

Library Lines by Ruth Gilbert, Youth Librarian, Kirkland Town Library

The start of a new year always makes me even more excited about books than usual. It's a time to look back on everything I've read over the past year and to look forward to reading more inspiring, thoughtful, and smart books for children. I'm a firm believer that children's literature can be just as well-written as literature for adults, and that many grownups miss out on some amazing books when they limit themselves to "adult books." Here are some of my favorite middle grade books from 2021, and all of them are great for children and adults!

"The Beatryce Prophecy" by Kate DiCamillo is an epic, medieval tale full of hope, love and the power of stories. A girl named Beatryce wakes up snuggled next to a goat in a monastery with no memory of who she is or how she got there. A kind monk, Brother Edik, discovers her and realizes she's in danger: the king wants to stop a prophecy that says a girl like Beatryce will unseat him. But with the help of new friends and the loyal goat, Beatryce fulfills her destiny.

"Ahmed Aziz's Epic Year" by Nina Hamza is another novel about stories and how they can connect people. Ahmed's family moves from Hawaii to his dad's hometown in Minnesota for his father's medical treatment. He misses Hawaii, but he finds that he likes the novels he's assigned to read in his new English class. When he borrows one of them from the school library, he discovers that his uncle, who died before he was born, had borrowed the same book years ago. This starts Ahmed's journey to learn more about his family and to see them in a different light.

"Starfish" by Lisa Fipps is a standout in middle-grade fiction. Written in verse, this novel is about Ellie and her struggle with self-acceptance. She's bullied about her weight by classmates, siblings, and even her own mother, and things start to feel even worse once her best friend moves away. But a new family moves in next door, which leads to a new friendship and a glimpse at a family that accepts each other as they are. With the help of a therapist and the support of her dad and new friend, Ellie finally decides to love herself exactly as she is.

"How To Train Your Dad" by Gary Paulsen is a smart and hilarious story of 12 year old Carl, who is getting tired of the off-the-grid, dumpster-diving lifestyle his father has chosen for them. When Carl finds a puppy training guide in a bag of dog food, he decides to try the training methods on his dad. All Carl wants is some store-bought shirts instead of the weird clothes his father gets from yard sales, but the training doesn't seem to work. Can Carl make him change before middle school starts?

"Living With Viola" by Rosena Fung is a graphic novel about friendship, family dynamics, and how anxiety can affect your life. Livy is starting 6th grade at a new school, which would make anyone nervous. But she's also battling with Viola, the personification of her anxiety. Anytime Livy has a negative thought, Viola pounces on it and makes Livy feel sad and scared. Sometimes Livy can keep Viola at bay, but when life gets stressful Viola takes over and Livy's mother notices that she's not herself. In therapy she learns ways to cope with her anxiety, which helps make her new friendships stronger and builds her confidence.

"Willodeen" by Katherine Applegate is the most recent of this author's heartfelt,

inspiring books. Willodeen lives in a fantasy world very similar to our own except that it's full of creatures like hummingbears and screechers. Her town is dealing with the unpredictability of nature: forest fires threaten to tear through people's homes, and the hummingbears who draw tourists to town every autumn are nowhere to be found. Through careful observation, Willodeen figures out why the hummingbears haven't come and how the actions of people can have a huge impact on the environment around them.