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Top 50 Books for Young Readers

By Lou Fancher



Despite his stature - at 6 feet 7.5 inches tall he is known as "Walter the Giant Storyteller" - Walter Mayes is at heart, a sprinter.

Dashing through highly opinionated, knowledgeable verbal reviews of the 50 top books for young readers on Nov. 9 at Orinda Books, Mayes set a record for economy of words and energy expended.

The longstanding tradition of wowing teachers, librarians and people dedicated to fine children's literature with his annual 90-minute performance moved to Orinda Books this fall from The Storyteller in Lafayette after the October closing of Linda Higham's much-loved bookstore. "He's a treasure and there was no way I was going to allow this to end," said Orinda Books owner Maria Roden.

Mayes is the school librarian at Girls Middle

School in Palo Alto, an all-girls school. Like any giant in the industry, his love of words has expanded his job resume to include book advocate, author, publisher, actor, producer, director and more.

"I've been coming to hear his reviews forever," said Robin Ludmer, the librarian for 19 years at Piedmont's Beach Elementary School. "I learn about books I don't know about. He's a wealth of information and he's funny."

Indeed, Mayes knew how to please the crowd, gracefully fielding interjected calls to specify the targeted age range for a book, but unafraid to answer bluntly. "Age suggestions are just that. I don't believe there's anything like a fourth-grade book. It depends on the fourth-grade student," he said, in reply to the question.

"He's very honest about the fact that he doesn't subscribe to the idea of inappropriate," said Ludmer. "It's my responsibility as a librarian to decide what's appropriate for my students and not rely on him to tell me."

With filters in place, the approximately 25 people frequently asked about age brackets, eventually causing Mayes to say about one title, "If you're asking me if it uses ("expletive" for the F-word), no, it does not."

The questions about readership age may have been driven in part by reading initiatives enacted in schools. "There's a big push towards guided reading levels," Ludmer said. "It's fine for reading instruction, but we hear about it in the library now more than in the past. There's an expectation of providing books labeled level 'P' for a level 'P' reader. I ask what kids like to read and make a recommendation from that, not from what level 'P' is."

If making book recommendations requires a high level of discernment, it is easy to understand the value of Mayes' reviews. He is knowledgeable, and well aware of opposing viewpoints, but courageous about forming independent conclusions.

"A Fine Dessert," by author Emily Jenkins and illustrator Sophie Blackall, tells the story of blackberry fool as it is made and served by a slave-era mother and daughter in the South Carolina home of a white family. "This is the finest crafted book of the year," Mayes said. "It's one of the New York Times best illustrated books of the year." But a firestorm across the nation presents a crucial, opposing perspective. Critics say the illustrations gloss over, water down, or are even horrifyingly cheerful depictions of slavery. Mayes says readers who object haven't read the author's

essay defending her choices.

Other titles carry less controversy. "Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings," by Margarita Engle, Mayes said is a memoir told in "magnificent poetic style" about a girl with one foot in Cuba and one foot in the United States. About Katherine Applegate's "Crenshaw," he said, "I wept. I've never encountered a finer depiction about poverty. This is about being the poor kid. It's about having an imaginary friend come back into your life when you really need it."

The large number of graphic novels on Mayes' top 50 list - "The Boy Who Crashed to Earth," by Judd Winick; non-fiction "Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans," by Don Brown; and others - reflect his experience as a school librarian. "Graphic novels circulate more than anything else in my library," he said.

Nonfiction books were prominent on Mayes' list. Especially books that read like great adventure fiction - "The Boys Who Challenge Hitler," by Phillip Hoose - or provide fanciful, imaginative subjects - Steve Jenkin's and Robin Page's "How to Swallow a Pig" - or offer newfound clarity on well-traversed topics. "Finally, in one volume, a book that will explain to any seventh- to ninth-grader what the Vietnam War was about," Mayes said about "Most Dangerous: Daniel Ellsberg and the Secret History of the Vietnam War" by Patrick J. Lewis.

For a complete list of Mayes' top 50 books, contact Orinda Books. But the list won't come with the inside scoop on which book had the best primary source information, the best feminist tale of the year, the creepiest characters, the most enchanting language or the most to offer both parent and child. For that, you'll need to mark your calendar for fall of 2016 and come to Orinda Books to see a giant run a swift race through the coming year's top 50 books for young readers.

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