
BOOK CRUSH

NANCY PEARL

**FOR KIDS AND TEENS—RECOMMENDED READING
FOR EVERY MOOD, MOMENT, AND INTEREST**



SASQUATCH BOOKS
SEATTLE

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INTRODUCTION

My happiest memories of a childhood that was otherwise scarred by an anxious and raging father and a depressed and angry mother were of escaping into books. I read. I went to the Parkman branch of the Detroit Public Library after school and on Saturdays, checked out armloads of books, brought them home, and read. I climbed the apricot tree in our backyard and, wishing I had a tree house just like Suzie Green, one of the two main characters in the Best Friends series by Mary Bard, I read. I closed my bedroom door, risking my father's incomprehensible and unpredictable wrath, lay on my stomach on my bed, and read. (Looking back now, one of the things I most regret is that I didn't keep a list of those books. While my memory is pretty good, I know there are many books that I've simply forgotten.)

My parents, despite their other flaws, were readers. And though I don't have any memories of being read to, there were certainly a lot of books around. (Two I remember picking up and paging through, although I can't link either to any particular age: **The Naked and the Dead** by Norman Mailer and **Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care**. I was struck by the fact that despite having lots of dialogue, there were no quotation marks in Mailer's book. What impressed me about the Dr. Spock book was not the advice, but the cute line drawings on many pages—those kids looked so happy.)

I was very fortunate to have a cadre of librarians, both at the public library and my elementary and high school libraries, who happily and caringly fed my reading needs.

Although I included a few books for children and teens in *Book Lust: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason* and *More Book Lust: 1,000 New Reading Recommendations for Every Mood,*

Moment, and Reason, I thought that it would be fun for me, and useful for parents, teachers, librarians, and other adults who lived or worked with children, to write a book devoted solely to great reads for kids and teens. And while I was mulling that thought over, teen librarian Marin Younker e-mailed me and suggested that I write a book called *Book Crush*, filled with recommendations and suggestions of good reads for children and teens.

It never occurred to me that writing *Book Crush* might be more difficult than either *Book Lust* or *More Book Lust* had been. After all, I had wanted to be a children's librarian since I was ten years old; my first job when I finished library school at the University of Michigan was as a children's librarian in the Detroit Public Library system. Even though my subsequent jobs in bookstores and libraries had been more focused on adult materials, I kept up with the field, always reading at least every year's award winners, if nothing else.

So who knew?

I realized that before I could even begin writing, I had to think through two thorny issues. The first was how the books in *Book Crush* should be arranged. With my first two books, it was easy: one alphabetically arranged list of categories, from, as in *Book Lust*, "A, My Name Is Alice" to "Zero: This Will Mean Nothing to You." But I thought that a book for children and teens wouldn't work that way, would it? Surely readers of the book—parents, teachers, grandparents, librarians—would want some indication of what age the books were intended for.

My original idea was that I could use one alphabet of topics and make creative use of fonts to designate the three broad age groupings—birth to age seven, eight- to twelve-year-olds, and teens, for example.

At first this seemed like a perfect solution. By juxtaposing the different age groupings in the same list, it would automatically

expose readers to books “older” and/or “younger” than those for which they were specifically looking. For example, there are many great books for all age groups that feature strong and unquenchable young women, and I compiled them under the heading “Girls Rule.” The list looked like this:

Abuela

THE CRY OF THE ICEMARK

The Misadventures of Maude March

Pippi Longstocking

Swamp Angel

But then a saner voice (my own, but in its saner mode) prevailed. The fonts were extremely difficult to read; even I, who had chosen them, was having trouble remembering which font indicated which age group. Clearly, despite the fact that I believe strongly in opening up the world of books and reading through minimal labeling and divisions, I needed to come up with some way of arranging the books sans imaginative fonts.

In the end, I decided to divide the books into three broad age categories, and then come up with topics to reflect the books I chose to include. My advice is to use these categories as a first step in finding age-appropriate titles, but to keep in mind that readers of the same age can vary greatly in the books they’re ready for and will enjoy. The suggested categories shouldn’t be thought of as ruling out either younger or older readers.

Once I had the general arrangement of *Book Crush* figured out and was madly reading and rereading away, I had to face another issue: what to do with those titles, mostly published before 1960, that feature ethnic characters who appear to our modern eyes to be stereo-

typical or who are presented in a negative light. I could easily see how a young Native American child might feel both hurt and upset to read, for example, **Caddie Woodlawn**, **The Courage of Sarah Noble**, or **Little House in the Big Woods**, with their stereotyped, one-sided portrayals of American Indians. In lots of these otherwise perfectly wonderful books, anyone other than a Caucasian is frequently portrayed as being either stupid or evil (or sometimes both).

In many cases, I chose to include such books when I thought their overall quality justified it. While I recognize that these books can be painful to read, I think they can also be excellent conversation starters to help young readers see how our dominant culture's ideas about race and ethnicity have changed over the years. These books offer a ready-made opportunity to talk about what makes a character three-dimensional as opposed to being stereotypical, whether or not some people might still stereotype others who are different than they are, and how we might all work to overcome such destructive attitudes. I recognize that this is not a stance that will be popular with everyone, but I believe that there is an opportunity for reading and discussion to help make the world a better place.

Librarians like to say that there's something in their library to offend everyone—it wouldn't be a library, otherwise. The same is true of this book, which I like to think of as a small library catalog devoted to books for children and teens. There may be areas or subjects that you don't want your child to encounter, say fantasies or books about death and dying. If you are at all concerned about a book your child or teen might read, my best advice is to read the book first. Don't rely totally on anyone else's description or recommendation. Not even mine.

Another consideration in suggesting books for the children and teens in your life is what I call emotional readiness. Often a child

or teen is able to read (understands the meaning of the words) a book well before he or she is emotionally equipped to deal with the subject matter. At one talk I gave, a mother described her eight-year-old son's reaction to reading Ursula K. Le Guin's **A Wizard of Earthsea**—he burst into tears when he finished it. While a reaction like this to a book at any age is painful, and painful to observe in a child, I can also see that it could be a valuable growth experience, even for an eight-year-old, and not one that he would regret later on (or even at the time). However, a parent's emotional support and comforting would certainly be called for, until the reader develops the tools to comfort him- or herself.

Le Guin's coming-of-age fantasy of a young boy growing into his destiny as the greatest wizard in all of Earthsea is awesome. It's intelligent, it's fast moving, it's not to be missed. (I remember when I first read it I thought that Ged's education in sorcery was the way Gandalf, in Tolkien's books, must have been trained as well.) I reread it often. Yet it contains ideas and events that are beyond the full understanding of an eight-year-old, no matter the grade level at which he or she is reading. Not that the book will harm anyone (I've never found that reading any particular book has seriously harmed any child), but he or she will miss out on many of the nuances that make the book so powerful. And the child may never go back to that book again.

I fear the same sort of situation arises with the Harry Potter books. When J. K. Rowling's **Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone** was first published, millions of eight- to ten-year-olds devoured it (as did their older brothers and sisters, their parents, and their grandparents). And rightly so. It was a perfect choice for them—a three-dimensional hero near to their own age, a splendidly evoked

world, and magic. Then we all waited for about two years for the second book to come out, then we waited a few years more for the third, and so on. By the time the really heavy stuff started happening (the true nature of evil being revealed, the deaths of beloved characters, a recognition that the world is not a particularly safe place), those original eight- and nine-year-old readers were in their teens, where such knowledge can be more easily assimilated and their knowledge of the ways of the world is broader. As the books grew in complexity (and length), the readers grew, too.

But what's happening now is that eight-year-olds are starting with the first Harry Potter and immediately reading all the rest in the series, so that they're confronting those terrible events with not a lot of emotional body armor. Again, it's probably not going to hurt them—they'll just miss a lot of what makes the Rowling books so great. And that would be unfortunate. I don't have an answer to this, except that I think it's important that adults suggesting reading material to young people be aware of it.

I do think that in general a sort of protective self-selection usually operates in reading (as opposed to television and film, where the material is more forced upon the viewer, rather than actively assimilated and interpreted, as it is in reading). The problem arises when children are guided to books based on their reading-level readiness rather than their emotional readiness; they simply won't appreciate all that the books have to offer. Indeed, they may then find the experience of reading books, generally, less fulfilling than it could be. In that regard, it would be interesting to examine the experience of those children who start reading the Harry Potter books at eight, and attempt to read them all straight through. Do they gradually lose interest or enthusiasm?

I am frequently asked how to encourage children to read, or read more. Here's my four-step plan: First, introduce reluctant readers to books that match their interests. Is a teen passionate about bicycling? Try Lance Armstrong's memoir, **It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life**. A ten-year-old who loves computer games? Give him Terry Pratchett's **Only You Can Save Mankind**; if he's a bit older, hand him **Snow Crash** by Neal Stephenson. Crazy about horses? Don't let her grow up without the opportunity to cry over Anna Sewell's **Black Beauty**. *Book Crush* offers some good suggestions in a large variety of subjects, and your school or public librarian can surely help, as well.

Second, it's a great idea for families to set aside half an hour, after dinner, to all sit down together and read. This can be a time when each person reads his or her own book, or it can be a time to read aloud a book the whole family might enjoy, such as John D. Fitzgerald's **The Great Brain**, Farley Mowat's **The Dog Who Wouldn't Be**, J. R. R. Tolkien's **The Hobbit**, or M. T. Anderson's **Whales on Stilts**, to name just a few. This shouldn't be a time set aside only for the children in the family; it's vital that everyone have this time every day to lose themselves in a good book.

Third, I believe that reading should never be referred to or used as a punishment—none of that “no more television until you read your book.” I hate the thought that otherwise well-meaning adults are doling out books as things that are good for kids and teens rather than as sources of pure pleasure, excitement, and interesting ideas and information. Reading a book is not something to be gotten through before you go on to the really great parts of your day; it should (and can) be something that makes the day a great one.

Fourth, encourage children not to feel compelled to finish every book they start. It's silly for readers, no matter what their age, to slog through a book that they're not enjoying simply because they've been taught to finish what they start. Nine times out of ten, what determines whether or not you'll like a book is your mood at the time you're reading it. And reading moods change often. This is no less true for children and teens as it is for adult readers. The world of books is large (and growing larger even as I write this) and gorgeously diverse; there's something for everyone. There are books to enrich the senses and enlighten the mind, family stories, biographies and memoirs, science and science fiction, love stories, and gripping adventure tales. If someone finds Esther Forbes's **Johnny Tremain** slow-going today, that doesn't preclude him or her picking it up in a month or a year and trying it again, only to discover that at that later moment it's absolutely the right book at the right time.

So how much of a book should children or teens read before giving up on it? If it's a school assignment or for a book club, they ought to finish it, of course. But otherwise, have children or teens give a book three chapters. If they're enjoying it, terrific. Read on. But if not, encourage them to put the book down, return it to the library or lend it to a friend, and pick up another and try that one. There are books galore in *Book Crush* that will match any mood, interest, moment, or reason to read. My hope is that you'll find here hours and hours, days and days, of wonderful reading for the children and teens in your life.

And I'd love to hear from you and the young readers in your world. Let me know what worked, what flopped, what discoveries you've made as you interact with children, teens, and good books. My e-mail is nancy@nancypearl.com.

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During this period I had the opportunity to be part of the 2006 English Festival held by the English Department of Youngstown State University, in Ohio. For three days I met with seventh- to twelfth-grade kids and talked to them about what they were reading, how they defined a “good book,” and what they would especially recommend to their peers. These kids were reading it all—Stephen King, Neil Gaiman, Robin McKinley, M. T. Anderson, Elie Wiesel, Tamora Pierce, Robin McKinley, J. K. Rowling, Dan Brown, and everything in between. I was especially pleased to learn that many of the books they loved were books I had already read, enjoyed, and have included in *Book Crush*. Not only did my visit to the English Festival provide me with *lots* of suggestions of many new titles to read, but it also renewed my faith in the future of books and reading. For information about the Festival, contact the English Department at YSU, Youngstown, Ohio.

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YOUNGEST READERS

PART I

AHH, THOSE ADORABLE ANTHROPOMORPHIC ANIMALS

I use adorable here with no bit of irony attached: this group of picture books and readers are charming, funny, and entrancing. For ease in locating particular titles, I've divided them into categories of animals:

Aardvarks

In the many books by Marc Brown about Arthur, readers can share Arthur's experiences at home, at school, and with his friends and family.

Amphibians

Froggy Gets Dressed and other amphibious tales by Jonathan London are terrific choices for reading aloud.

Dogs

Bungee, the seagoing heroine of Sally Ford's **Bungee's Voyage** and **Bungee Down Under**, undertakes a trip on her sailboat *Gypsy Rover* from her home in New Hampshire to far-flung lands on the other side of the world, down the coast of South America to the Sydney harbor, enduring a terrible storm on the Pacific along the way.

Donkeys

You have to feel sorry for Sylvester, who unknowingly—and in a moment of panic—made a wish holding what turned out to be a magic pebble and was transformed into a great big rock. But you have to feel even sorer for his parents, who miss their son dreadfully. How they finally get him back is described in one of my favorite books ever, **Sylvester and the Magic Pebble** by William Steig.

Earthworms

Diary of a Worm by Doreen Cronin, with pictures by Harry Bliss, gives an up-close view of the daily activities of a young worm, including his observations about kids playing hopscotch (“very dangerous”), what happens when fishing season begins (dig deeper into the earth), how to do the hokey pokey, what to do with a macaroni necklace, and more. The same author and illustrator teamed up to do the equally fun **Diary of a Spider**. (“Today was my birthday. Grampa decided I was old enough to know the secret to a long, happy life: Never fall asleep in a shoe.”)

Elephants

I’ve always felt that the very first of Jean de Brunhoff’s Babar books, **The Story of Babar**, is far and away the best, but children love them all, and never fail to be interested in Babar, his wife Céleste, their children, and Babar’s rise from being orphaned in the jungles of Africa to becoming crowned king of the elephants. The only problem with reading the book aloud is how to pronounce the main character’s name. I’ve always said *Buh*-bar (first syllable stressed), but

others say *Bay-bar* (second syllable stressed), so it always sounds as if we're discussing (or reading aloud) different books.

Foxes

Families with two little girls might especially delight in Laura McGee Kvasnosky's books featuring fox sisters, but they're fun for everyone else as well. The pair is introduced in **Zelda and Ivy**, and continues with **Zelda and Ivy and the Boy Next Door** and **Zelda and Ivy One Christmas**. Kvasnosky's technique of gouache resist lends itself to the brightly colored illustrations outlined in a bold black ink.

Gorillas

In Anthony Browne's **Willy the Wizard**, the young gorilla believes that he's a star player only because he wears his special soccer shoes—but on the day of the big match, he forgets them at home and has to wear a borrowed pair of shoes. Will Willy still play well?

Hamsters

What's irresistible about **I Love You So Much** by Carl Norac is not just the text, but also the tender pictures of Lola, a hamster who just loves her mother and father an awful lot.

Pigs

When Ian Falconer's **Olivia** was published, I suspect that the number of people who named their daughters Olivia increased dramatically—all in honor of this irresistible porker who's a bundle

of delightful energy. Her adventures continue in **Olivia Saves the Circus, Olivia . . . and the Missing Toy**, and **Olivia Forms a Band**.

The eponymous Piggins is not only an impeccable butler, but—as Jane Yolen and Jane Dyer’s **Piggins** shows—he’s a great detective as well.

Rabbits

When Willa can’t fall asleep because she’s afraid of having bad dreams, her big brother Willoughby tells her about the joyful things that will happen in the morning, in **Tell Me Something Happy Before I Go to Sleep** by Joyce Dunbar, with illustrations by Debi Gliori.

Rodents

Two of my favorite and lovable picture book heroines just happen to be mice. The first is Angelina, the star of Katharine Holabird’s series of books beginning with **Angelina Ballerina**, all illustrated in glorious detail by Helen Craig, and all capturing aspects of young Angelina’s life.

The second is Lilly, a mousette created by Kevin Henkes. She first appeared in **Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse** and her everyday but never humdrum adventures continue in **Lilly’s Big Day**. Henkes clearly has a thing for mice, at least in his picture books, as can be seen in **Sheila Rae, the Brave; Chester’s Way** (a lovely look at how friendships can change and develop); and **A Weekend with Wendell**. (There are more Henkes mice to be found in the next section, “B Is for Babies.”)

Dr. DeSoto, a mouse with a dental degree, welcomes all animals to his office, except, of course, the dangerous ones, like cats. But what should he do about a fox with an aching tooth and mischief on his mind? The answer's in **Doctor De Soto** by William Steig.

Wombats

I must say I've never actively wondered what wombats do all day, but after reading Jackie French's **Diary of a Wombat**, I now know that they live a life of ease—they sleep a lot! Or, at least, this particular wombat does.

B IS FOR BABIES

Younger brothers and sisters—their appearance in the family is often a bit traumatic for the older child. Most adults have their own stories about how they felt as children when they learned about the arrival of a new member of the family. I remember—at age three—listening unhappily on the phone when my father called from the hospital to tell me that I had a little sister and my instant negative response (not spoken, but certainly felt): nobody asked me whether I wanted a little sister! Here are some of my favorite books about babies and older siblings, all showing different ways in which children greet the newcomer (the interloper). Sometimes it's good to be honest in your reactions . . .

When her parents' attention seems to be focused entirely on baby Gloria, Frances decides to pack up a few of her possessions and run away, settling in under the dining-room table. How her parents handle Frances's unhappiness at the changes in her life can be a

lesson for us all, which is why Russell Hoban's **A Baby Sister for Frances** (along with all the other Frances books), belongs on every child's must-read list.

In Anne Gutman's **Lisa's Baby Sister**, with its bright acrylic, uncluttered illustrations by Georg Hallensleben, Lisa is not so happy that her mom's pregnant, but on the upside she does have some good names for the baby (Doofus or Goofus), and she's made her best friend Gaspard promise he won't ever talk to the baby when it finally arrives. But when Lila is born, Lisa discovers that things aren't all *that* bad with a baby sister in the house.

Four other books to check out are Ed Young's **My Mei Mei**, the only book I know of about the reaction of an older child to the adoption of a younger sibling; **I Kissed the Baby!** by Mary Murphy (how different animals greet a new duckling, illustrated in black and white until the arrival of the vibrantly yellow-colored newcomer); **Julius, the Baby of the World** by Kevin Henkes (with the always entrancing Lilly in a more or less central role); and **The Perfect Friend** by Yelena Romanova, in which Archie the Dog (who wears human clothing and walks on two legs) is not overjoyed when a new baby enters his household. Boris Kulikov's humorously eerie paintings add to the pleasure of the tale.

BEDTIME STORIES

Although I have to admit that bedtime was not my favorite time to be a mother (I've always been a morning person and just wanted to go to sleep myself), it did give my daughters and me the chance to sit quietly and, depending on their ages, I would read aloud to them or we would read silently and companionably together. During those read-aloud years, I always tried to end the pre-bedtime ritual with a book that is clearly about going to bed—finally!

The classic “bedtime” book is, of course, Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd’s **Goodnight Moon**, but when you’re tired of reading and rereading that to a baby or toddler who doesn’t want to go to sleep, try Mem Fox’s **Time for Bed**, with its gentle rhymes about all different animals getting ready for bed and its full-page soft watercolor pictures by Jane Dyer.

But I’m afraid that bedtime for most parents and children is far less peaceful—closer to the hilarious experiences of Mama and Papa Bear, in Stan and Jan Berenstain’s **The Berenstain Bears’ Bedtime Battle**, who wear out long before their children do! Mine frequently was.

Using both text and amusing detailed pictures (mostly in a palette of calming blues, greens, and grays) in **Russell the Sheep**, Rob Scotton humorously depicts a sheep who just can’t fall asleep—until he tries counting guess what?

Another author/illustrator who makes good use of color is Uri Shulevitz. Right from your first glance at the cover of **So Sleepy Story**—with its yawning house and peacefully slumbering moon against a background of shades of blue—you’ll know you’re in for a treat in this tale about a house full of sleeping people and objects who all get awakened by music drifting in through the windows. I’m very taken with the dancing dishes.

I guess there are challenges associated with bedtime even in the animal—that is, nonhuman—world: the eponymous Baby Beebe Bird is just not ready for bed at the zoo when all the rest of the animals are. It takes some sharp thinking on the part of the other animals to get him back on the correct sleeping track, in Diane Redfield Massie’s **The Baby Beebe Bird**, originally published in 1963 (now in a new edition with illustrations by Steven Kellogg).

Other bedtime stories not to be missed are **Clara and Asha** by Eric Rohmann, with stunning oil paintings of a little girl who has so many friends that it’s hard to go to sleep; **What! Cried Granny: An Almost Bedtime Story** by Kate Lum; **Baby Can’t Sleep** by Lisa Schroeder (a good gift, incidentally, for expectant parents); **Down in the Woods at Sleepytime** by Carole Lexa Schaefer, with pencil and watercolor illustrations by Vanessa Cabban; Barbara Helen Berger’s **Grandfather Twilight**; and Audrey Woods’s **The Napping House**, a tried, true, and much-loved read-aloud. (My favorite character in Woods’s book has always been the very pesky—and wide-awake—flea who wreaks havoc with the nappers.)

And parents at the end of their patience at bedtime will greatly appreciate Geoffrey Kloske and Barry Blitt’s **Once Upon a Time, the End (Asleep in 60 Seconds)**, although I have my doubts if kids much under five will get the humor.

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