

Award-Worthy Books for Kids & Teens
By Ruth Gilbert, Youth Services Librarian

The American Library Association's Youth Media Awards were presented last week, and I watched the awards ceremony remotely along with more than 5,000 other people to find out which books had won the Newbery and Caldecott medals, among other awards.

These awards often help to elevate lesser-known books and bring them to the attention of young readers, librarians, and educators. But that only happens for a handful of lucky titles! Some books have the advantage of a healthy marketing budget from their publishers, or a popular main character or author to gain readers' attention. But there are so many amazing books that fly under the radar, waiting to be discovered by some lucky reader. Here are a few of my favorites that you may have missed from the past year. They may not be award winners, but they deserve to be read and loved just as much as the books with medals on the cover.

"That Always Happens Sometimes" by Kiley Frank and K-Fai Steele might have been my favorite picture book from 2024. The loveable narrator, a boy who needs some help with paying attention, asks the reader lots of seemingly random "Have you ever...?" questions. They may make you laugh out loud, like when he asks "Have you ever abandoned your lunch because you were thinking about having an extra face under your hair like some Lego figures do?" The illustrations humorously illustrate his progress through the day, from missing the bus, to eating an eraser, to using a robot voice to work on a group project.

"We Are Definitely Human" by X. Fang is another laugh-out-loud picture book from the past year. Mr. Li is awoken by a crashing sound and goes outside to find some blue creatures who claim they are "human" who have crashed their "car." He invites them to stay the night at his house until they can get parts to repair it the next day. If Mr. Li and the people in town are at all skeptical, they don't show it. They do everything they can to help the "humans" fix their vehicle. This one is a sweetly funny story about how to be a good human.

"It Bears Repeating" by Tanya Tagaq and Cee Pootoogook is a beautifully simple counting book written in both English and Inuktitut, a language of the Inuit people in Canada. A pronunciation guide in the back matter helps readers count all the way to ten in Inuktitut, and the long-necked white bears on a blue background provide the perfect visuals for children learning to count. Picture books written in the languages of Indigenous people are becoming less rare, but are still a treasure.

"Louder Than Hunger" by John Schu is a middle grade novel about a tough topic with a heart lifting ending. Middle school student Jake struggles with anorexia and is finally admitted to a residential treatment center. Through therapy, making art, and a new friend, he starts to find his way to self-acceptance. His story, told in verse, will resonate with anyone battling to love themselves.

"Lunar New Year Love Story" by Gene Luen Yang and LeUyen Pham is a young adult graphic novel that is so much more than just a romantic love story. There is a bit of romance when teen Valentina meets another lion dancer preparing for the Lunar New Year parade, but she learns much more about love as she navigates a rocky relationship with her dad, a non-existent one with her dead mother, family secrets, and figuring herself out. And Val's rock-steady best friend Bernice is with her through it all.