

As we all know right now, life does not always go according to plan. The unexpected can be viewed as a stressful inconvenience or as an adventure - it all depends on your attitude. One of the many fantastic things about books is that they provide the opportunity to experience the unexpected with no risk. Fans of mysteries and thrillers already understand this appeal, but it works in children's books, too. Some of my favorite picture books have very unexpected and strange endings. If you have kids in your life who like a thrill at the end of a story, check out these twisty tales.

"Interrupting Chicken and the Elephant of Surprise," by David Ezra Stein. This sequel to the super popular and award-winning "Interrupting Chicken" sets out to explain the "element of surprise." Of course, the spunky Chicken has misheard the expression and thinks she's looking for an elephant of surprise. As she reads books with her very patient father, she injects a literal elephant into each story. Surprise! There's an elephant in "Rapunzel"! When Papa and Chicken then write their own story, Chicken gleefully fills it with elephants.

"Bear Came Along," by Richard T. Morris and illustrated by LeUyen Pham. This story follows a bear as he floats down a river, unaware of what awaits him around every curve. We're left in suspense every time the story pauses with the word "until..." The story gains momentum much like a gushing river, and the bear is faced with quite a surprise at the end. The gorgeous illustrations also grow more colorful as the book flows along.

"One Mean Ant," by Arthur Yorinks and illustrated by Sergio Ruzzier. If there's anything I like in a picture book even more than a surprise ending, it's a grouchy character. This book has both. It's about a really mean ant who inadvertently becomes friends with a fly. The illustrations are otherworldly and weird, and the text is mostly a funny conversation between the ant and the fly. The ending is a doozy and comes out of nowhere. I had to go back and read it a second time. Not for very sensitive kids.

"A Hungry Lion or A Dwindling Assortment of Animals," by Lucy Ruth Cummins. If you like a story with twists, this is the one for you. The title pretty much sums up what happens: there's a hungry lion and a group of animals that mysteriously gets smaller and smaller, but not for the reason you might think. I can't tell you any more without ruining the end. Hold onto your hats when you read it.

"Beware of the Frog," by William Bee. This is another very twisty story, but you have to wait until the very end for the full experience. At first it seems like a simple tale about little Mrs. Collywobbles and her pet frog and what happens when some scary monsters try to visit. Don't be fooled by the seemingly predictable pattern of events, and heed the advice of the title: beware of that frog!

"I Want My Hat Back," by Jon Klassen. This is one of my all-time favorites. A not-very-smart bear has lost his hat and asks the other animals in the forest if they've seen it. At one point he talks to a rabbit who is wearing a red, pointy hat that is identical to the one he's missing, but he doesn't realize it until a few pages later. A two-page spread shows an intense eyeballing between the rabbit and the bear, and the next page shows that their confrontation is resolved, but the ending makes you guess how.

It's anyone's guess how and when the pandemic may end, but in the meantime keep reading to manage stress, escape, and spend quality time with each other. And call or check your local library's website to see how we can help!