



CSA Suggested Independent Reading List

Below is a list of book recommendations for independent reading. To find out more about these titles, websites such as [commonsensemedia.org](https://www.commonsensemedia.org) and [goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com) are great resources. Common Sense Media provides more in depth summaries and book details, parent reviews, and ideas for how to engage in discussion about the story with your children. Goodreads provides a variety of reviews, summaries, similar book suggestions and reader Q&As.

Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli

Main themes: Racism, homelessness, and courage

Synopsis: Maniac Magee is the story of Jeffrey Lionel Magee, a homeless orphan who runs away from life with his unhappy aunt and uncle to a racially divided community in Pennsylvania. While there, Maniac amazes the town with his athletic ability and bravery and is deemed a legend. While there, Maniac meets the Beale family who brings him into their home despite others' racial criticism. Although ensuing racial tensions eventually force Maniac to leave the Beales' household, a series of relationships and events unite the community and Maniac with his newfound family.

Learn more: <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/book-reviews/maniac-magee>

The Magician's Elephant by Kate DiCamillo

Main themes: Coming of age, family, secrets

Synopsis: Peter Augustus Duchene is a ten-year-old orphan whose mother's dying wish was for Peter to protect his sister; however, his guardian, a soldier named Vilna Lutz, believes she is no longer alive. When Vilna Lutz gives Peter money to buy food in the market square, he sees a fortuneteller's tent and decides he must use the money to ask her if his sister is alive and how he can find her. The fortuneteller responds that an elephant will lead him to find his younger sister, Adele, who is alive.

Learn more: <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/book-reviews/the-magicians-elephant>

Unstoppable Octobia May by Sharon G. Flake

Main themes: History, race, culture and family

Synopsis: Octobia May is a quick-witted, ten-year-old girl who loves to ask questions, especially the ones no one wants to answer. She lives in her aunt's boarding house in 1953, and through her curiosity and exploration of the house uncovers, what she believes to be, a vampire living in Room 204. In this novel, Octobia May goes on a quest for truths that explore issues of race and community, the impact of war, and secrets best kept hidden.

Learn More:

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/20894025-unstoppable-octobia-may?ac=1&from_search=true

The Red Pencil by Andrea Davis Pinkney

Main themes: Dreams, family, freedom, war, and changing times

Synopsis: Amira is a twelve-year-old Sudanese girl living in a village where it is believed that a woman's role in society is to marry, raise children and do chores; not read or write. However, Amira, who draws beautiful pictures in the dirt alongside her home, longs to go to school to learn to read and write. Life as she knows it is shattered when the Janjaweed militia storms her village causing her spirit and hopefulness to dwindle until the gift of one red pencil opens her mind.

Learn more: <https://www.commonsemmedia.org/book-reviews/the-red-pencil>

Let it Snow: Three Holiday Romances by John Green, Maureen Johnson and Lauren Myracle

Main themes: Love, romance

Synopsis: Three interconnected stories about a Christmas Eve snowstorm that transforms one small town into a romantic haven. Well, kinda. After all, a cold and wet hike from a stranded train through the middle of nowhere would not normally end with a delicious kiss from a charming stranger. And no one would think that a trip to the Waffle House through four feet of snow would lead to love with an old friend. Or that the way back to true love begins with a painfully early morning shift at Starbucks.

Learn more: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/33290383-let-it-snow?from_search=true

Number the Stars by Lois Lowry

Main themes: Growing up, friendship, bravery

Synopsis: Ten-year-old Annemarie Johansen and her best friend Ellen Rosen often think of life before the war. It's now 1943 and their life in Copenhagen is filled with school, food shortages, and the Nazi soldiers marching through town. When the Jews of Denmark are "relocated," Ellen moves in with the Johansens and pretends to be one of the family. Soon Annemarie is asked to go on a dangerous mission to save Ellen's life.

Learn more: <https://www.commonsemmedia.org/book-reviews/number-the-stars>

A Long Walk to Water by Linda Sue Park

Main themes: Perseverance, family, water, war and history

Synopsis: A compelling blend of fact and fiction, *A Long Walk to Water* emotionally illustrates the hardships of the civil war in Sudan (1983-2005) through the narratives of a young boy and girl. Salva, a boy in 1985, is forced from his home due to the war. In an effort to find his family, he encounters extreme thirst, hunger, and violence. Nya's story, based in 2008, is a more contemporary depiction of the current state of Sudan. Nya, an 11-year-old Sudanese girl, travels to a pond, two hours from her home, twice a day to keep her family alive. Although there is a decent amount of war-based violence in this novel, *A Long Walk to Water* is a story of perseverance that culminates in a "triumphant climax".

Learn more:

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/7981456-a-long-walk-to-water?from_choice=false

The Tale of Despereaux by Kate DiCamillo

Main themes: Forgiveness, compassion, courage, and individuality

Synopsis: Despereaux is a mouse, but no ordinary mouse. He is courageous and has gigantic ears, but most of all, he enjoys the company of humans. In this adventure-packed novel, Despereaux is ostracized from his community, makes the most unlikely of friends, and embarks on a mission to save his love, Princess Pea. *The Tale of Despereaux* is a novel that children can easily relate, while also promoting self-confidence. DiCamillo carefully crafts a story that imparts an important message: regardless of individual differences, with courage and determination, a mouse, or even a child, can accomplish the unthinkable.

[Learn more:](#)

<https://www.commonsemmedia.org/book-reviews/the-tale-of-despereaux-being-the-story-of-a-mouse-a-princess-some-soup-and-a-spool-of>

Chomp by Carl Hiaasen

Main themes: Survival, animal rights and conservation, reversal of parent/child roles

Synopsis: Wahoo Cray lives in a zoo with his unpredictable, animal wrangler, father. When his dad takes a job with a reality TV show called "Expedition Survival!", Wahoo figures he'll have to do a bit of wrangling himself—to keep his dad from killing Derek Badger, the show's boneheaded star, before the shoot is over. But the job keeps getting more complicated after only one day of shooting in the Everglades. It's anyone's guess who will actually survive "Expedition Survival."

Learn more: <https://www.commonsemmedia.org/book-reviews/chomp>

Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution by Ji-li Jiang

Main themes: Fear, politics, family, society and class, dreams, hopes and plans, duty, identity, truth

Synopsis: This book tells the story of Ji-li Jiang who was twelve years old in 1966, the year that Chairman Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in China. An outstanding student and much-admired leader of her class, Ji-li seemed poised for a shining future. But all that changed with the advent of the Cultural Revolution, when intelligence became a crime and a wealthy family background invited persecution or worse. She tells her story and the difficult decisions she and her family were forced to make while living through this political movement.

Learn more:

<https://www.commonsemmedia.org/book-reviews/red-scarf-girl-a-memoir-of-the-cultural-revolution>

I am Malala: How One Girl Stood Up for Education and Changed the World by Malala Yousafzai with Patricia McCormick (young readers edition)

Main themes: Power of education, women's rights, peace, strength

Synopsis: Malala Yousafzai grew up in a once peaceful region of Pakistan transformed by terrorism. Growing up, she was taught to stand up to fight for what she believes in, so when girls were forbidden from attending school, she fought back. On October 9, 2012, she was shot on

her bus ride home from school and was not expected to survive. She is now an international symbol of peaceful protest and this memoir tells her powerful story.

Learn more:

<https://www.commonsemmedia.org/book-reviews/i-am-malala-how-one-girl-stood-up-for-education-and-changed-the-world>

One Crazy Summer by Rita Williams-Garcia

Main themes: Race, friendship, youth, abandonment, prejudice, identity, arts and culture, memory and the past

Synopsis: Abandoned by a mother who doesn't want them, three sisters, Delphine, Fern and Vonetta travel from Brooklyn to Oakland to reunite with their estranged mother for a month. It's 1968 and to keep the girls out of her way, their mother, Cecile, sends them to the local Black Panther Party day camp. Over the course of the next four weeks, the sisters spend time learning about revolution even though what they want is to learn about and bond with their mother. Slowly, they become part of a larger community and the mysterious story of their mom's flight is untangled.

Learn more: <https://www.commonsemmedia.org/book-reviews/one-crazy-summer>

Because of Winn-Dixie by Kate DiCamillo

Main themes: Abandonment, compassion and forgiveness, isolation, communication, friendship, family, love, courage

Synopsis: When Opal and her father, the preacher, move to Naomi, Florida one summer, she goes into the Winn-Dixie supermarket and comes out with a stray dog. She names the dog Winn-Dixie, and because of Winn-Dixie, the preacher tells Opal ten things about her absent mother, one for each year Opal has been alive. Together, Opal and Winn-Dixie make new friends and collect stories about the town and her mother.

Learn more: <https://www.commonsemmedia.org/book-reviews/because-of-winn-dixie>

An Abundance of Katherines by John Green

Main themes: Individuality, love, memory and the past, coming of age, happiness, dreams, hopes, and plans

Synopsis: Colin Singleton has been dumped by nineteen Katherines, and is on a mission to prove "The Theorem of Underlying Katherine Predictability," which he hopes will predict the

future of any relationship, avenge Dumpees everywhere, and perhaps finally win him the girl. This mission takes him on a road trip miles from home with ten thousand dollars, a feral hog on his trail, and an overweight, Judge Judy-loving best friend riding shotgun.

Learn more: <https://www.commonsemmedia.org/book-reviews/an-abundance-of-katherines>

Crash by Jerry Spinelli

Main themes: Bullying and conformity, conservation and pacifism, family, friendship, stereotypes

Synopsis: John "Crash" Coogan is a seventh-grade football star who exhibits a rough and aggressive behavior, which he enjoys possessing. However, his opinion of himself begins to shift when he meets his neighbor who makes him reevaluate how he treats others. This book provides a different glimpse into the life and mind of a bully.

Learn more: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/87226.Crash>

Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures by Kate DiCamillo

Main themes: Parent/child relationship, superheroes, loneliness

Synopsis: Self-proclaimed cynic Flora Belle Buckman has read every issue of the comic book, *Terrible Things Can Happen to You!* However, she begins to learn the power of optimism after saving a squirrel, Ulysses, from a vacuum cleaner. After his rescue, Ulysses is born anew with the power of strength, flight, and misspelled poetry, which work together to change Flora's outlook on the world.

Learn more:

<https://www.commonsemmedia.org/book-reviews/flora-ulysses-the-illuminated-adventures>

I Will Always Write Back: How One Letter Changed Two Lives by Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda with Liz Welch

Main themes: Cultural and economic comparisons, acts of kindness, friendship

Synopsis: This book tells the true story of two pen pals: an American girl and a boy from Zimbabwe. It started as a class assignment which had students in Caitlin's class writing letters to an unknown child across the world. Martin was lucky to be one of the ten students, out of fifty in his class, to receive a letter. This one letter led to a correspondence and companionship that spanned over six years.

Learn more:

<https://www.commonsemmedia.org/book-reviews/i-will-always-write-back-how-one-letter-changed-two-lives>

Return to Sender by Julia Alvarez

Main themes: Citizenship, immigration, cultural differences, friendship, family

Synopsis: In order to save their family's farm from foreclosure, Tyler's injured father must hire Mexican migrant workers. As a result, Tyler has many questions and concerns about the status and lives of the new workers, especially the three daughters who live in constant fear of being discovered and deported. He is most curious about Mari, the oldest who is proud of her Mexican heritage, but becomes increasingly connected to her American life. Can Tyler and Mari become friends despite their many differences?

Learn more: <https://www.commonsemmedia.org/book-reviews/return-to-sender>