

Books for back-to-schoolers will set the classrooms abuzz

By Joanna H. Kraus

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It's time to break out those alarm clocks, backpacks and lunch boxes to prepare for the new academic year. Here to help are a wide assortment of books about school, or ones that will prompt class discussions on issues as old as prejudice and as new as genetic engineering.

- ["Ready for the Day! A Tale of Teamwork and Toast, and Hardly Any Foot-Dragging,"](#) by Stacey R. Kaye, illustrated by Elizabeth O. Dulemba (Free Spirit Publishing, \$12.95, ages 3-6). Part of a new series for parents and children to read together, "Ready" begins with a little girl who doesn't want to go to school. Instead of a typical tug-of-war, the father shows he understands and asks her to pick a game to play when they both get home. The morning preparations of father and daughter show a step-by-step guide to beginning the day with smiles instead of tantrums. The realistic illustrations successfully underline the author's purpose, which is to raise "confident, emotionally intelligent children." A boon to parents, teachers and, most of all, kids.

- ["Two Bobbies: A True Story of Hurricane Katrina, Friendship, and Survival,"](#) by Kirby Larson and Mary Nethery, illustrated by Jean Cassels (Walker, \$16.99, ages 4-8). Teaching children about natural disasters can be frightening for them. But Larson and Nethery have found a way to make a touching story of a devastating event. The unusual friendship between cat and dog, two household animals left behind as the hurricane strikes is extraordinary. They look after each other, howl and bark when rescued and then are separated, and the reason why is astonishing. The happy outcome of this true story will give readers a real sense of satisfaction.

["I, Matthew Henson: Polar Explorer,"](#) by Carole Boston Weatherford, illustrated by Eric Velasquez (Walker, \$16.99, ages 6-11). "I did not start as cabin boy, climb the ranks to able-bodied seaman, sail to five continents, and learn trades and foreign languages to be shunned by white crews who thought blacks were not seaworthy. I did not chart this course to drift in humdrum jobs ashore. My dreams had sails." This lyrically written bit of history is the story of a lesser-known Arctic explorer who accompanied Admiral Peary over 18 years to the North Pole (1891-1909). But he wasn't recognized or honored until many years later. The art created in pastels evolves Henson's journeys from jungle swamps to the frozen seas, and reflect his steadfast determination.

- "Lost and Found," by Andrew Clements, illustrated by Mark Elliott (Atheneum, \$16.99, ages 8-12). "Because being on his own was a nice change — very nice. He looked like no one else, he talked like no one else, he walked like no one else, he smiled like no one else. For this one day Jay Grayson was twinless, purely himself. He was a regular, one-of-a-kind kid. And all day long, it felt great." Clements' latest is delightful. When identical twins start at a new school, one of them is sick that first day. Due to a clerical error, no one knows there should be two boys, not one, enrolled. The twins decide to keep it that way — for awhile. As the Grayson twins try to separate themselves and take turns going to school, the scheme seems to work — almost. Because while they may look alike, they aren't alike. Not at all. What started as a crazy whim goes wildly out of control. Clements writes a funny, heartfelt book about the importance of being yourself and of helping everyone, including parents, teachers and new friends, to recognize and respect those differences. Clements' middle-school setting and characters spring to life in his carefully crafted new novel.

- "See How They Run: Campaign Dreams, Election Schemes, and the Race to the White House," by Susan E. Goodman, illustrated by Elwood H. Smith (Bloomsbury, \$9.95, ages 8-12). Goodman's style is casual and witty, but her text is chock-full of information, explanations and illustrative anecdotes on the history of democracy, how a campaign is run, why it's vital to vote and how kids can help. The cartoonlike illustrations make you laugh and make you think. I vote for this book for every classroom.

- "One Small Step," by P.B. Kerr (Margaret K. McElderry, \$16.99, ages 8-14). The year is 1969, when this country was determined to win the race to the moon. In this action-packed novel, 13-year-old Scott MacLeod is unexpectedly thrust into a secret NASA mission accompanying two trained chimpanzees. "If you thought being a kid was just a lot of people telling you what to do, then you're about to find out that being an astronaut is ten times worse." There are details galore about space travel. When Scott, an independent thinker, disobeys orders to take a walk on the moon (for a darn good reason), we're rooting for him. For any students curious about the nitty-gritty of space travel, and who care about the treatment of animals, this is a story they'll love.

- "Pencil of Doom! (Schooling Around)," by Andy Griffiths (Scholastic, \$5.99, ages 9-12). This is the second book in the new series "Schooling Around" about a wacky classroom led by a highly unorthodox teacher. Henry McThrottle and his fifth-grade classmates battle a pencil that grants your wish — but with dire consequences. Comedy, suspense and merriment for all.

- "Trouble," by Gary D. Schmidt (Clarion, \$16, ages 12 and up). Set in a small upscale community on the Massachusetts coast where "Trouble will never find you," this searing novel has stunning descriptions, believable characters and taut dialogue. Schmidt tackles his subject with realism and depth, and demonstrates the futility and fatality of prejudice. For 300 years, the Smith family has been taught not to look for trouble. But suddenly it arrives in a traffic accident that kills Henry's older brother. Cambodian refugee Chay is accused. Henry sets off for Maine, where he and Franklin had planned to ascend Mount Katahdin. But along the way, he meets Chay. All of the plot details and segments are intricately interwoven, and the surprise ending reveals that trouble was always in Smith history, buried in the sand. In the clear, clean air of Mount Katahdin, Henry realizes "the world is Trouble "... and Grace. That is all there is." Schmidt's work has the passion of conviction and the restraint of a skilled artist.

- "The Adoration of Jenna Fox," by Mary E. Pearson (Henry Holt and Company, \$16.95, ages 14 and up). Is genetic engineering for humans on the horizon? What are the ethical implications? 17-year-old Jenna Fox was in a car crash and in a coma for a year. When she wakes, she has no memories. At times there are words she doesn't know. At other times, whole encyclopedia bits pour out. "Why can I remember the details of the French Revolution, but I can't remember if I ever had a best friend?" When she watches tapes of her earlier life, she doesn't recognize herself. In a spellbinding novel, Pearson presents a science-fiction mystery and compelling characters in complex relationships wrestling with the question: How far do you go to save the one you love? The novel is guaranteed to provoke heated class discussions.

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