

Readers' Survey: 21st Century Canon

by [Kara Yorio](#)

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READERS' SURVEY | MOST INFLUENTIAL BOOKS | 2000–2025

The 21st century has brought children's literature more diversity and a willingness to explore difficult and complex topics. In addition, in the last five years, the publishing world—and the young readers it serves—have dealt with a global pandemic and a new, orchestrated censorship campaign seeking to remove books, particularly those that include the LGBTQIA+ community or discuss race and identity.

Through it all, children's authors and illustrators have created titles that teach empathy, reflect the lives of the most marginalized, and share everyone's story. They have created books that change and save lives, along with those that entertain, connect, and create lifelong readers. And we wanted to know what our readers thought were the most influential titles of the last 25 years.

Children's Books

The 25 most influential titles for ages 0-12

				
Wonder R. J. PALACIO	The One and Only Ivan KATHERINE APPEGATE	The Wild Robot PETER BROWN	Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus MO WILLEMS	The Lightning Thief RICK RIORDAN
				
Diary of a Wimpy Kid JEFF KINNEY	The War that Saved My Life KIMBERLY BRUBAKER BRADLEY	Front Desk KELLY YANG	Last Stop on Market Street MATT DE LA PEÑA	Smile RAINA TELGEMEIER
				
Creepy Carrots! AARON REYNOLDS	The Book with No Pictures B. J. NOVAK	Brown Girl Dreaming JACQUELINE WOODSON	I Want My Hat Back JON KLASSEN	Starfish LISA FIPPS
				
Inside Out & Back Again THANHHA LAI	Out of My Mind SHARON M. DRAPER	Dog Man DAV PILKEY	Ghost JASON REYNOLDS	Kitten's First Full Moon KEVIN HENKES
				
The Day the Crayons Quit DREW DAYWALT	Because of Winn-Dixie KATE DICAMILLO	Refugee ALAN GRATZ	Amari and the Night Brothers B. B. ALSTON	Sam and Dave Dig a Hole MAC BARNETT



“ I REMEMBER FIRST BOOKTALKING [*Wonder*] IN 2012 when it was new, and kids ate it up. I am so happy that it has continued to be such an incredibly popular book with kids for almost 15 years, and I think it has to do with both the uniqueness and universalities of Auggie’s story. Young people are able to think about, some for the first time, how a kid their age with a visible disability experiences life, and how a lot of it is actually universal to kids everywhere. In addition, the multiple narrators of *Wonder*—as well as the Auggie and Me stories—really gives kids a chance to work out what might be some complicated feelings.

—Jenny Berggren, library assistant
Jones Library, Amherst, and Pelham Library (MA)

“When we first started developing this survey, our primary goal was to provide a fun and happy-making exercise that could be a bright spot amid the dark times impacting our profession,” says SLJ reviews director Shelley Diaz. “We hope this has provided a joy-filled respite.”

We asked for the most influential books of the last 25 years in two age categories: 0–12 and 12–18. Apologies to the many respondents who wished the question created separate lists for age groups or genres, picture books, middle grade, graphic novels, etc. But we wanted the books that stood out against all others—not just ones like them.

In all, 1,638 individual titles were named for ages 0–12 and 1,657 for 12–18. We’ve pulled the top 25 for each category.

“These selections are a blend of titles that have left an indelible mark on my own reading life and on how I recommend books for kids and teens, including books that changed my brain, books that showed the world I want for the kids and teens I work with, and books that show what just a little representation, a little kindness, and a little imagination for something better can really do,” said Emma Carbone, senior YA librarian at Brooklyn Public Library.

For many respondents, the effort was a trip down memory lane.

“Over the last 25 years, I’ve worked in public and school libraries in three states and have also become a parent to two kids, so thinking through the best in kids’ and YA books of that time period was a fascinating trip into my own history of reading and recommending books to young people,” said Jenny Berggren, library assistant at Jones Library, Amherst, and Pelham Library, both in Massachusetts. “I am thrilled that the field has become so much more diverse during the last

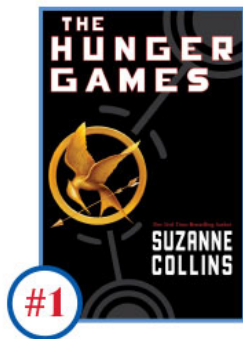
25 years and sickened about the backlash of book banning over the last few. I guess it just underscores how incredibly important and essential authors, illustrators, publishers, and librarians are in the lives of our young people, and our future as a whole.”

The numbers back up Berggren’s assessment that the selections have diversified.

Young Adult Books

The 25 most influential titles for ages 12-18





“*The Hunger Games* was just gaining popularity when I was in graduate school. In a lot of ways I feel like I grew into being a YA librarian along with the series. During my entire career I've used it as a benchmark when deciding what books to recommend to teen readers. This series has always shown how important it is to support each other and to fight for what we believe in—things that are still so relevant for readers and demonstrate its lasting impact.”

—Emma Carbone, Senior YA Librarian,
Brooklyn Public Library

The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) has tracked diversity in children's literature since 1985. In 2000, the CCBC reviewed more than 5,000 books and found approximately 10 percent were by or about BIPOC communities. In 2024, it assessed 3,619 books for children and teens and, for the first time, more than half (51 percent) of the titles had “significant BIPOC content—meaning they have a primary or significant secondary character or human subject who is BIPOC, or the setting or topic of the book relates to BIPOC people, history, or culture.” The report said representation of Black (16 percent), Asian (13 percent), and Indigenous (3 percent) people all grew compared to 2023.

In recent years, the CCBC has also seen more books with characters that are multiracial/multiethnic; that reveal intersectional identities; or are from the disability, LGBTQIA+, or non-Christian communities. Among the books reviewed in 2024, 7 percent featured a primary or significant secondary character with a disability and 7 percent included LGBTQIA+ themes or characters—both unchanged from 2023. However, 6 percent included content related to a minority religion, which is up from 4 percent the previous year.

Readers' choices reflected this increased diversity, including seven of the top 10 titles on the ages 12–18 list having BIPOC or LGBTQIA+ representation or creators. The top book in 0–12, *Wonder*, centers around a child with a disability. Adding to the popularity and offering an avenue into the books for new readers, more than half of the 50 titles have been adapted for film, television, or theater.

“My choices are based entirely on quality of story and the ways I've seen it resonate with readers,” said Margaret Thomas of Stillwater, MN. “Too often lists like these get generated by what's already on the [*New York Times*] Best Sellers List. I'm truly grateful that *SLJ* is creating this

list, because it's too easy for adults to default to what they read as a kid. By forcing people to choose titles from the [last] 25 years, my hope is that the results will elevate some titles that need to stay or resurface to more readers' attention."

Respondents weighed student popularity more than their own opinion, with one noting that she doesn't love the "Diary of a Wimpy Kid" series but can't ignore its huge impact in creating young readers.

Another librarian wrote, "All of these are books that are loved by readers over the years—ones that I had to have multiple copies."

One high school librarian went to the data.

"I started by thinking about the titles that have been the most popular in our high school library, then looked at our statistics over the past 25 years," they wrote. "It was hard to narrow it down to just 25, but I think this is a fairly good reflection of what students at our school have been reading the most on their own."

Editor Picks

SLJ's reviews editors offer their own curated shortlists of standout titles from the past 25 years

Latine Gems

The We Need Diverse Books movement impacted children's book publishing in such a monumental way. Underrepresented stories and experiences were given a space that was long overdue. Latine readers, like me, were finally able to see themselves in books. And Latine creators received the recognition that they deserve.

—Shelley M. Diaz, Reviews Director

Merci Suárez Changes Gears by Meg Medina ▪ *Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Pérez ▪ *The Last Cuentista* by Donna Barba Higuera ▪ *More Happy Than Not* by Adam Silvera ▪ *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo



Fandom Series

The idea of “fandom” as we know it today really sprung to life with Harry Potter and *Twilight*. Harry Potter was first published in the late 90s so it wouldn't make this list, but all of these big YA series started post-*Twilight*, with their first books falling in the past 25 years.

—Florence Simmons, Associate Editor



Twilight by Stephenie Meyer ▪ *City of Bones* by Cassandra Clare (first “Shadowhunters” book) ▪ *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins ▪ *Shadow and Bone* by Leigh Bardugo ▪ *Throne of Glass* by Sarah J. Maas

Standouts

Jacqueline Woodson and Gideon Sterer have careeningly different takes on playtime, both bullseyes, while Drew Beckmeyer and Antwan Eady know that for nonfiction to hit, it has to be a story. Angharad Walker wrote the most gripping book of this century, across genres and age ranges.

—Kimberly Fakh, Executive Editor



The World Belonged to Us by Jacqueline Woodson, illus. by Leo Espinosa ▪ *The Last Stand* by Antwan Eady, illus. by Jerome Pumphrey and Jarrett Pumphrey ▪ *I Am a Tornado* by Drew Beckmeyer ▪ *From Ed's to Ned's* by Gideon Sterer, illus. by Lucy Ruth Cummins ▪ *The Ash House* by Angharad Walker



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21st century

most influential books

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The Hunger Games

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