

Presenting USBBY's Outstanding International Books for 2020

Far Away, So Close



FOR THE LAST 15 YEARS, the United States Board on Books for Young People (USBBY), the U.S. section of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), has entrusted a small subset of its membership with a substantial charge: to create an honor list of “international books that are deemed most outstanding of those published during the calendar year.”

The 42 titles on the 2020 Outstanding International Books List (OIB) are significant for both their exceptional quality and globe-spanning origins. The outstanding literary merit of the honorees, from a cerebral picture book about boredom to a stereotype-crushing photographic art book, is ultimately a qualitative assessment—albeit a collective one.

By Patrick Gall

The Return by Natalia Chernysheva, illustrated by author (Groundwood)

Notably, the 2020 list reflects the complexity found within the designation *international*. USBBY defines an international book as any title that originated or was first published in a country other than the U. S. Many titles on the list, including books originally published in Brazil, India, and Russia, overtly reflect their countries of origin in both setting and story; however, this straightforward representation is regularly disrupted across the list. Young readers, as well as the adults in their lives, will find that many titles on the 2020 OIB List defy prevailing stereotypes and geographical expectations. Through stories such as a trilingual Chilean picture book featuring English, Hebrew, and Arabic; a British novel set in the Philippines during the Philippine-American War; and a Swedish memoir by a survivor of the Holocaust, readers are offered titles that honestly reflect a world in which borders and conceptions of culture are ever-changing, often as a result of unjust histories and present-day realities.

No country, culture, or people is monolithic. The titles on the following list can serve as an example to young readers that just as all people's experiences in and of a place are varied and complex, so too is literature.

PRESCHOOL TO GRADE 2

ABADIA, Ximo. *The Farmer*. tr. from French by Grace Maccarone and Kelly Loughman. illus. by author. Holiday House. (Switzerland) While the village rests, Paul the farmer works hard—but when the well runs dry, he finds he's not alone in caring for his farm. Bold illustrations combine powerful graphic design with a playful quality that balances the weight of Paul's work.

AVINGAQ, Susan & Maren Vsetula. *The Pencil*. illus. by Charlene Chua. Inhabit Media. (Canada) One day, while their mother is out, Susan and her sister Rebecca use the family's one precious pencil to draw pictures. Dynamic perspective shifts and a lively illustration style depict the joie de vivre of a particular way of Inuit life.

BASIL, Krystia. *A Sky Without Lines*. illus. by Laura Borràs. minedition. (Hong Kong/set along U.S./Mexico border) Lines on a map separate Arturo from his beloved brother Antonio, but it is the sky, a place without borders, that allows him to hope for the day that they will be reunited.

CHERNYSHEVA, Natalia. *The Return*. illus. by author. Groundwood. (Portugal) In this nuanced wordless story, artfully executed

in black ink, textural prints, and subtle pops of color, a single character journeys from the city to the country. Scale and perspective are imaginatively manipulated, encouraging multiple interpretations of this emotional homecoming.

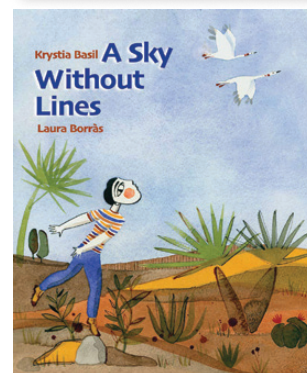
DEKKO, Espen. *Paws+Edward*. tr. from Norwegian. illus. by Mari Kanstad Johnsen. Kids Can. (Norway)

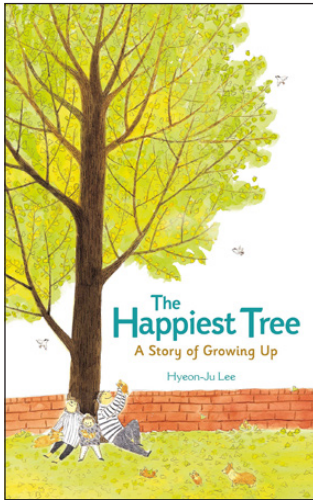
This heartrending book portrays the special relationship between child and dog, and how losing a beloved four-legged friend can be incredibly painful. Edward finds solace and happiness in his memories and dreams of Paws, helping him through his grief journey.

FLETT, Julie. *Birdsong*. illus. by author. Greystone. (Canada)

In spare, poetic text infused with Cree-Métis words, this deeply moving multi-seasonal story explores the intergenerational relationships between a young girl, her mother, and their elderly neighbor. Textured, earth-toned illustrations invite reflection and capture the richness and beauty of the natural world.

IGLESIAS, Juan Pablo. *Daniel and Ismail*. tr. from Spanish by Ilan Stavans (English), Eliezer Nowodworski and Frieda Press-Danieli (Hebrew), and Randa Sayegh (Arabic). illus. by Alex Peris. Restless Bks/Yonder. (Chile) Two boys accidentally swap religious and cul-





turally significant birthday gifts, with eye-opening consequences. A unique format, featuring three languages and reading right-to-left, reinforces the story's message that despite our differences, we can all share the same page—and the same soccer field.

LEE, Hyeon-Ju. *The Happiest Tree: A Story of Growing Up*. tr. from Korean. illus. by author. Feiwel and Friends. (Korea)

One ginkgo tree tells its story of growing outside an apartment building, describing the friends and families it meets. Joyful years and lonely years are always coupled with the hope and anticipation of what else might be in store.

MEDDOUR, Wendy. *Lubna and Pebble*. illus. by Daniel Egnéus. Dial. (UK)

Colorful illustrations depict Lubna sharing her worries and concerns with her best friend, a rock named Pebble—until she meets a fellow refugee named Amir. Before her family relocates, she passes Pebble on to Amir to help him through his hard times.

RAM, Praba & Sheela Preuitt. *Thukpa for All*. illus. by Shilpa Ranade. Karadi Tales. (India)

Tsering treks with his stick, sweeping it left and right as he invites all the neighbors to dinner to enjoy Abi's delicious noodle soup, but when the power is cut, only Tsering is able to find his way in the dark.

READ, Kate. *One Fox: A Counting Book Thriller*. illus. by author. Peachtree. (UK)

One famished fox spies three plump chickens and devises a plan to satisfy his hunger. Bold, dramatic collages demand careful attention, starting with the end papers. This unusual counting book is quite the thriller. Will the fox find success or will his plan be thwarted?

TANCO, Miguel. *Count on Me*. illus. by author. Tundra. (Canada)

A young protagonist discovers her passion for math. She records her observations and illustrates diagrams of various concepts in her math notebook that is cleverly included in the back matter. Expressive watercolor and ink illustrations are beautifully displayed on oversized double-page spreads.

VERMETTE, Katherena. *The Girl and the Wolf*. illus. by Julie Flett. Theytus. (Canada)

A lone wolf finds a lost girl. The wolf encourages the girl to take a breath and remember what she already knows about her surroundings, then stays by her side until she reunites with her family. This poetic story interrupts a well-established European fairy tale norm.

VILELA, Fernando. *Along the Tapajós*. tr. from Portuguese by Daniel Hahn. illus. by author. Amazon Crossing. (Brazil)

When it begins to rain along the Tapajós River, Cauã and Inaê must relocate to higher ground with their family, including their pet tortoise, Titi. Eye-popping mixed-media illustrations depict contemporary life in the Amazon rainforest.

YOSHITAKE, Shinsuke. *The Boring Book*. illus. by author. Chronicle. (Japan)

"I'm bored. So bored!" Readers follow a child through an offbeat exploration behind the meaning of this common complaint that is both humorous and philosophical. Conclusion: Boring times make fun times more exciting...right?

GRADES 3-5

ABELA, Deborah. *The Most Marvelous International Spelling Bee*. Sourcebooks/Sourcebooks Jabberwocky. (Australia)

India Wimple and her family leave rural Australia for London so she and a diverse cast of characters can compete in an international spelling competition. But the spellers have to foil a villain before they can meet the queen and spell their way to fame.

ALVAREZ, Lorena. *Hicotea: A Nightlights Story*. illus. by author. Nobrow. (UK)

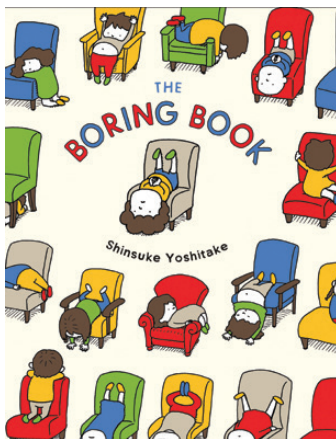
On a field trip to the wetlands, Sandy tumbles into a turtle's shell and through new dimensions of the natural world, discovering that the more we explore, the bigger the world becomes. Complex and unconventional panel layouts feature Alvarez's lush, radiant illustrations.

BLACKCRANE, Gerelchimeg. *The Moose of Ewenki*. tr. from Chinese by Helen Mixter. illus. by Jiu Er. Greystone. (China)

Based on actual events, this tender story originating from Inner Mongolia depicts the unlikely relationship between a human hunter and orphaned moose. Meaningful visual shifts between subdued sepia tones to vibrant full color heighten the emotional impact of the exquisitely rendered illustrations.

DAHLE, Gro. *Angryman*. tr. from Norwegian by Tara Chace. illus. by Svein Nyhus. North-South. (Norway)

A young boy describes life with his angry, abusive father. The illustrations and free verse powerfully convey the child's emotions as he tries to understand, love, and yet hide from a





The Moose of Ewenki by Gerelchimeg Blackcrane, illustrated by Jiu Er (Greystone Kids, an Aldana Libros book)

parent out of control. Through intervention, Daddy is ultimately restored to his family.

HUSON, Brett D. *The Grizzly Mother*. illus. by Natasha Donovan. HighWater Pr. (Canada)
Boldly graphic illustrations and informative text describe a grizzly mother rearing her cubs while co-existing with the Gitksan people of Northwestern Canada. Scientific terms are explained in helpful captions while the Gitksan language is artfully defined within the text, providing access for a range of readers.

HUTCHINSON, Michael. *The Case of Windy Lake*. Second Story. (Canada)
Clearly and cleverly paying homage to 20th-century serialized children's mysteries, this contemporary First Nations adventure is instantly engaging. Distinctive main characters (each with compelling backstories and individual motivations) and engrossing secondary plots come together to portray a rich, complex world.

ØRBECK-NILSSEN, Constance. *Vanishing Colors*. tr. from Norwegian by Kari Dickson. illus. by Akin Duzakin. Eerdmans. (Norway)
A magical bird helps a child find solace as she huddles with her mother in their war-torn city. The bird reminds the girl of happy memories, gradually lifting her spirits and thus turning the initial gray and black images to soft pastels. Poignant and uplifting.

RUNDELL, Katherine. *The Good Thieves*. S. & S. (UK/set in U.S.)
British Vita Marlowe travels to New York City

to help her grandfather, who has lost possession of the family home. With the help of a pickpocket and two circus performers, Vita tackles rooftop walking, dungeons, and tunnels to foil the trickery of a Mafia-connected businessman.

SMITH, Heather. *The Phone Booth in Mr. Hirota's Garden*. illus. by Rachel Wada. Orca. (Canada/set in Japan)
Everyone in a Japanese village loses a loved one when a tsunami strikes. Then Mr. Hirota builds a phone booth in his garden and the villagers use it to send messages on the wind to their lost loved ones, thus allowing their healing to begin.

TAYLOR, Sean & the Khayaal Theatre. *Riding a Donkey Backwards: Wise and Foolish Tales of Mulla Nasruddin*. illus. by Shirin Adl. Candlewick. (UK)
Follow the famous Mulla Nasruddin through 21 stories of his foolishness and wisdom. Lively, silly mixed-media illustrations complement these Middle Eastern tales full of culture, humor, and insight.

VAFAEIAN, Marjan. *The Parrot and the Merchant: A Tale by Rumi*. tr. from Persian by Azita Rassi. illus. by author. Tiny Owl. (Iran)
Straightforward text coupled with evocative illustrations retell Rumi's thought-provoking 13th-century tale of a clever parrot and greedy merchant. Set across a stark white backdrop, distorted characters and stylized objects are eerily expressive and endlessly complex in their design and execution.





The Red Zone: An Earthquake Story by Silvia Vecchini, illustrated by Sualzo (Abrams/Amulet)

The 2020 Outstanding International Books Committee

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GRADES 6-8

ARGUETA, Jorge. **Caravan to the North: Misael's Long Walk.** tr. from Spanish by Elizabeth Bell. illus. by Manuel Monroy. Groundwood. (Canada/set in Central America)

Hope and sadness coexist in this first-person account of Misael, a young Salvadoran boy, and his family as they leave their home to join the caravan heading to the United States. Black-lined illustrations set the stage for Misael's emotion-filled poems about his journey.

GOURLAY, Candy. **Bone Talk.** David Fickling Bks. (UK/set in the Philippines)

The Philippine-American War of 1899 comes to life in this vivid coming-of-age novel about

the Bontoc community. Ten-year-old Samkad desperately wants to become a man, but when his village is invaded by Americans he realizes his culture and people are more important.

KADARUSMAN, Michelle. **Girl of the Southern Sea.**

Pajama Pr. (Canada/set in Indonesia)

Nia must care for her brother and manage the family's food-cart business for her often absent, alcoholic father. Inspired by Javanese mythology, she pens adventures that mirror her real-life struggles. An author's note provides insights about the effects of poverty on young women in Indonesia.

LITVINA, Alexandra. **The Apartment: A Century of Russian History.** tr. from Russian by Antonina W. Bouis. illus. by Anna Desnitskaya.

Abrams. (Russia)

The Muromtsev family lives in the same apartment generation after generation, through many social and political changes. Some of the furniture and other unique items are passed down, whereas other objects disappear in this oversized book with newspaper clippings, photographs, and memorabilia.

MELLO, Roger. **Charcoal Boys.** tr. from Portuguese by Daniel Hahn. illus. by author. Archipelago/Elsewhere Editions. (Brazil)

Striking neon color and incendiary die-cut flames illuminate a hornet's observations of the dire situation of two young boys forced to work in the charcoal fields.

POLAK, Monique. **The Taste of Rain.** Orca. (Canada/set in China)

Girl Guides are always optimistic and do their duties with a joyful heart, according to Miss E. This mantra makes life as normal as possible for teen girls imprisoned by the Japanese at Weih sien Internment Camp in China during World War II.

ROSS, Ailsa. **The Girl Who Rode a Shark: And Other Stories of Daring Women.** illus. by Amy Blackwell. Pajama Pr. (Canada)

Fifty-two artists, pioneers, scientists, activists, athletes, and seekers from all parts of the world are profiled in these compelling portraits of women across history who have pushed their own boundaries to impact their world. Each profile includes a diverse list of additional individuals to further explore.

STRANGE, Lucy. **Our Castle by the Sea.** Scholastic/Chicken House. (UK)

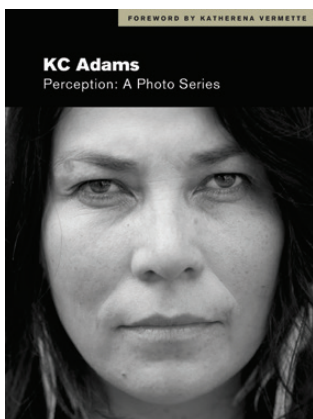
Two sisters, living with their family in a light-house on the English coast, become embroiled in World War II secrets and subterfuge

as the threat of a Nazi invasion looms. Spies, British internment camps, and unlikely heroes are intertwined with local folklore, forming a nuanced, fast-paced story.

VECCHINI, Silvia. *The Red Zone: An Earthquake Story.* tr. from Italian by Anna Barton. illus. by Sualzo. Abrams/Amulet. (Italy)

When an earthquake destroys their quiet Italian town, three friends must cope with aftershocks both geological and emotional in this introspective graphic novel, one that also discusses the aftermath of natural disasters and their impacts on individuals and communities.

GRADES 9-12



ADAMS, K.C. *Perception: A Photo Series.* illus. by author. HighWater Pr. (Canada)

Powerful black-and-white photographs juxtapose pairs of portraits: the first a solemn subject captioned by a disparaging remark, while the second shows the same subject positively captioned and joyful. The depth, detail, and range of photographs clearly challenge stereotypes about First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people.

FRIED, Hédi. *Questions I Am Asked About the Holocaust.* tr. from Swedish by Alice E. Olsson. Scribe. (Sweden)

This slim volume shares the voice of a Holocaust survivor. The range of practical to philosophical questions covers Fried's life before the war, her experience in the camps, and her resettlement in Sweden; and Fried's insightful responses make for compelling reading with relevance for today.

KWAYMULLINA, Ambelin & Ezekiel Kwaymullina. *The Things She's Seen.* Knopf. (Australia)

Part murder mystery, part historical account of Australia's Stolen Generation, this tightly woven story told in two voices revolves around

a biracial daughter of a police detective and a ghost. The two work together to solve the mystery of a fire and girls who disappeared.

MAGNASON, Andri Snær. *The Casket of Time.* tr. from Icelandic by Björg Árnadóttir and Andrew Cauthery. Restless/Yonder. (Iceland)

The adults try to escape the ravages of "the situation" in a TimeBox, but when Sigrun wakes up too soon, she finds herself in the fantastical world of Pangea, where a greedy king has tried to stop time altogether, creating an equally perilous situation.

PETRECA, Guilherme. *Ye.* tr. from Portuguese by Andrea Rosenberg. illus. by author. IDW/Top Shelf. (Brazil)

A young man goes on a perilous journey to find his voice and rid himself of the Colorless King's darkness. Depicted in rich, warm illustrations that reference titles such as *The Little Prince*, this is a story of perseverance and hope in the face of forces beyond one's control or understanding.

SEDGWICK, Marcus & Julian Sedgwick. *Voyages in the Underworld of Orpheus Black.* illus. by Alexis Deacon. Candlewick/Walker. (UK)

An artist, firefighter, and conscientious objector searches for his brother in the wreckage of 1944 London after a devastating German air raid. This immersive anti-war text speaks to contemporary global dilemmas through a head-spinning collage of prose, poetry, and illustrations.



AKIWENZIE-DAMM, Kateri & others. *This Place: 150 Years Retold.* illus. by various. HighWater Pr. (Canada)

This multi-genre comics anthology by Indigenous creators features high-quality cartooning, passionate writing, and a strong thematic through line. A brilliant foreword establishes the focus of this collection—to examine what it means for contemporary Indigenous people to live, survive, and succeed in a post-apocalyptic world.



Each year USBBY, the United States section of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), appoints a committee to select its Outstanding International Books List, which celebrates children's literature that U.S. publishers and distributors have brought in from around the world. The list highlights exceptional international children's literature that introduces young people to outstanding authors and illustrators from other countries, helps children and young people in the U.S. to see the world from diverse perspectives, promotes literature that is accessible to children and young people in the U.S., addresses topics that may be missing from U.S. children's and young adult literature, and encourages titles that exhibit distinct cultural flavor. The committee received nearly 550 books published in 2019, of which 42 were chosen for the 2020 OIB List. For additional information and access to all OIB lists, visit www.usbby.org.