

 Natalie's Book Recs

February Newsletter

Hello and happy Valentine's Day!

My January ended with the ALA Youth Media Awards. This is the ceremony where the Caldecott, Newbery, and Printz are announced. It felt a little bit like I was having my own second Christmas, and it was wonderful to see so many of the books that I've loved get shiny stickers on their covers.

Among the winners of 2020 were the picture books *Outside In* (Caldecott Honor), *Honeybee: The Busy Life of Apis Mellifera* (Sibert Winner), and *The Bear in My Family* (Geisel Honor); the middle grade graphic novel *When Stars Are Scattered* (Schneider Family Honor); and the young adult titles *Lifting As We Climb* (King Honor), *Dragon Hoops* (Printz Honor), and *Dancing at the Pity Party* (Sydney Taylor Winner), all of which I've recommended in my last two newsletters. Not a bad record if I say so myself! :)

Now it's time to start searching for this year's great books. So without further ado, I'd like to share some new favorites of the month, as well as some older titles that I've discovered for the first time. Happy reading!

—Natalie D. Tate

The Books

Picture Books Ages 3–8

Unicorns Are the Worst!. Alex Willan.

The Suitcase. Chris Naylor-Ballesteros.

Hello Lighthouse. Sophie Blackall.

Middle Grade Reads Ages 8–12

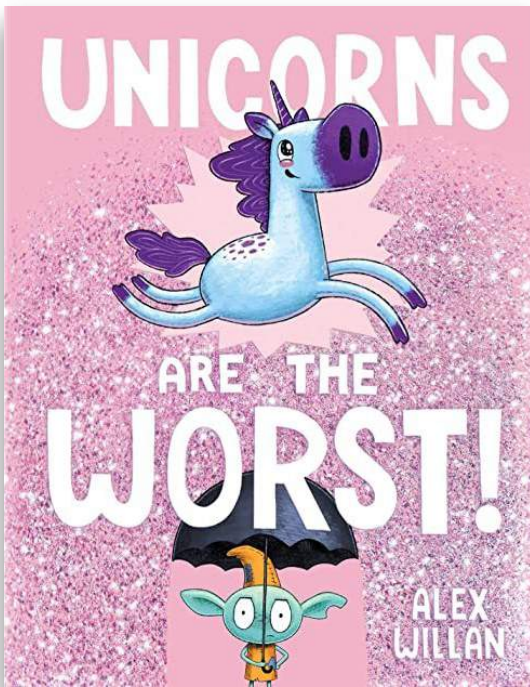
One Dead Spy. Nathan Hale.

The Beast and the Bethany. Jack Meggitt-Phillips, illus. Isabelle Follath.

Real. Carol Cujec and Peyton Goddard.

Young Adult Reads Ages 13+

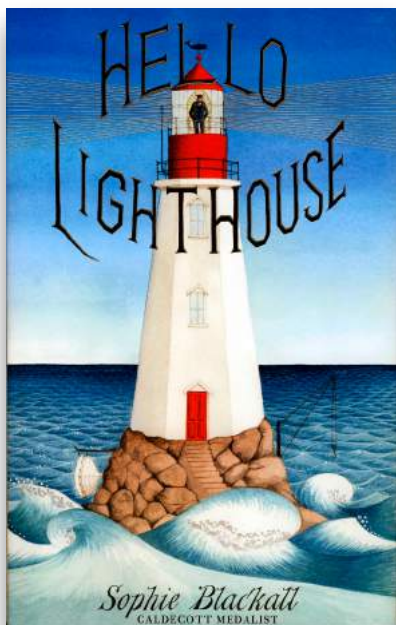
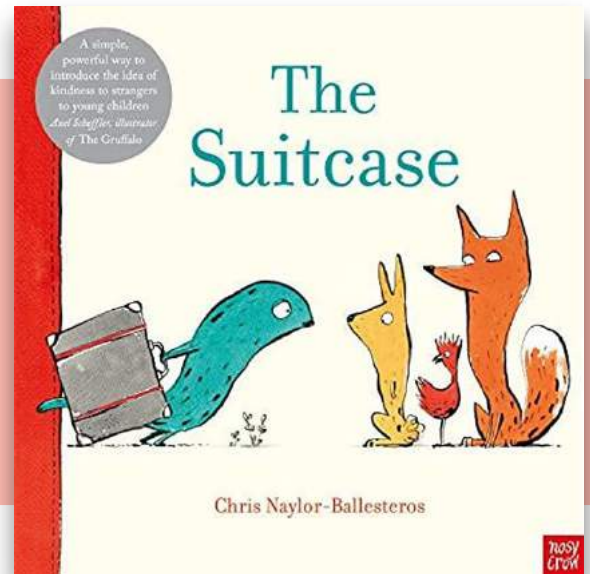
Strongman: The Rise of Five Dictators and the Fall of Democracy. Kenneth C. Davis.



Unicorns are pretty cool, right? Wrong! Our poor little goblin narrator has had enough of his new unicorn neighbors. Not only does he feel underappreciated—nobody ever throws a *goblin*-themed party or talks about a *goblin's* cool magic—but he also feels like he's the only one doing any *real* work around this place! All the unicorns ever seem to do is frolic, have dainty tea parties, and get glitter all over everything. They're the *worst*. But when a big, bad, flame-snorting dragon shows up and corners the little goblin, he might just realize that unicorns aren't so bad after all.

A witty narrator, colorful drawings, and a unicorn-centric plot make this picture book a delight for readers young and old. (You might just change *your* mind about unicorns too!)

When a strange-looking creature arrives in town one day, Bird, Fox, and Rabbit don't quite know what to think, especially when the creature claims to have his whole house in his suitcase. So when the creature falls asleep, the three animals decide to break in. The contents of the suitcase surprise them, and the three animals decide to surprise the creature in return. Simple, engaging, and oh-so-sweet, this book is storytelling at its best.



Hello *Lighthouse* is the story of a lighthouse and its last “keeper,” a man whose job is to make sure the lamp is wound up tight, its oil is refilled, and the events of the day are written in the logbook. Time passes in the lighthouse and, with it, many events—the arrival of the keeper’s wife, the rescue of three wrecked sailors from a storm, the birth of a daughter, and—finally—the invention of a lighthouse machine that needs no keeper, causing husband, wife, and daughter to say goodbye to their beloved lighthouse and find a new home on the shore.

What makes *Hello Lighthouse* truly exceptional is its pictures. Beautiful illustrations invite young observers to uncover hidden gems in each spread. Blackall imbues her art with well-researched details from the lives of real lighthouse keepers. It's no surprise that this was the 2019 Caldecott winner!

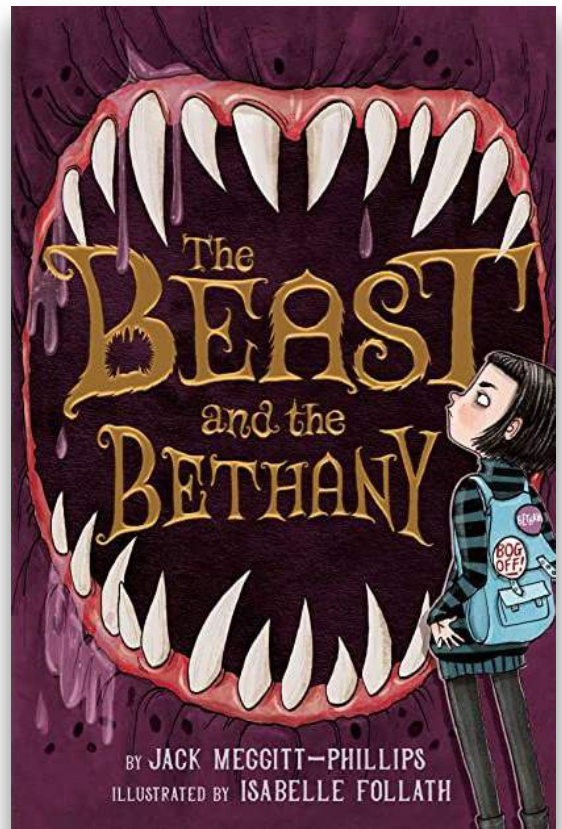


When Nathan Hale, American spy, is captured by the British and sentenced to death, his last words ("I regret that I have but one life to give for my county") are so good that he's snatched up into the Big Huge Book of American History. Nathan is now privy to all sorts of crazy stories about America, and he proceeds to tell his captors—a British soldier and a hangman—thrilling truths about the Thirteen Colonies, the Boston Massacre, the Green Mountain Boys, the Knox cannon mission, sieges, deceptions, escapes, exploding cows (and fingers), and prisoners of war, to name a few.

The first of ten (and counting) graphic novels in the highly praised Hazardous Tales series, *One Dead Spy* is an American history lesson like you've never read it before. If you're looking for a middle grade series that's accessible, interesting, educational, and extremely funny, you've definitely found it. Readers should know that the author advises reading this series in order. The tenth book, *Blades of Freedom: A Louisiana Purchase Tale*, was released in November 2020.

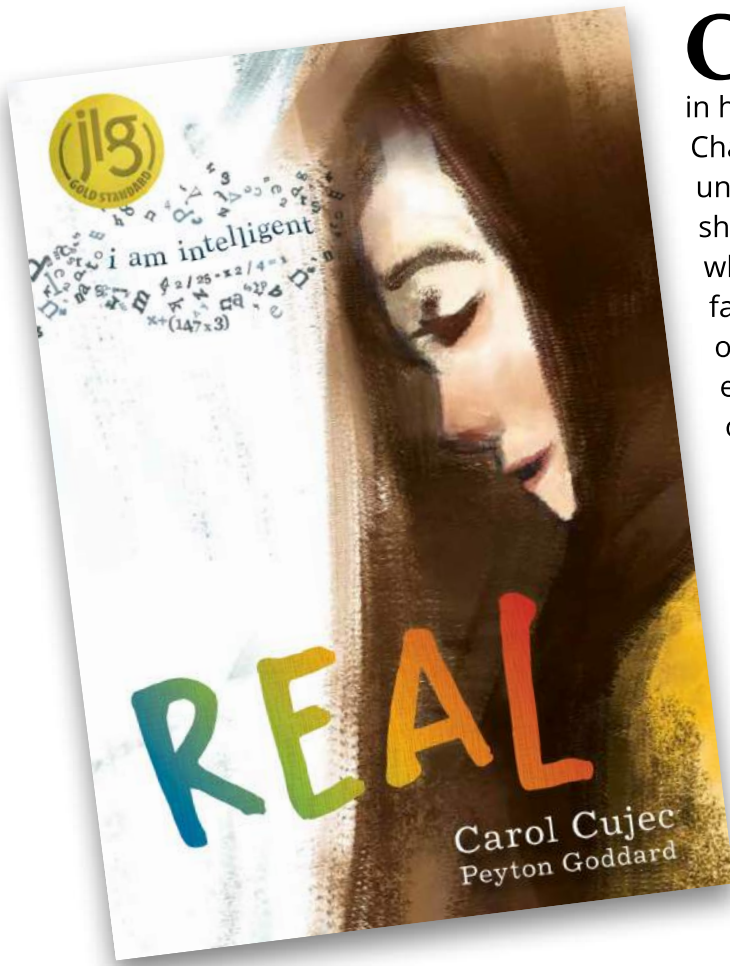
Ebenezer Tweezer is a 511-year-old man. Fortunately for Ebenezer, he doesn't actually *look* like he's 511. Unfortunately for Ebenezer, the only way to keep himself from looking 511 is by feeding strange and rare items to the beast that lives upstairs. When the Beast asks for a human child for its next meal, Ebenezer is horrified . . . but he's much more horrified about the possibility of losing his good looks, so he decides to go to the local orphanage and adopt the nastiest child he can find. That child's name is Bethany and all havoc breaks loose when he brings her home.

As a kid, Roald Dahl was one of my very favorite authors. His books were full of wacky characters, crazy scenarios, and boatloads of irony. Jack Meggitt-Phillips writes with startlingly similar charm. Although Bethany and Ebenezer were both thoroughly naughty at the beginning of the story, they'd wormed their way into my heart by the end. Read this book for some serious laughs.



Charity is stuck in her head. In fact, she's been stuck in her head for 13 years. Born with nonverbal autism, Charity can't always control her body, but she understands everything that's said to her. That means she understands when her aunt calls her retarded, or when her "special" school teacher tells her she's a failure. Charity also understands her mother's lessons on reading, history, and—Charity's favorite—math, even when only her parents believe Charity is capable of learning anything. But with the help of a gifted teacher and a huge keyboard, Charity's life and the lives of all who know her are about to change forever.

Just released this month, *Real* is based on the true story of Peyton Goddard. This novel touched me deeply. Charity is strong and persevering, even in the face of bullying, ignorance, and maltreatment. Readers will come away enlightened and better equipped to be forces for good in their community. *Real* would be a great book to read and talk about as a family. I highly recommend this one.



What allows a strongman—a political dictator—to come into power? Where does he get power? *How* does he get power? Why have there been so many strongmen? And how do we prevent the rise of another? Kenneth C. Davis answers all of these questions and more in his biography of five notorious political leaders: Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Saddam Hussein. Davis also provides a history of ancient democracy and of its continued relevance today.

Strongman was a harrowing read. While the ruthlessness of these five men defy words, Davis doesn't use the book as a scaremongering tactic, nor does he share each man's childhood, rise to power, and political agenda to analyze or compare strongmen. Instead, the histories are used to teach readers about the fragility of democracy and the importance of being involved in democracy today. Interesting and informative, *Strongman* is a solid introduction to dictators and government.

