book about two boys pitting the strengths and weaknesses of their favorite toys against each other. *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* is a fun read-aloud and a crowd pleaser without significant Truth. *His Dark Materials* is an engaging

trilogy in which the author's antagonism toward the church is evident. Can we enjoy reading these books? Certainly, while applying varying degrees of discernment (or assuming that they're just plain fun³).

The lower left corner includes books that are "truth" and "story." These may be favorites for a season, and there's nothing seriously offensive, but they soon lose their charm with minimal nostalgic residue.

The last quadrant in the upper left contains books that are Truth and "story." These may include cute board books of Noah's ark that poorly represent the biblical account but still introduce children to a man who obeyed God and, with his family, was delivered from judgment.⁴ Factual books that are popular or highly visual also fall in this category.

GOD, THE AUTHOR OF TRUTH AND STORY

Pontius Pilate looked wearily into the eyes of Jesus and asked, "What is truth?" (John 18:38a). He did not expect an answer. Before him stood the very incarnation of love, goodness, justice, mercy, compassion, and the Savior of the world—the perfect embodiment of Truth and any virtues we glimpse in the best children's stories. But Pilate was blind.

We still live in a world that is blind to the Truth, that denies the reality of God's design and authority over His creation. But if our ears hear the One who declared, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6), our eyes can be opened to see the goodness of God everywhere, including in literature for children.

Why do we respond so viscerally to stories? The classic plot arc of the Bible, as we've already seen, is hard-wired in human consciousness: setting, conflict, development, climax, resolution. Story puts flesh on these bare bones of Truth. Stories that include descriptions of beauty in nature reflect the seeds

3. See chapter 16, "Just for Laughs: Kid Humor."

4. The Ark Encounter in Kentucky has an impressive display of problematic picture book retellings of Noah's ark. As always, use discretion.

of creation. Where nature is ravaged or weeds crop up, that is a result of the fall; planting a garden is a redemptive act of faith. Where we read of a happy family, beginning with marriage that is between one man and one woman, that is a gift that was God's idea. Where there is divorce or death of a parent, the pain, separation, and longing are evidence of the fall. There may or may not be restoration in the conclusion, but we look for signs of grace in other caring adults who come alongside the hurting child, bringing healing and hope in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Is our duty to be didactic, expecting to stop and make spiritual application while we're reading? Not necessarily. Children who have been made in the image of God will naturally be drawn to manifestations of His character in Truth, and experiencing delight in many Stories will have the cumulative effect of helping lift the veil of delighting in Him. Part of our role as parents and educators means being prepared when the occasion does arise to point out both positive and negative aspects of characters; not as moral guides (don't betray your siblings for candy like Edmund did!) but recognizing that although we are imperfect, our hope of redemption is in Jesus Christ.⁵

Jesus is the Word made flesh who dwelt among us. As the creator of the perfect Story arc, He knew how effectively stories communicate. He knew, as good preachers do, that His audience's understanding was limited, and that parables would help those who had ears to hear. He knew that Truth soaks into the soil of the soul through Story, especially when it is grounded in reality.

Sometimes Truth and Story do not gloriously soar off the page together. We do not always find them shining from happy pages of books that are teaching character values, nor in secret, subtle themes veiled in clean literature that is "safe" for anyone to read. Christians can read a wide variety of literature, both sacred and secular, but we need discernment when doing so.

As much as we would like to enjoy children's books that are described as "inspirational," they are often saccharine, lacking realistic emotion and

5. See chapter 21.

the well-crafted narrative of a Story. Since everything is put under Christ's dominion, we can learn to read to the glory of God, always looking for Truth and Story wherever it may be found. Pleasure is a gift that comes from God, and it is the first indication of the presence of Truth and/or Story. If there is no delight, we ask ourselves why.

ON READING AND STORY

A love of Stories begins with *hearing* them, not independently reading them. It takes a lot of reading aloud from literature that provides rich language and delightful stories before a child is ready to learn to read. Delight is a great motivator.

When we look at the whole wide world God has made, when we cultivate our children's imaginations, we are offering them a reason to want more Stories. We can tell them Stories, show them Stories, read them Stories, and nurture a love for Story long before children have the developmental skills necessary to read the words on their own. Long before a child can read, he or she should develop a taste for the Stories that will make the effort worthwhile.

Stories connect us to God. He reveals Himself through His Word and the unfolding of history, and through seeing how He works in our own and in our children's lives.

Stories connect us to others, to family members who relate past experiences, to shared culture and inside jokes. To friends who are eager for us to read the same book, who make memories with us, or whose lives are nothing like our own. Stories connect us to strangers, to their experiences in the past or in another country or culture.

Oral storytelling has been around for millennia, and reading aloud with a child is a priceless experience, not merely because of the book, but especially for the development of loving relationships with a caregiver. In *The Enchanted Hour*, Meghan Cox Gurdon writes, "The act of reading together secures people to one another, creating order and connection, as if we were

quilt squares tacked together with threads made of stories.”⁶ Bonding over a shared, well-narrated audiobook can provide a modern alternative to sitting around a fire (although s’mores are a marvelous reason to build relationships if you don’t have a traveling bard handy). Hearing good stories can make any child’s soul hunger for more. Taste and see.

READING AS WORSHIP

Discerning appreciation of literature, from picture books to lengthy classics, comes from learning to recognize these elements and how they resonate. There may be Truth told in “story,” or a Story may only contain “truth.” Reading is an act of redemption by those who seek to wonder and to worship God by offering up all our activities with our families in every area of life.

God made a magnanimous offer to Solomon when he was made king, and Solomon asked for one thing: wisdom. God is still the source of all wisdom, and He gives each of us the opportunity to glorify Him in our reading. This means choosing some books, but not others, discussing questions that arise along the way, and being gracious while holding different opinions and humble enough to see how we can shine gospel light into our understanding of Truth and Story in all kinds of literature.

Ultimately, finding Truth and Story is an act of worship, beginning with asking for wisdom (James 1:5). Let us seek to find what is true and good in the books that we read.

6. Meghan Cox Gurdon, *The Enchanted Hour* (Harper, 2019), 47.

BOOKLIST FOR CHAPTER 1

Further Reading

Echoes of Eden, Jerram Barrs

For Children/Teens

Bartholomew and the Oobleck by Dr. Seuss (Picture Book)

The Golden Plate, Bernadette Watts (PB)

Last Stop on Market Street, Matt de la Peña (PB)

The Girl and the Bicycle, Mark Pett (PB)

The Watcher, Nikki Grimes (PB)

Ben Washington series, Jasmine Mullen (Chapter Book)

Mikis and the Donkey, Bibi Dumon Tak (CB)

All-of-a-Kind Family, Sydney Taylor (Middle Grade)

The Charlatan's Boy, Jonathan Rogers (MG)

Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane, Kate DiCamillo (MG)

Words by Heart, Ouida Sebestyen (MG)

The Mythmakers, John Hendrix (Young Adult/Graphic Novel)

Once a Queen, Sarah Arthur (YA)

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