

Escaping into new picture books and middle grade novels has helped provide some balance for this children's librarian in such an unpredictable year. Fortunately, 2020 has delivered an outstanding collection of beautiful, original, and honest new children's books. As I was compiling my list of favorites for this column, I realized that they all have a common thread: love. My favorite picture books and middle grade fiction from this year are about family relationships, friendships, and self-acceptance, which boil down to love. If your family needs an infusion of warmth and good feelings these books will do the trick, and any of them would make a wonderful gift.

"Me & Mama," by Cozbi A. Cabrera. This poetic and beautifully illustrated picture book is about a little girl who wants to be everywhere Mama is. An ordinary rainy day is special when it is spent with just Mama. My favorite illustrations compare some of the girl and Mama's things, like Mama's porcelain cup that goes "clink, clink" and the girl's plastic cup that goes "duh, duh." This book is an ode to the beauty that can be found in the ordinary, especially when shared with someone you love.

"You Matter," by Christian Robinson. Also gorgeously illustrated, this book's view of life on Earth zooms in and out in both time and space. We go from seeing tiny organisms under a microscope to dinosaurs to an astronaut in space looking back down on Earth. The scope changes from huge and tiny to show how everything is connected and how those connections make everything important, including the reader. The spare text leaves lots of room for your own interpretations of the pictures.

"If You Come to Earth," by Sophie Blackall. This picture book is an attempt to explain to a visitor from outer space what life on Earth is all about – a big undertaking! The result is shown with illustrations that are a feast for the eyes. You'll see lots of different people (some you may recognize!), places, and the little details that make us human and life on Earth special.

"Prairie Lotus," by Linda Sue Park. This middle grade novel has been compared to the Little House on the Prairie books, but it frames the pioneer experience in a new way. Hanna, who is half Chinese and half white, moves out west with her father in search of a place to settle after the death of her mother. When people in their new community are less than welcoming, Hanna finds strength and wisdom in the memories of her mother and succeeds in finishing school and opening a dress shop with her father.

"Black Brother, Black Brother," by Jewell Parker Rhodes. I'm not usually a fan of sports books but this one used the sport of fencing to link together ideas about brotherhood, friendship, and racism in a way that stuck with me. Two brothers, one Black, one white, learn to fence in order to beat a bully at their school. As they train they make deep connections with their teammates, coach, and their own identities.

"Before the Ever After," by Jacqueline Woodson. On its surface this is another sports book, but it's so much more than that. This middle grade novel is a beautifully written story about a Black boy named ZJ and his father, a professional football player with early onset dementia. ZJ struggles with his father's memory lapses and mood swings but is supported unconditionally by his three best friends. The subject matter may sound heavy, but there is so much joy and humor to be found in ZJ's relationships with his friends and family.

"The List of Things that Will Not Change," by Rebecca Stead. This middle grade novel is about the important things that will never change even when everything else seems to. Bea's family went through a huge change when her parents got divorced, and it's about to get even more complicated when her father gets remarried and introduces a new stepfather and stepsister to the mix. The characters in this charming book are so well developed and relatable that you'll catch a glimpse of yourself in at least one of them.