

Heroes Across the Ages

by | Judy Bradbury

• Keep 'em Reading •

Grades
K-1, 2-3

From fierce, courageous gods with fiery breath and monumental powers, to moms who check under the bed for monsters and dads who snore like the family dog, heroes have always managed to catch and keep children's attention. Fictional heroes are role models that offer comfort, guidance, and a sense of justice. To readers and listeners in today's classrooms and libraries, they also offer insight into conflict resolution, and a moral compass by which to navigate the thorny brush of bully behavior.

Heroes of Mythic Proportions

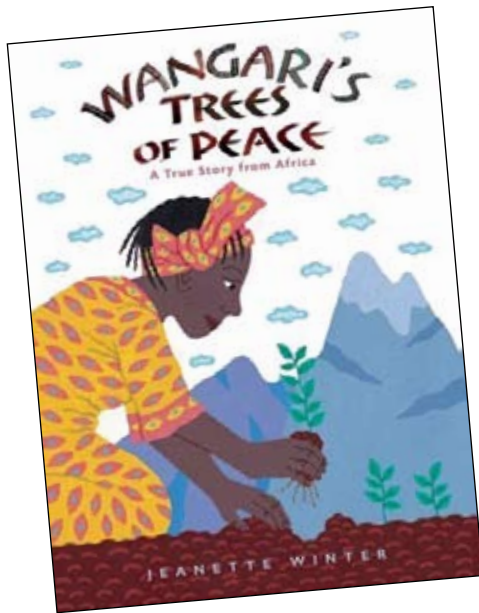
Young Zeus by G. Brian Karas (Scholastic, 2010) is an accessible introduction to the mythic ruler of Mount Olympus. Readers follow along as young Zeus learns the history of his less-than-loving family and manages to outsmart his mean old dad, Cronus, in order to rescue his brothers and sisters. Under young Zeus's guidance, this family with

Extension: Make a family tree for Zeus using the information found in the book. List each god's heroic claim to fame (Gaia is goddess of the earth; Rhea is mother to the gods; Hera is goddess of women and marriage; Hestia is goddess of hearth and home; Zeus is top dog, ruler of Mount Olympus). Have children create personal family trees that list "hero qualities" for each member.



giant-sized powers rallies, and even manages to overcome silly sibling bickering in order to reign over heaven and earth (while managing to set aside plenty of time for fun and games). A helpful chart of the cast of godly characters and how to pronounce their Greek names can be found at the front of the book. Grades 2-3.

Capture students' attention with *Gods & Heroes*, created by the singular pop-up artist team of Matthew Reinhart and Robert Sabuda (Candlewick, 2010). Each spread offers an intricate and sturdy centerfold pop-up with miniature, yet equally elaborate pop-ups in the corners of the page. This book is not just eye candy—it provides loads of information derived from a variety of myth traditions including Greek and Norse, as well as those from ancient Egypt and Asia. Grades 2+.



Wangari's Tree of Peace by Jeanette Winter (Harcourt, 2008) is the true story of Wangari Maathai, environmentalist and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for her work restoring trees in Kenya. For more on this amazing woman, also consider *Mama Miti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya* written by Donna Jo Napoli and

illustrated by Kadir Nelson (Simon & Schuster, 2010); *Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai* by Claire A. Nivola (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008); and *Seeds of Change* by Jen Cullerton Johnson and illustrated by Sonia Lynn Sadler (Lee & Low Books; 2010). Grades 1–3.

Extension: Read several of these books and compare perspective, facts presented, the authors' messages, and the illustrators' depictions of Maathai and the beauty of her legacy.

Listen to the Wind: The Story of Dr. Greg & Three Cups of Tea written by Greg Mortenson and Susan L. Roth and illustrated by Susan L. Roth (Dial, 2009) is a children's version of Mortenson's *Three Cups of Tea* about his work building schools for children and furthering education in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Grades 1–2.

The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq by Jeanette Winter (Harcourt, 2005) is the account of a courageous librarian who saved 30,000 books from being destroyed during the bombing of Basra in 2003. Grades 1–2.

SIMPLE HEROICS

Although children clamor for stories about ferocious defenders, they also are drawn to the unlikely hero. Ferdinand the bull (*The Story of Ferdinand* written by Munro Leaf and illustrated by Robert Lawson; Viking, 1936) has lived a long life in no small part because he touches a tender spot in our hearts and minds. We rally to his softer side, and at the end of the book we feel affirmed, renewed, and shored up. All this because of a lamb in bull's clothing who is comfortable in his own skin. Grades PK–2+.

Fly Free! written by Roseanne Thong and illustrated by Eujin Kim Neilan (Boyd's Mills, 2010) is a beautifully rendered tale set in a small village in Vietnam where a simple act of kindness sets in motion a series of good deeds with far-reaching effects. The refrain, *Fly free, fly free / in the sky so blue. When you do a good deed, it will come back to you!* sets the tone and frames this lilting, affirming story. Korean-born Neilan illustrated the story in watercolor on board, successfully capturing the mood of the text, the details of the setting's landscape, and the customs of the country. Grades PK–2+.



Extension: Post a “good deed list” in plain sight. Encourage children to add good deeds (those that they've performed themselves, or experienced) to the list as they occur. Celebrate these acts of kindness on a weekly basis!

The Curious Garden by Peter Brown (Little, Brown & Co., 2009) shows that one person can make a difference of epic proportions. As this uplifting fable unfolds, a boy's stitch of a garden in a most unlikely spot gradually transforms an entire city's dreary landscape. Brown's illustrations

done in acrylic and gouache on board evolve from drab gray to magnificently bright and fresh hues as young Liam's garden flourishes. Brown was chosen as the Children's Choice Book Awards Illustrator of the Year for 2010. Grades 1–2.

Extension: Ask children to brainstorm ways they can make a difference in their community. Record their ideas and encourage them to act upon their ideas. Consider sending the list home and enlisting parents' help to bring their children's initiatives to fruition. Have children report on their accomplishments. Encourage participation from the entire student body in activities that impact the school community.

The Lion & The Mouse by Jerry Pinkney (Little, Brown, 2009) is a wordless rendering of Aesop's fable set in Africa's Serengeti plains. It memorably explores both courage and the power of kindness with stunning, luminous art that won the 2010 Caldecott Medal. Grades PK–3.

Extension: Pair *The Lion & The Mouse* with *Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears* by Emily Gravett (Simon & Schuster, 2008). Everyone is afraid of something as this clever tale demonstrates. The book's creative format enhances the story in this winner of the Kate Greenaway Medal. Grades PK–2.

In *How To Heal a Broken Wing* by Bob Graham (Candlewick, 2008), a young boy aids an injured bird. This is a tender picture book featuring spare text and evocative art. Grades PK–2.

HEROES AT HOME, AT SCHOOL, AND IN THE PARK

The best-loved books for children feature a child protagonist who, when faced with a conflict, effectively resolves it using his or her own resources. No dragon spits fire annihilating the child's enemy; no burly big brother or muscle-bound caped wonder sweeps in and grabs the snarly ruffian by the scruff of his grubby neck. The child works it out; the child saves the day. Young readers cheer for the main character in the midst of struggle, and they share in the satisfaction when the protagonist prevails.

Hallo-weiner by Dav Pilkey (Blue Sky Press, 1995) introduces Oscar the dachshund, who is the target of many jokes...until one Halloween, when dressed as a hot dog, he rescues the pack from some crabby cats. Very punny! Grades PK–2.



In *Brave Charlotte* written by Anu Stohner and illustrated by Henrike Wilson (Bloomsbury, 2005), a shy but brave and adventurous sheep comes to the rescue when the shepherd breaks his leg. Marvelous art done in acrylics enhances the simple text in this New York Times Best Illustrated Book Award winner. Be sure to also check out *Brave Charlotte and the Wolves* (2009) about facing down bullies. Grades K–1.

Extension: Make lists of the characteristics a bully possesses versus characteristics a friend possesses, and discuss them.

He Saves the Day written by Marsha Hayles and illustrated by Lynne Cravath (Putnam, 2002) tells the story of a young boy who imagines himself the hero as he plays in his yard. PK–1.

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In *My Father, the Dog* written by Elizabeth Bluemle and illustrated by Randy Cecil (Candlewick, 2006), Dad's behavior is compared to a dog's—from his snacking and lying around for hours, to roughhousing and fetching the newspaper. Underlying message: Dad's a hero nonetheless! Grades PK–2.

Peace Week in Miss Fox's Class by Eileen Spinelli and illustrated by Anne Kennedy (Albert Whitman, 2009) provides gentle suggestions, perspectives, and helpful techniques for getting along in all sorts of situations by way of story. Grades PK–2.

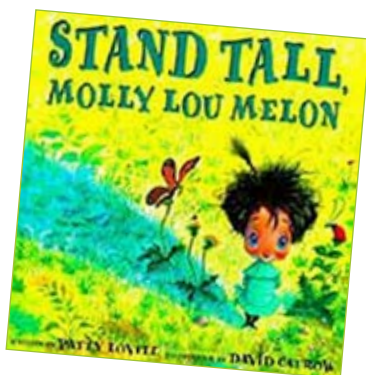


In *The Recess Queen* written by Alexis O'Neill and illustrated by Laura Huliska-Beith (Scholastic, 2002), Mean Jean has her way on the playground until the undersized new kid on the monkey bars changes the scene for the better. Gouache and collage artwork brings the antagonist right into your lap, and paired with the infectious

text, this amusing, read-aloud-friendly story offers an appealing alternative to contentious confrontation on the playground. Grades 1–2.

Extension: After reading the book, encourage children to play with someone during recess that they have not played with before. Have them discuss their experiences.

In *Stand Tall, Molly Lou Melon* written by Patty Lovell and illustrated by David Catrow (Putnam, 2001), new-to-school and less-than-perfect Molly Melon



meets rotten Ronald Durkin and musters her self-esteem (fueled by a loving and wise grandmother) to stand tall and put the bumptious bully in his rightful place. Bold, bright illustrations by the award-winning Catrow bring to life Molly's spirit, spunk, and unforgettable panache. You go, girl! Grades 1–2.

Such a Prince written by Dan Bar-el and illustrated by John Manders (Clarion, 2007) is a fractured fairy tale based on "Three Perfect Peaches," and is sure to delight contemporary listeners. It offers a timely message about a skinny guy with no money and no confidence. Nevertheless, he has a big heart, he is honest, kind, and clever, and—*spoiler alert!*—he manages to win the heart of the princess in the end. Grades 1–4.

Mama's sick and tucked in bed, and her caring family intends to take over in *Taking Care of Mama* by Mitra Modarressi (Putnam, 2010). Throughout this humorous and delightful tale, the family learns that taking care of the family is hard work indeed. Watercolor art adds detail to the simple rhyming text about an often-overlooked hero. Grades PK–1.

Extension: Have children finish the sentence, "My mom is a hero because..." and pair *Taking Care of Mama* with *My Mom* by Anthony Browne (Farrar, Straus Giroux, 2005), a celebration of the many talents of an everyday mom that features great use of figurative language. Grades PK–2.

EVERYDAY HEROES

After reading aloud a book about an everyday hero whose actions are helpful and kind, comforting and redemptive, discuss ways in which we all can be heroes. Try these simple activities to change or improve the dynamic in your classroom, library, or school:

- Distribute the names of three children in the class to every class member. Ask children to list five words that describe how each class-

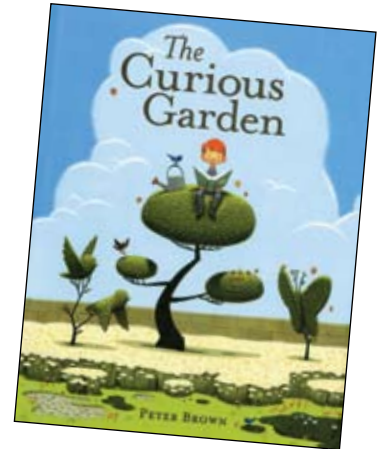
mate is special. Collect and collate. Read aloud the lists for each child and ask classmates to guess who is being described.

- With students, make a list of ways we can be friendly to others.
- With students, make a list of ways to help younger children or older folks.
- Have students write a letter to the principal telling her about something troubling they've experienced in school or on the playground. Have them explain why it is a problem and offer the principal suggestions about ways to improve the situation—and what they can do to help.

From superhero to snack-size hero, it's the quest and the journey that keeps kids interested, engrossed, and eager for more, more, more. Heroes help us see the possibilities—and the rewards—of improving our world. Is it any wonder, then, that children throughout the ages are drawn to their stories?

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Judy Bradbury (www.judybradbury.com) is a reading specialist and the author of the Children's Book Corner series. She presents workshops nationally on the topic of reading aloud to children. Her upcoming resource, *The Read-Aloud Scaffold: Best Books to Enhance Content Area Curriculum*, will be released in Spring 2011 by Libraries Unlimited/ABC-CLIO.