

A Commonsense Guide to Finding Books

by Betsy Hearne with Deborah Stevenson

Whether you're a parent or a friend of one, it's going to happen: you're going to be standing amid the children's books in the library or bookstore wondering where on earth to start.

Maybe you're at the bookstore because you've decided it's time to expand your home collection beyond books picked up in the checkout lane of the local supermarket. Or maybe a special child's birthday has snuck up on you, providing a golden opportunity to invest in the future, since a good book given as a gift will (1) last a long time and (2) be enjoyed over and over again. Or maybe you're at the library hoping to find some likely choices for a bedtime story.

Whatever the reason, there you are among the shelves, surrounded with books, lost among books. If you're in the library, you can console yourself with the thought that they are free (relatively speaking), but you still don't want to spend your time or your child's on a bad book. If you're in a bookstore, you're probably thinking that the books all seem expensive, even though you know that quality costs money and a book can last a long time.

Still, whether you're taking a book home for a week, making it part of your permanent family library, or sending it across the country as a token of love you have the same question: How do you tell a good children's book from a bad one?

I used to buy a copy of *Winnie the Pooh* every time I got a birth announcement. There's nothing wrong with *Winnie the Pooh*, but sometimes I wanted a little variation, especially if I was going to be the visitor who read bedtime stories in a couple of years. Later, as a parent who was going to read bedtime stories every night, I wanted more than a little variation.

The same old question haunts the aisles of every children's book department: What's a good book for young Hermione or Herbert going on x years old?

In libraries, there are often good children's librarians to help you, but bookstore salespeople aren't as likely to be able to lay the question to rest. They sometimes don't know where to start any more than consumers do. They also don't know the child, and they may not be familiar in any meaningful way with children's books – unless you're lucky enough to encounter one of those dedicated booksellers who reads widely and makes it her or his business to know both books and customers.

Too often booksellers and book buyers are stuck in the myth that children and their books are a breed apart. Take heart and remember rule number one: Don't panic and grab a copy of *Black Beauty* because your grandmother recommended it to you in your youth.

Stand there and calmly ask yourself how you pick out a good coat. Color? Cut? Fabric? Warmth? Is it going to wear well? Do you just like the way it looks? Does it make you happier than the others? Think carefully and react honestly. Picking

a good children's book isn't that different from making any other purchase. Actually, it's more like deciding what interests you in a movie. Is it the plot, the characters, the scenery, the script? Did you like the last movie these same people created?

Pick up the book. If it's a picture book, read it. If it's longer, read the beginning, leaf through a few pages in the middle, investigate the illustrations, if it's got any, and check out the ending. Don't rely solely on the front cover (even if it's got an award medal on it) or on the blurbs. Just as when you browse through a book rack at the airport, something may catch your attention – a suspenseful opening, a poetic sentence, a funny scene.

If you're looking for something informational, pick a topic that interests you as well as the child. Ask for a book on bugs or ballet and then read some of it. The text and illustrations should seem clear, accurate, and interesting to you.

Ask yourself, Is the text clever or cloying? Engaging or boring? Original or clichéd? Does it make sense to you? Do you wish you didn't have to read more? Look at the illustrations slowly, carefully. Stare at them. That's the way a child will do it. Can you live with them? Are the images fresh enough to absorb your attention? Do they entertain you or do they look like "kid stuff," filler pictures anyone could do with ten toes rather than a nimble wit?

You're the key here, because if you enjoy the book, your children will soak it up. They won't get half as much pleasure stuck off alone with something you don't like well enough to share, and you really won't want to be left out of the fun either. Trust your own reactions.

Of course, tastes and interests vary as much for children's books as they do for adult books. It's useful to remember that every book doesn't have to do everything, and it's not the end of the world if a promising title flops. Maybe you can figure out why – and in the process learn more about your child's developing tastes – or maybe the book will be better received later. There are always other books to be shared, and there's always more to learn in the process.

Reading can be the same kind of shared activity as fishing, playing cards, or going to a concert. Your response to a children's book, linked with your involvement with the child, is as important as any expert's recommendation.