

# Focus on Elementary

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## Animals in Children's Literature: A Powerful Motivator for Literacy Learning

by **Lori Friesen**

*University of Alberta, Canada*

*The line my daughter remembered this morning, from Obama's speech last night?  
"You have earned the new puppy that's coming with us to the White House."*

*(Shinn, 2008)*

After their father was elected President of the United States, the only request made by Barack Obama's daughters, Sasha and Malia, was that they be able to get a dog (Davis, 2008). North American culture, and children in particular, embrace and value pets. Despite the expense and inconvenience, more than 50% of Canadian families own pets (Ontario Veterinary Medical Association, 2007). Dogs and cats are most common in homes with children, and become increasingly popular in families as children approach school age (Melson, 2001). As Melson notes, in addition to the common plea of "all I want for Christmas is a puppy," the importance and omnipresence of animals in children's lives can be observed in the plethora of trade books designed for children that feature animals, in the popularity of stuffed animals with children, and in children's television shows and movies that feature animals as their main characters. Disney movies abound with animal stars, from the most famous character of Mickey Mouse and his cast (Minnie, Goofy, etc.) to *Bambi* and *The Lion King*. Common associations with these characters play an important part in North American children's childhoods. In the elementary language arts classroom, quality children's literature that features animals can be a powerful motivator for students' learning and development. Specifically, elementary students' situational interest in animals and in ecology can serve as a motivator for children's long-term intrinsic reading

engagement (Guthrie, Hoa, Wigfield, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2006) and for meaningful literacy learning in the classroom. In this article, I will share 20 picture books that feature animals and suggest ways that they can be effectively incorporated into literacy lessons throughout the year.

### Selection Criteria for Literature

As Bainbridge and Pantaleo (1999) acknowledge, "Children's literature choices frequently vary from adult choices in terms of 'good' literature" (p. 4). While educators often make classroom book selections based on the awards (Killeen, 2009), children typically "respond positively to books which provide them excitement, animal interest, adventure, mystery, and humour" (Pascoe & Gilchrist, 1987, p. 59). A recent study by Reuter (2007) exploring elementary students' book selection found that children are initially attracted to books that are "cool" or unusual, to a book's illustrations as well as to its plot. As an educator, I am conflicted when asked to determine the quality of a book. Can a book's popularity determine its quality? Current research suggests that if an educator's intention is to motivate and inspire an intrinsic love of reading, particularly for students who have been reluctant to engage with literature previously, student choice and individual interest become paramount (Guthrie, Wigfield, et al., 2006). Therefore, the majority of the titles included in the following list represent a balance between fiction and nonfiction titles, come highly recommended by my own students, and have featured in successful literacy lessons in my classroom over eight years of language arts teaching.

### Animal Books To Begin the Year

One of my main objectives during the first few weeks of school is to ensure that the children in my classroom know that they are important, that they are safe in our classroom,

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## EDITORS:

April Bedford

*University of New Orleans*

Donna Witherspoon

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Latrobe, Pennsylvania*

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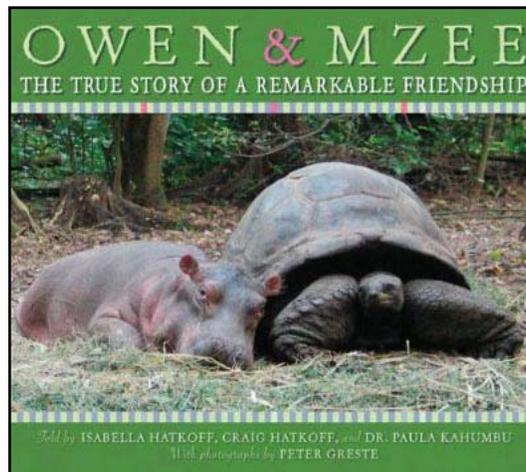
Patricia Vido,

*Director of Membership Services*

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that they belong, and that I care about them (Friesen, 2008). Therefore, the books I have included for the beginning of the year are a reflection of this focus.

**Hatkoff, Isabella, Hatkoff, Craig, & Kahumbu, Paul.** *Owen & Mzee: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship.* New York: Scholastic Press, 2006. 30 pp. \$16.99/\$22.99. Ages 5-8 years. This book is the true story of an unlikely but enduring friendship between an abandoned hippo and a giant tortoise following the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004. It features heartwarming photography and an engaging storyline.

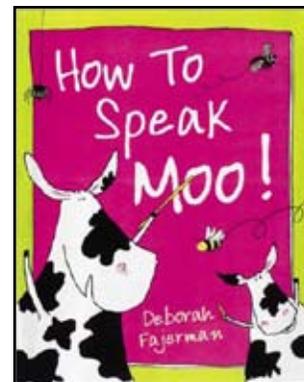


This is a wonderful book to use in the first few weeks of the school year to encourage students to consider remaining open to the possibilities of friendships that at first may seem unlikely. To encourage my students to pay attention to the unique gifts and abilities of each of their classmates, I challenge the children in my class to write one genuine compliment for each student. After modeling and practicing what a genuine compliment looks like, feels like, and sounds like, I schedule 15 minutes at the end of each school day for students to take the time to write one compliment. Each child uses a first-name checklist to keep track of whom they have given compliments to, and the compliments are deposited in individual student mailboxes to be opened at the end of the first three weeks of school (Friesen, 2008). What a great way to begin the school year on a “positive note!”

**Romanova, Yelena.** *The Perfect Friend.* New York: Frances Foster Books, 2005. 30 pp. \$15.00/\$21.00. Ages 5-7 years. This book is told from the family dog's perspective when a new child is brought home from the hospital. Because the dog, Archie, has always been the center of attention, he has a difficult time understanding how his importance seems to be suddenly diminished. In the end, the new little boy, Max, becomes Archie's best friend as he grows up. This is a wonderful book to include in a conversation about change and the positive aspects of change, such as a new classroom with different students—and new potential friends.

## BOOKS TO HELP TEACH CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS

**Fajerman, Deborah.** *How To Speak Moo!* London, UK: The Random House Group, 2002. 22 pp. \$5.95/\$7.95. Ages 5-7 years. It may be surprising to learn that cows go to school, too! This book is an entertaining and animated story about the many different ways that cows can communicate by using the word “Moo,” such as loud and soft moos, jiggly and boinging moos, and wobbly and smooth moos. This is a wonderful book to incorporate into the first few



days of school to engage students in a conversation about what kinds of voices are appropriate in the classroom.

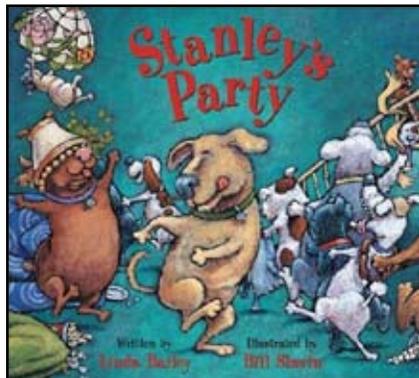
**Shannon, David.** *Good Boy, Fergus!* New York: Scholastic, 2006. 28 pp. \$15.99/\$19.99. Ages 3-5 years. Fergus is a playful puppy who is doing his best to learn the rules, but who often doesn't do what he should. Brightly colored illustrations capture the true essence of what it means to have a new puppy in the family, such as going for walks and learning new tricks. This book can serve as a friendly introduction to teaching students about learning to follow class rules.

**Demas, Corinne.** *Always in Trouble.* New York: Scholastic, 2009. 40 pp. \$16.99. Ages 5-7 years. A more sophisticated version of David Shannon's *Good Boy, Fergus*, this delightful and engaging book features Toby, a loving and well-intentioned mutt who just doesn't seem to be able to learn basic obedience in doggy training school. The story is light-hearted and entertaining, and your students will relate easily to Toby's efforts to do as he should—in whatever setting they find themselves!

#### BOOKS TO CAPTURE STUDENTS' IMAGINATIONS FOR WRITING

**Watt, Melanie.** *Chester.* Tonawanda, NY: Kids Can Press Ltd., 2007. 30 pp. \$16.95/\$18.95. Ages 5-8 years. Chester is a large cat with a huge personality who feels that it is his duty to take over the writing of the story for author Melanie Watt whenever the storyline is not going his way. Your students will be laughing from beginning to end as they engage in Chester's naughty yet playful antics—and will enjoy the author's revenge in the end by placing this endearing cat in a tutu. This is a great story for helping students to learn about character development and author voice in writing.

**Bailey, Linda.** *Stanley's Party.* Toronto, ON: Kids Can Press, 2003. 32 pp. \$6.95. Ages 5-8 years. A Rocky Mountain Book Award winner, this is the creative and light-hearted story of a dog's adventures when his family goes out for the evening. What begins with an innocent evening lying on the forbidden living room couch devel-



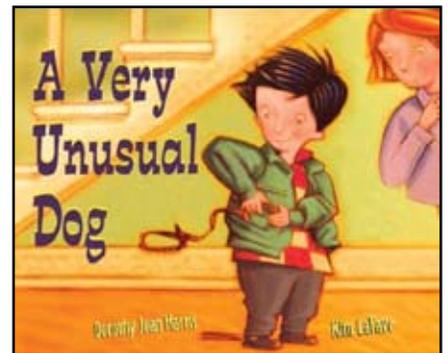
ops into a full-fledged house party for dogs. In the end, Stanley gets caught by his owners and is no longer allowed to stay home alone . . . which suits him just fine! This is a wonderful book to teach perspective to budding authors, and to encourage young writers to consider what kinds of adventures their own pets might get up to when they're out for the evening. Three follow-up books to *Stanley's Party* (2003) include *Stanley's Wild Ride* (2006), *Stanley at Sea* (2008), and *Stanley's Beauty Contest* (2009).

**Walter Foster Creative Team.** *All About Drawing Sea Creatures and Animals.* Oshkosh, WI: Walter Foster Pub. Inc., 2008. 80 pp. \$9.95. Ages 4-7 years. Although many children love to draw, they can feel better supported in their efforts by the clear, step-by-step instructions offered in this and many other drawing books designed for young children. In my own classroom, after selecting, offering opportunities for practice, and then drawing a creature of their choice, I then invite my students to "personalize" their animal. For example, a dolphin may now be holding a hockey stick from a young student's favorite team. Then, each child designs the background setting for his or her new character; in no time, this hockey-playing dolphin has its very own underwater arena, using an abandoned seashell for a puck, and a budding story line for an original piece of writing. These student-generated illustrations serve as a wonderful inspiration for student story-writing ideas!

**Namm, Diane.** *Laugh-a-Long Readers: Slithery, Squirmy Jokes.* New York: Sterling, 2008. 32 pp. \$3.95. Ages 4-8 years. Young children love animal humor, and joke books are a wonderful way to engage students in reading in a light-hearted and non-threatening way. Consider inviting your students to choose two of their favorite jokes each, design puppets, and put on a class puppet show for family and friends, featuring your students' favorite riddles!

#### BOOKS TO HELP DEVELOP CARE AND EMPATHY

**Harris, Dorothy Joan & LaFave, Kim.** *A Very Unusual Dog.* New York: Scholastic, 2004. 28 pp. \$7.99/\$4.50. Ages 6-9 years. This book, a finalist for the Gover-



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nor General's Literary Awards, is the touching story of Jonathan and his imaginary dog. As Jonathan goes about his daily activities, he shows consideration and care for his dog by sitting on the floor to watch TV with him (because according to his sister, Elizabeth, dogs aren't allowed on the couch) and takes him to the park, using a length of rope for a leash (much to the embarrassment of his sister). When the family goes to visit his Grandma, Jonathan learns of her loneliness for her pet cat that died and decides to leave his imaginary dog with her to keep her company. This is a wonderful book, offering discussion opportunities for how children should properly care for a pet and consider the needs of others.

**Wright, Norman H.** *My Faithful Companion: Heartwarming Stories About the Dogs We Love.* Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009. 55 pp. \$15.99. Ages 7-9 years. Although the vocabulary level is advanced for young students, this book is an inspiring collection of stories and poems, perfect for read-alouds and as a springboard for discussion. Sprinkled with heartwarming quotes about dogs and illustrated with paintings by John Weiss, this book is a must-have for any book collection featuring animals.

#### BOOKS THAT BRIGHTEN AND INSPIRE

**Grieve, Bradley Trevor.** *The Blue Day Book for Kids.* Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2005. 44 pp. \$9.95/\$14.95. Ages 5-7 years. Beginning with the question "Have you ever had a blue day?" and accompanied by endearing photos of real animals, this book explores what it means to experience a blue day. This book helps children to acknowledge that everyone has bad days, and will have students laughing regardless of their mood through the hilarious and heartfelt photos of the animals' antics. The book concludes with advice for how children can cheer themselves up with a little bit of imagination and pride for being who they are.

**Buehner, Caralyn.** *Dex: The Heart of a Hero.* China: HarperCollins, 2004. 28 pp. \$17.89/\$22.89. Ages 5-8 years. Dex is a little dog who looks "like a plump sausage sitting on four little meatballs" and who is often overlooked among his friends because of his size. Dex dreams of becoming a superhero and so, after intense training, he becomes the hero helper he's always wanted to be. With brightly colored illustrations designed with comic strip flair, this book is a wonderful model for students to design their own superheroes to draw and write about.

#### ANIMAL FACTS AND FAMILIES

**Clarke, Ginjer.** *Fake Out! Animals That Play Tricks.* New York: Penguin Group, 2007. 48 pp. \$4.99. Ages 4-7 years. Young students are always fascinated by animals' abilities to change their appearance or behavior in some way for protection and survival; for example, one breed of goat has the natural gift of being able to faint when it has been startled. This book is a sure way to hook reluctant readers, and would serve as a fantastic springboard for students to write their own book of amazing facts about animals.

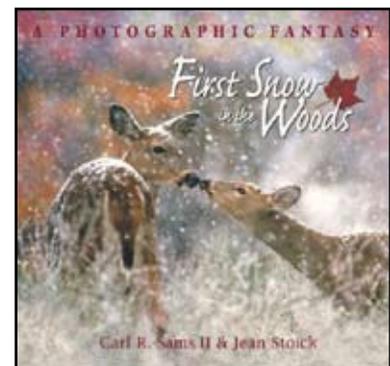
**Boutilier, Joanna.** *Pigs Aren't Dirty, Bears Aren't Slow: And Other Truths About Misunderstood Animals.* Toronto, ON: Annick Press, 2009. 40 pp. \$9.95. Ages 6-9 years. Why is it that spiders, snakes, and sharks seem to have such bad reputations? Using humorous illustrations, this book dispels the myths about 10 animals that are commonly misunderstood. As with Ginjer Clarke's book (above), students may enjoy designing their own page for a class book telling the truth about these animals with less-than-stellar reputations.

**Kalman, Bobbie.** *Animals Grow and Change.* New York: Crabtree Publishing, 2007. 24 pp. \$8.95. Ages 4-6 years. Just like children, animals go through a series of changes as they grow and mature. With a focus on animals' metamorphoses, this book illustrates the many ways that animals change throughout their life cycle. For language learning, this book offers wonderful opportunities for students to talk and write about similarities and differences in changes between species as they mature.

**Kalman, Bobbie.** *Animal Families.* New York: Crabtree Publishing, 2007. 24 pp. \$8.50. Ages 4-6 years. How does a wolf, a fish, or a penguin take care of its young? Young children will be fascinated to learn about how different animal families interact. Accompanied by vibrant photographs, the text serves as a springboard for a fascinating conversation about how human families are similar and different from these animals.

#### UNFORGETTABLE READ-ALLOUDS

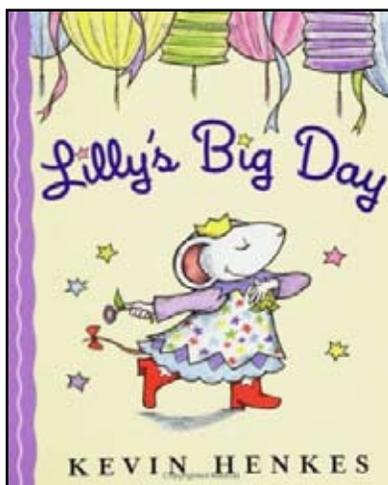
**Sams, Carl R., & Stoick, Jean.** *First Snow in the Woods: A Photographic Fantasy.* Milford, MI: Carl R. Sams II Photography,



**2007. 48 pp. \$19.95. Ages 4-8 years.** With beautiful photos and charming prose, this book is a nature lover's dream! In the same spirit as the authors' previous books, *Stranger in the Woods* (2000) and *Lost in the Woods* (2004), this book takes readers on an adventure that explores how animals prepare for winter. Brimming with exquisite examples of descriptive writing, these books serve as outstanding models for students' own literary efforts.

**Kotzwinkle, William, & Murray, Glenn. *Walter the Farting Dog*. Berkeley, CA: Frog, Ltd., 2001. 28 pp. \$15.95/\$26.50. Ages 5-8 years.** Although a stark contrast to Sams and Stoick's work, no student-selected book list would be complete without a tribute to the flatulent Walter. In what has become a classroom classic for many young children, this is the story of Walter, a dog with a flatulence problem, or gift, depending on the circumstances. Walter is blamed for foul smells at family gatherings, but also saves his family from robbers with his special powers. This book is entertaining for kids of all ages, and is the first in a series that includes *Walter the Farting Dog: Trouble at the Yard Sale* (2004), *Rough Weather Ahead for Walter the Farting Dog* (2005), *Walter the Farting Dog Goes on a Cruise* (2006), and *Walter the Farting Dog: Banned From the Beach* (2007). In my classroom, students have enjoyed tracing images of Walter, using carbon paper to outline in black marker and color. We then place the images in a unique setting to serve as a springboard for writing their own Walter story. Imagine: What antics might Walter get up to if he were at your house?

**Henkes, Kevin. *Lilly's Big Day*. China: Greenwillow Books, 2006. 30 pp. \$16.99/\$19.99. Ages 6-8 years.** Lilly is a small mouse with a huge personality who absolutely loves her teacher, Mr. Slinger. When Mr. Slinger announces that he is going to get married, Lilly decides that she is going to be his flower girl. She practices being a flower girl at home, and drops less-than-subtle hints



about her plan during story time at school. Finally, Mr. Slinger takes Lilly aside—not to ask her to be the flower girl, but rather to be the *assistant* to the flower girl. Although not initially impressed, Lilly warms to this idea and agrees to take on the role. On the day of the wedding, Lilly saves the day by carrying the flower girl when she freezes up at the last minute. Lilly's huge, heartwarming personality is a wonderful example of strong character development in stories and is featured in several other Henkes favorites, including *Chrysanthemum* (1991), *Julius, the Baby of the World* (1995), and *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* (1996). Kevin Henkes's books are popular with many students, particularly because of his light-hearted manner of addressing topics that are important to most children. I include *Chrysanthemum* (1991) in my language arts lessons as an engaging invitation to celebrate and explore the meaning and history behind students' own names, and I incorporate *Julius, the Baby of the World* (1995) into a lesson addressing sibling rivalry with a light-hearted and humorous touch, and then ask students to consider what they might be best at in the whole world. Finally, *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* (1996) is a wonderful illustration of common classroom misbehaviors, written by Henkes with a kind and good-natured spirit.

#### CLOSING REMARKS

I am hopeful that these books will engage many children in the joys of literacy learning. Students' situational interests may stimulate long-term intrinsic motivation to read (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004), particularly by focusing on a topic, such as animals, that is close to children's hearts. I encourage educators to ask their own students which books they would recommend for classroom literacy activities; perhaps as we listen more carefully to what truly interests young students, we will begin to gain insight into why some children choose to read, while others do not.

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## Gerbils, and Rabbits, and Pigs, Oh My!

By Donna Witherspoon

Greater Latrobe School District, Latrobe, PA

“Where’s Papa going with that ax?” said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast” (White, 1952, p. 1). And so begins the story of Wilbur the pig and Charlotte the spider in one of the best-loved, most enduring classics in children’s literature, *Charlotte’s Web*.

Not surprisingly, animals always have played a large role in children’s literature, reflecting children’s fascination with creatures of all kinds. In some stories, animals take on imaginary, unrealistic, and human-like characteristics, such as the lovable, loyal Wilbur and the beautiful, wise Charlotte. In other stories, like the iconic *Black Beauty* (Sewell, 2008), originally published in 1887, the animals are somewhat realistic, but also serve as archetypes of such positive traits as courage, loyalty, or determination. Nonfiction books that showcase animals are prevalent as well, often beautifully illustrated with photographs.

When sharing books about animals with children, one important aspect to consider is the message that the book portrays concerning appropriate and humane interactions between people and animals. Animal advocacy groups suggest that teachers be aware of both positive and negative messages in books about animals. Potentially harmful messages may be imparted by books in which dogs and cats roam freely without human supervision, pets run about without collars and tags, children feed or interact with wildlife, or animals are mistreated in some way (Denver Dumb Friends League, 2009). Teachers can encourage children to discuss questionable aspects of these books, rather than avoiding them altogether. Such discussions help children develop empathy for and understanding of humane values. They may even lead to positive ac-

tion, as did the original publication of *Black Beauty*, which raised awareness of inhumane treatment of horses and spurred the first animal protection movement (Humane Society of the United States, 2003). In addition, parents and teachers should discuss the realistic versus fantasy aspects of animal stories, so that children are not confused about the types of behaviors to expect from their pets or other animals they encounter in real life (Denver Dumb Friends League, 2009). The Humane Society of the United States, Youth Division, provides a wealth of information for helping children learn kind and humane ways to interact with animals. Each year they present Kind Awards to children’s books that are exemplary in the treatment of animals. Following are the 2009 Kind Children’s Book Award winners. More information about these books and a listing of previous winners can be found at the Humane Society of the United States website ([www.humanesocietyyouth.org/awards](http://www.humanesocietyyouth.org/awards)).

### HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES, YOUTH DIVISION KIND CHILDREN’S BOOK AWARDS, 2009

#### Best Picture Book

##### *A Home for Dakota*

Written by Jan Zita Grover

Illustrated by Nancy Lane

Edina, MN: The Gryphon Press, 2008

24 pages; \$15.95 hardcover; ages 5 and up

#### Best Chapter Book

##### *Dolphin Song*

Written by Lauren St. John

New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2008

246 pages; \$16.99 hardcover; \$6.99 paperback; ages 9-12

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***Breakfast in the Rainforest:***

***A Visit With Mountain Gorillas***

Written by Richard Sobol  
Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 2008  
48 pages; \$18.99 hardcover; ages 7 and up

***Dolphins on the Sand***

Written and illustrated by Jim Arnosky  
New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2008  
32 pages; \$16.99 hardcover; ages 4 and up

***Finding Home***

Written by Sandra Markle  
Illustrated by Alan Marks  
Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge, 2008  
32 pages; \$15.95 hardcover; ages 4 and up

***First Dog Fala***

Written by Elizabeth Van Steenwyk  
Illustrated by Michael G. Montgomery  
Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 2008  
32 pages; \$16.95 hardcover; ages 4-8

***It's Raining Cats and Cats!***

Written by Jeanne Prevost  
Illustrated by Amelia Hansen  
Edina, MN: The Gryphon Press, 2008  
24 pages; \$15.95 hardcover; ages 6-9

***Night of the Spadefoot Toads***

Written by Bill Harley  
Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 2008  
218 pages; \$15.95 hardcover; ages 9-12

***The Nine Lives of Travis Keating***

Written by Jill MacLean  
Brighton, MA: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2008  
214 pages; \$11.95 paperback; ages 9-12

***Skylar***

Written by Mary Cuffe-Perez  
New York: Philomel Books, 2008  
144 pages; \$14.99 hardcover; ages 9-12

***The Wolves Are Back***

Written by Jean Craighead George  
Illustrated by Wendell Minor  
New York: Dutton Children's Books, 2008  
32 pages; \$16.99 hardcover; ages 4 and up

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