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## Books of Character: Eighteen Books for Teaching About Character Across the Grades

Every year, across the country, people celebrate National Character Counts Week during the third week of October. Teachers have a great opportunity to initiate discussion and projects that examine the meaning of character. Today, Education World offers a selection of books that might be used -- in or out of the classroom -- to spark discussion about character. **Included: Eighteen titles arranged by age level and a link to a list of more than 200 other titles for teaching about character!**

Each year, the U. S. government recognizes the third week in October as National Character Counts Week. Students and teachers have an ideal opportunity to examine the meaning of character as it appears in literature. Following is a list of children's books, organized by reading level, that might prompt discussion about such character traits as respect, responsibility, and citizenship. Any list of recommended children's titles is naturally going to be very limited; the following selections are merely suggestions to get you started.

In compiling this list, we used a resource from [Character Counts](#) called *Children's Books That Illustrate the Six Pillars*.

### BOOKS OF CHARACTER FOR KIDS AGED FOUR TO EIGHT

The following books may be read aloud to non-readers. The simple language and the illustrations should make them appealing to young children.

***The Two of Them***, written and illustrated by Alik

This book begins with a man's creation of a ring for his newborn granddaughter and ends with the young girl's grief over the old man's death. The emphasis in this book by Alik, the author and illustrator of many acclaimed children's books, is on the mutual love and respect between the child and the grandparent.

***The Berenstain Bears and the Truth***, written and illustrated by Stan and Jan Berenstain

Teach your kids about the importance of telling the truth with this representative title from the popular Berenstain Bear series. When Brother and Sister Bear accidentally break Mama's favorite lamp, a little lie grows bigger and bigger until Papa Bear helps them find the words that set everything right again.

***Arthur's Eyes***, written and illustrated by Marc Brown

In this typical installment of Marc Brown's perennially popular series, Arthur is embarrassed by his friends' teasing when he gets new glasses. He eventually realizes that four eyes can be better than two and learns to wear his glasses with pride.

***Once a Mouse ... A Fable Cut in Wood***, written and illustrated by Marcia Brown

This short children's story of pride and humility follows the adventures of a mouse rescued from certain danger when a wise hermit changes him into various animals. When the mouse becomes a majestic tiger, he grows arrogant, forgetting his humble origins. Marcia Brown's simple retelling

of an old Indian fable makes the book's message easy for young children to understand. She won a Caldecott Medal for her delightful three-color woodcuts.

***The Grouchy Ladybug***, by Eric Carle

Generations of readers have enjoyed this classic tale. It is the story of an ill-tempered bug who won't say please or thank you, won't share, and thinks she is bigger and better than anyone else. As children follow the grouchy ladybug on her journey, they will learn the important concepts of time, size, and shape as well as the benefits of friendship and good manners.

***The Courage of Sarah Noble***, written by Alice Dalgliesh and illustrated by Leonard Weisgard  
This book is based on a true story. Eight-year old Sarah Noble accompanies her father when he travels from colonial Massachusetts to Connecticut to build a new home in the wilderness. The trip makes her face her fears -- of animals, Indians, and loneliness -- as she responds to the needs of her father on the difficult journey.

## BOOKS OF CHARACTER FOR KIDS AGED NINE TO 12

Children in this age group still enjoy being read to, and some of the following books are suitable for that purpose. Whether read aloud or privately, the following selections illustrate the variety of literature available for this age.

***Night Journeys***, by Avi

This exciting adventure by the Newbery Award-winner Avi is set on the Pennsylvania-New Jersey border in 1768. Newly orphaned Peter York is unhappy with his strict and unyielding new guardian and sees a chance to escape when he hears of two runaway indentured servants fleeing through his community. If he catches one, there will be a reward -- and freedom. Capturing the runaways leads to consequences -- and choices -- Peter cannot foresee.

***Ramona the Brave***, by Beverly Cleary

In this installment of Beverly Cleary's popular Ramona series, six-year-old Ramona confidently enters first grade, only to find that she and her new teacher don't get along. While trying to get on Mrs. Griggs's good side, Ramona learns that the way others see her is not always the way she sees herself. A Newbery Medal winner, Beverly Cleary is known for her knack for capturing, with humor but without condescension, the subtle emotional complexities of young children.

***The Cat Ate My Gymsuit***, written by Paula Danziger

Marcy Lewis is bored by school, resents her tyrannical father, despairs of ever being thin, and is certain that she'll never have a date. Then along comes Ms. Finney, a remarkable teacher with unconventional ways. Things begin to change. The issues of teacher independence and student protest are topical, and Marcy, an intelligent and enjoyable adolescent who learns how to respect herself, is an appealing heroine.

***Summer of My German Soldier***, written by Bette Greene

The summer that Patty Bergen turns 12 is a summer that will change her life forever. During World War II, her small Arkansas town becomes the site of a prison camp housing German prisoners. Patty, who feels rejected, unappreciated, and unloved by her parents, meets an escaped German prisoner named Anton. In Anton, the lonely Jewish girl finds someone who can appreciate her in a way she feels her family never will. Patriotic feelings run high, and Patty risks losing everything -- her family, friends, even her freedom -- for this dangerous friendship. This novel, by Newbery winner Bette Greene, is considered by many to be a modern children's classic.

***The Cricket in Times Square***, written by George Selden and illustrated by Garth Williams  
After Chester, a cricket, arrives at the Times Square subway station in a picnic basket from his

native Connecticut, he takes up residence in the Bellini's newsstand. There, the tiny creature is lucky enough to find three good friends: a little boy named Mario, whose parents run the unsuccessful newsstand; a fast-talking Broadway mouse named Tucker; and his pal, Harry the Cat. The friends' struggle to help the almost-bankrupt newsstand succeed illustrates life in the big city

***Bat 6***, written by Virginia Euwer Wolff

In Bear Creek Ridge and Barlow, two small Oregon towns, everyone looks forward to the annual Bat 6 girls softball game. The game of 1949 is extra special, marking the 50th anniversary of the good-natured competition. However, this year, unsettled conflicts of World War II cut the game short-and cause both the adults and children to examine their own roles in the unresolved issues surrounding the treatment of Japanese Americans during the war. Told with some degree of complexity-the story unfolds through 21 different first-person narratives-Bat 6 effectively and un sentimentally explores the subjects of individual responsibility and prejudice.

## **BOOKS OF CHARACTER FOR YOUNG-ADULT READERS**

The books listed below all feature young protagonists who learn how to be true to themselves and to their own understanding of right and wrong. The settings may be contemporary, historical, or futuristic, but the moral dilemmas in the following books are timeless and are sure to prompt discussion among today's teenagers.

***The Chocolate War***, written by Robert Cormier

Stunned by his mother's recent death and appalled by the way his father sleepwalks through life, Jerry Renault, a New England high school student, ponders the poster in his locker: Do I dare disturb the universe? Part of his universe is Archie Costello, leader of a secret school society -- the Virgils -- and master of intimidation, who is himself intimidated by an ambitious teacher into having the Virgils spearhead the annual fund-raising event -- a chocolate sale. When Jerry refuses to be bullied into selling chocolates, he becomes a hero for some. For others, he becomes a scapegoat -- a target for their pent-up hatred. And Jerry? He's just trying to stand up for what he believes. In 1974, the publication of Cormier's book generated some controversy.

***That Was Then, This Is Now***, written by S. E. Hinton

Ever since Mark's parents died, he has been living with Byron. The boys have been as close as brothers -- until recently. Something seems to be changing between them, and Byron can't figure it out. Ultimately, Byron must struggle with the conflict of whether to protect his best friend or to follow his own beliefs. In this acclaimed novel, best-selling author S. E. Hinton demonstrates her talent for creating realistic portraits of teenagers. Byron's dilemma is sure to spark conversation and debate among students about friendship, loyalty, and morality.

***The Giver***, written by Lois Lowry

In a world with no poverty, crime, or disease, 12-year-old Jonas's destiny is to be trained for an extremely important role: to be his community's next Receiver of Memories, the one person who holds all memories, happy and painful, so that the community need not be concerned with them. Under the tutelage of the present Receiver of Memories, an old man called "the Giver," Jonas comes to discover the disturbing truth: that in the past, his people freely gave up their individual freedom and humanity in order to create a seemingly safe, stable society. Gradually, Jonas learns just how costly this ordered and pain-free life is and decides to take drastic action against it. In this Newbery Medal winner, Lowry examines the complex topics of individuality, freedom, civic responsibility, and courage.

***Jacob Have I Loved***, written by Katherine Paterson

This 1981 Newbery Medal winner is a beautifully written novel about love and envy between sisters, set in a fascinating community of crabbers on an island in the Chesapeake Bay. Sara

Louise Bradshaw -- known as Wheeze -- is a twin, but her sister is far brighter and prettier than Sara can ever hope to be. God, she thinks, has marked her with his especial disfavor. In the lean times of the Depression, with little enough to go around, Sara Louise has just about the least. Nevertheless, she possesses a fierce desire to make it in the world. Readers will be able to empathize with Sara Louise's feelings and with her joyous awakening when, after a life that has for so long seemed like a betrayal, light dawns at last.

***Child of the Owl***, written by Laurence Yep

This spellbinding tale of the contradictions and special heritage of growing up Chinese American is set in the early 1960s in San Francisco's Chinatown. Twelve-year old Casey discovers her roots but in doing so forfeits her faith in her compulsive gambler father. *Child of the Owl* engagingly follows a young girl through her journey of self-discovery to arrive at self-respect.

***The Pigman***, written by Paul Zindel

For sophomores John and Lorraine, the world feels meaningless; nothing is important. They certainly can never please their parents, and school is a chore. To pass the time, they play pranks on unsuspecting people. During one of those pranks, they meet Mr. Pignati -- aka the "Pigman" -- a fat, balding old man with a zany smile. In spite of themselves, John and Lorraine soon find that they're caught up in Mr. Pignati's zest for life. In fact, they become so involved that they begin to destroy the only corner of the world that's ever mattered to them. Originally published in 1968, this novel by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Paul Zindel still sings with sharp emotion as John and Lorraine come to realize that "Our life would be what we made of it -- nothing more, nothing less."

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