Our Favorite Books

Featuring Characters with Disabilities

As people who work in inclusive education, we love to read and teach books that portray children and youth with disabilities with fullness, nuance, and authenticity. Over the years, we’ve read a lot of books featuring young people with disabilities and swapped recommendations with children and teachers in the many classrooms in which we work. We compiled this list of the YA and children’s literature we like that feature young people with disabilities. Consider it our snapshot of books families and educators with a stake in inclusivity might want to know about.

Young Adult Literature

Wonder by R.J. Palacio

"August Pullman was born with a facial difference that, up until now, has prevented him from going to a mainstream school. Starting 5th grade at Beecher Prep, he wants nothing more than to be treated as an ordinary kid—but his new classmates can’t get past Auggie’s extraordinary face. Multiple perspectives converge in a portrait of one community’s struggle with empathy, compassion, and acceptance" (from www.randomhouse.com).

Out of My Mind by Sharon Draper

"Eleven-year-old Melody has a photographic memory. Her head is like a video camera that is always recording. Always. And there’s no delete button. She’s the smartest kid in her whole school but no one knows it. Most people—her teachers and doctors included—don’t think she’s capable of learning. If only she could speak up, if only she could tell people what she thinks and knows. Being stuck inside her head is making Melody go out of her mind—that is, until she discovers something that will allow her to speak for the first time ever" (from sharondraper.com).

Rules by Cynthia Lord

"Twelve-year-old Catherine just wants a normal life. Which is near impossible when you have a brother with autism and a family that revolves around his disability. She’s spent years trying to teach David the rules—from "a peach is not a funny-looking apple" to "keep your pants on in public"—in order to stop his embarrassing behaviors. But the summer Catherine meets Jason, a paraplegic boy, and Kristi, the next-door friend she’s always wished for, it’s her own shocking behavior that turns everything upside down and forces her to ask: What is normal?" (from cynthialord.com)

So B. It by Sarah Weeks

"Although she lives an unconventional lifestyle with her mentally disabled mother and their doting neighbor, Bernadette, Heidi has a lucky streak that has a way of pointing her in the right direction. When a mysterious word in her mother’s vocabulary begins to haunt her, Heidi’s thirst for the truth leads her on a cross country journey in search of the secrets of her past" (from www.sarahweeks.com).

When Books Don’t Measure Up

Sometimes, we run across a book we don’t think represents kids with disabilities fairly or just doesn’t depict what it means to live with disability with richness and depth. Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key is one of these books. It’s about a ten-year-old boy with ADHD. While some of the hijinks and shenanigans are intended to be entertaining young audiences, Joey’s characterization ultimately frames his behavior as something “bad” that requires fixing.
**The Reason I Jump by Naoki Higashida**

"Naoki Higashida is a very smart, very self-aware, and very charming thirteen-year-old boy with autism. This is a one-of-a-kind memoir that demonstrates how an autistic mind thinks, feels, perceives, and responds in ways few of us can imagine. Using an alphabet grid to painstakingly construct words, sentences, and thoughts that he is unable to speak out loud, Naoki answers even the most delicate questions that people want to know. Questions such as: 'Why do people with autism talk so loudly and weirdly?' or 'Why don’t you make eye contact when you’re talking?' With disarming honesty and a generous heart, Naoki shares his unique point of view on not only autism but life itself" (from thereasonijump.com).

**True (Sort Of...) by Katherine Hannigan**

"Delly Pattison likes surprises (presents that are a surprise). The day the Boyds come to town, Delly’s sure a special surprise is on its way. But lately, everything that she thinks will be good and fun turns into trouble. She’s never needed a surprise more than now. Brud Kinney wants to play basketball like nothing anybody’s ever seen. When the Boyds arrive, though, Brud meets someone who plays like nothing he’s ever seen. Ferris Boyd isn’t like anyone Delly or Brud have ever met. Ferris is a real mysturiosity (an extremely curious mystery)" (from Scholastic).

**Close to Famous by Joan Bauer**

"Foster is an excellent baker, and she absolutely loves watching The Food Network, especially Sonny Kroll, her idol. Her cupcakes and muffin recipes are combinations of ingredients even Martha Stewart has never imagined in her wildest dreams. However, superior baker Foster has one big problem. She can’t read. In sixth grade a student named Johnny Joe Badger called her the stupidest girl in the class, and sadly the teacher agreed. However, Foster never lets her disability get her down. She makes up for her reading disability by memorizing all of the cupcake and muffin recipes she sees on the Food Network" (from nypl.org).

**Sahara Special by Esme Raji Codell**

"There are two files on Sahara Jones. The one the school counselor keeps is evidence that she’s a fifth-grader who needs special education. The other is the book Sahara is secretly writing, her Heart-Wrenching Life Story and Amazing Adventures. The latest chapter in her book unfolds when her mother insists that she be taken out of special ed. So Sahara is facing fifth grade in the regular classroom, again. But why even try to do the work, Sahara wonders, if everything just winds up in the counselor’s file? Enter Miss Pointy, the new fifth-grade teacher" (from scholastic.com).

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**Children’s Literature**

**Junkyard Wonders by Patricia Polacco**

"In California, Trisha was put in a special education class—but now that she can read, she can’t wait for a fresh start at a new school in Michigan. But when she gets her class assignment, she’s heartbroken to find out that her new class is called the junkyard (even her teacher refers to it that way). At first, Trisha wants to quit, but then with the help of an unforgettable teacher and amazing friendships with the other kids in her “tribe,” she comes to realize that the junkyard is a place where every kid can become something truly special" (from scholastic.com).

**Can I Play, Too? by Mo Willems**

"Gerald is careful. Piggie is not. Piggie cannot help smiling. Gerald can. Gerald and Piggie are best friends. In Can I Play Too? Gerald and Piggie meet a new snake friend who wants to join in a game of catch. But don’t you need arms to catch? Mo Willems’ Geisel Award-winning duo never fails to tickle readers of all ages" (from books.disney.com).

**Thank You, Mr. Falker by Patricia Polacco**

"In this autobiographical story, Little Trisha, overjoyed at the thought of learning how to read, struggles when she finds that all the letters and numbers get jumbled up. Her classmates make matters worse by calling her dummy. Finally, in fifth grade, she is lucky enough to have a teacher who recognizes Trisha’s incredible artistic ability—and understands her problem, and takes the time to lead her to the magic of reading" (from scholastic.com).

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