Books are the best way to open kids' minds

By Kathleen Isaacs

In the past few years, Americans have been surprised to discover that the way we see ourselves and the world isn't shared by others. Our society's values are not universal, and what we see as acts of good will aren't always taken that way. We may feel connected to the rest of the world by television, telecommunications, and the Internet, but these links are ephemeral. Our attention shifts from one story to the next, and the fleeting moments of sympathy and understanding are quickly lost. Furthermore, our preconceptions about other cultures can easily cloud our vision. How can we get beyond our own experiences? How can we help our children see the world more clearly and pave the way for genuine empathy? One way, of course, is through reading.
Last spring, when the Children's Book Council and the U.S. Board on Books for Young People (a division of the International Board on Books for Young People) sent out their first call for submissions for the 2006 Outstanding International Booklist—highlighting titles published in the U.S. last year—their guidelines called for books that “counteract cultural stereotypes, bridge cultural gaps, and build connections.”

At first, we feared we wouldn’t have many books to choose from. We worried that publishers weren’t acquiring books from abroad, that they wouldn’t learn of our new list in time to submit books for consideration. But the response was enthusiastic, and we received 196 submissions. What surprised us was that 85 percent of the books were originally written in English, and published in Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The others came from European publishers. A few had more exotic origins—a diary from China and a memoir of serving in the Israeli army (both published in France), a description of going to school in India, and a picture book set in South Africa. To our surprise and dismay, South and Central America were not represented at all.

Our list of 42 recommended books is an attempt to build a bridge between our country and the rest of the world. It represents the best of what U.S. publishers are offering today. As the first international book committee, we spent considerable time discussing selection criteria. We looked for books that represented the best of children’s literature from other countries, that could introduce American readers to outstanding artists and writers, help our children see the world from other points of view, provide a perspective or address a topic otherwise missing from children’s literature in the U.S., and exhibit a distinct cultural flavor. We hope these books offer a way to help young people see through others’ eyes.

The Outstanding International Booklist Committee
Chair Kathleen Isaacs, Towson (MD) University; Joan Atkinson, University of Alabama; Ernie Bond, Salisbury (MD) University; Julie Corsaro, children’s literature specialist, Chapel Hill, NC; Marian Creamer, Children’s Literature Alive! Portland, OR; Micki Nevett, Westmere Elementary School, Albany, NY; Jinx Watson, University of Tennessee; Natalie Ziarnik, Ela Area Public Library, Lake Zurich, IL; Judy Zuckerman, Brooklyn (NY) Public Library; and Susan Stan, ex officio, Central Michigan University.

Gr 6-8—While excavating through postwar wreckage, 14-year-old worker Toni V. finds the diary of Pelly D., a spirited, carefree teenager who led a life of wealth and privilege before her futuristic society’s genetic profiling led to genocide. This riveting dystopia will stun readers with its resemblance to the Jewish Holocaust.

K-Gr 2—This affectionate and gently humorous picture book is notable for its compelling and comforting portraits of a workaday mom. Captions incorporating similes and patterned language convey the amazing variety of traits that make mothers everywhere special.

Gr 6-8—Neema, a seventh-grade Australian student and great-granddaughter of Kalpana, who is visiting from India, attempts to answer the question posed by her teacher, “Who am I?” This cross-cultural, intergenerational story combines magical and real worlds within a narrative told from various points of view.

K-Gr 2—Lyric text and vibrant mixed-media illustrations tell the story of a girl and her “boom-box” voice. Ruby is ostracized because of loudness until the day her jazzy neighbors teach her to harness her powerful voice. Though the story could take place anywhere, Daly’s South African context shines through.

Gr 6-8—In this third installment in the Cason family saga (Saffy's Angel, Indigo's Star, both S & S), the household is as chaotic as ever. Rose is determined to find her departed friend, Tom, and she has some humorous misadventures in her quest. Realistic dialogue and irresistible characters enliven the tale.


K-Gr 2—With a nod to inspirational teachers, McNaughton describes the transformation of an ordinary child's ordinary day into an extraordinary learning experience. A non-conformist teacher encourages his students to visualize what they hear in music he plays. His invitation stirs the children's imaginations. The illustrations expand the color palette and convey the text's wry humor and characters' subtle gestures.


Gr 6-8—Set in Victorian England, this historical fantasy follows the trials and adventures of poverty-stricken siblings Joe and Annie who had been left by their mother at a workhouse when they were very young and were then sold to an abusive farmer. After their escape from the farm, Joe and Annie travel a dangerous road and meet questionable as well as kind strangers as they search for their mother. This suspenseful and sad yet ultimately hopeful novel will be relished by fans of Dickens's Oliver Twist.


Gr 3-5—Droll humor, clever dialogue, multiple perspectives, and a distinctive French sensibility invigorate a matched set of engaging stories about teachers, students, and parents. Spare, spiky sketches add a touch of whimsy to the mayhem.


K-Gr 2—The illustrations of a productive and generous apple tree show its magic: everyone enjoys a delicious apple. "Every seed could be an apple tree... and [everyone likes apples]." With soft, pastel pictures spilling from one page to another, we find honor in the simple apple tree.


Gr 3-5—Seven tales told by the famous Jewish storyteller Reb Nachman of Bratslav are made very accessible to readers. Seemingly similar to traditional fairy tales, these all have a spiritual underpinning based on Kabalistic beliefs. An introduction, background notes, and an extensive bibliography are included in this handsome book.


Gr 9 Up—The lives of three young people begin as separate plot strands and then intertwine as they help one another make crucial decisions and gain perspective on their futures. Attitudes toward sex and death convey a non-American viewpoint.


K-Gr 2—In the bush country of frontier Australia, Lizzie's lively imagination keeps her mother entertained as they work and wait for her father to return from his trip to town to sell the sandalwood he has cut.


Gr 6-8—In a Stone Age land of clan rivalries, mystical spirits, and vast wilderness, Torak embarks on a journey at the behest of his dying father to destroy a demonic bear whose evil powers threaten civilization. With his wolf cub as companion and guide, Torak confronts human, spiritual, and natural enemies in this fast-paced, coming-of-age adventure/quest fantasy.


Gr 3-5—When lightning strikes and humanizes a scarecrow, Jack partners up with him and their journey begins. They survive many narrow escapes as they're chased and stalked. This tale of friendship comes to a satisfying conclusion with good rewarded and evil punished. Bailey's line drawings enhance the old-fashioned humor.


Gr 6-8—Luke Harding, 16, is the youngest Forensic Investigator (FI) graduated from his English prep school. Immediately there's a murder and all evidence points to Luke. With sidekick Male, his trusty robot who conducts DNA testing onsite, and for-
hidden girlfriend, Jade, Luke hopes to snare the real killer. This high-interest, readable tale is fast moving, and its characters are likable and engaging.

Gr 3-5—Prompted by the death of his teenage son, Rosen writes a heartfelt de-

Gr 9 Up—In 1915 as he lies dying in Loos, France, on the field of his first battle, Rudyard Kipling's 18-year-old son, John, remembers his childhood preparation for service to his country and the carefree days before the Great Picnic turned out to be something quite different.

Gr 9 Up—Told from the perspective of Phil, a gay teen, this compelling coming-of-age novel focuses on people closest to him and moves thematically between his childhood and adolescence. The story concludes, holding full circle, as Phil addresses and reveals his most perplexing questions. Exquisite, lyrical writing.

Gr 6-8—The continuing adventures of Montmorency and his underworld alter ego, Scarper, involve bombs, death, and drug addiction. The Victorian setting adds to the dark intrigue and may lead readers to other period classics.

KGr 2—As Lizette tries to find a missing sock, she has amusing and realistic encounters with friends and bullies. As she begins to use a new perspective, Lizette figures out her dilemma and moves on, satisfied with her place in the world. A spunky little heroine gets her domestic dramas under control!

Gr 6-8—Dolphin adores her mother, Mari-gold, who has vivid tattoos all over her body. But Mum's manic depression becomes overwhelming for Dolphin and her older sister, Star. Difficult family situations are portrayed realistically but leavened with humor.

Gr 6-8—Poison's quest begins when phaeries substitute a changling for her younger sister. She meets unusual friends along the way who help her face unpredictable adversities. Ultimately, she must not only play a pivotal role in the battle between the lords of the realm, but also discover some uncomfortable truths about her own life.

Gr 9 Up—After a dead body is discovered on his family estate, teenager Declan becomes obsessed with finding out what happened to his mother, who disappeared several years earlier. This beautifully written and distinctive novel combines a suspenseful mystery with an intriguing family drama about secrets.

Gr 6-8—Born into an impoverished family in a remote part of China, Ma Yan's schooling seemed to be over when she reached 13. Then her mother thrust her diaries into the hands of a French journalist, who edited and published them—ensuring the girl's future.

Gr 9 Up—Zenatti chronicles two years of compulsory military service in the Israeli army, her initial excitement with the uniform and gun, grueling training, an unexplained anxiety attack, and posting to a security listening post as she grows up and away from old friends.

Gr 9 Up—Ed Kennedy has a dead-end job, loser friends, and a smelly dog. He drifts through life without goals. But after accidentally stopping a bank robbery, Ed finds himself becoming an agent of change, and as he carries out a series of random missions he finds that he might actually care.

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