# Best Bets for Back to School Reading!

## **Picture Books**

**Arnaldo, Monica. Mr. S. HarperCollins. (2023 List)**

What do you do if you arrive on the first day of kindergarten and your teacher is missing and all that is in the classroom is a sandwich and the words Mr. S written on the board? Chaos ensues of course and while the class weighs the possibility of their new teacher, Mr. S, being a person or a sandwich. This picture book brings absurdity and laughter as the kids battle it out over whether a sandwich can also be a teacher.

**Brar, Kuljinder Kaur. My Name Is Saajin Singh. Illustrated by Samrath Kaur. Annick Press. (2022 List)**

Saajin Singh loves his name! Loves to write it, loves to sing it, and loves to see it in the clouds. Until he starts kindergarten, and his teacher mispronounces his name as “Say-Jin”, instead of “Sah-Jin”. This makes happy-go-lucky Saajin sad. Saajin learns some important lessons along the way to reclaiming his name. This energetically drawn picture book shows us a kind path forward for claiming our hard to pronounce names.

**Krampien, Celia. Sunny. Macmillan. (2020 List)**

Sunny, an optimistic young girl, starts out going to school on a rainy day with her big yellow umbrella. Until a big gust of wind comes along and takes Sunny on an adventure through the air and out to sea. All the while Sunny’s optimism helps her make the best of her situation, even when she stops to have a cry. With the help of some friends, she makes it back where she belongs. A fantastic debut, told in a gorgeous, limited palette Sunny shows us that with a mix of optimism and relying on others our situations often improve.

**Singh, Rina. Grandmother School. Illustrated by Ellen Rooney. Orca Book Publishers. (2020 List)**

Telling the true story of a school in Phangane, India, this book is just as fun as it is poignant. Flipping the usual school story on its head, this time it’s the grandmothers going to school, and the young children helping them with their homework. Narrated by one of those children, we learn how the community has come together to support their elder matriarchs in learning to read and write – a chance they were never given as children. The illustrations are just as bright and hopeful as the text, full of fuchsia and bright yellow. This is a heartwarming book about education, gender, rights, and intergenerational relationships.

## **Junior Fiction**

**Bow, Erin. Simon Sort of Says. Scholastic. (2023 List)**

Simon’s family has just moved to the National Quiet Zone, where the internet is banned so radio astronomers can listen for signs of life in space. For a kid who loves to tell stories, like how his family was driven out of Omaha by alpacas, his church-deacon dad accidentally gave a squirrel a holy sacrament, or his undertaker mom occasionally must wrangle emus, this is the perfect place to be. It is also perfect for someone who is avoiding one story that has been following them everywhere, because Simon is the only survivor of a school shooting. When Simon meets a kid who wants to give the astronomers exactly what they are looking for, he sees an opportunity to create a new story about himself. Equal parts hilarious and heart-wrenching, this hopeful book is about finding your friends, healing your heart and speaking your truth.

**Quin, Tegan and Sara Quin. Tegan & Sara: Junior High. Illustrated by Tillie Walden. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (2023 List)**

From first crushes to the perils of puberty, surviving junior high is something the sisters plan to face side by side, just like they've always faced things. But growing up also means growing apart, as Tegan and Sara make different friends and take separate paths to understanding their queerness. For the first time ever, they ask who one sister is without the other. This graphic novel about the famous Canadian duo tackles the struggles of growing up, self-discovery, and not knowing where you fit in with great illustrations from Tillie Walden.

**MacEachern, Muinji’j & Shanika MacEachern. Muinji'j Asks Why: The Story of the Mi'kmaq and the Shubenacadie Residential School. Illustrated by Zeta Paul. Nimbus Publishing. (2022 List)**

Written by a mother/daughter duo, *Muinji’j Asks Why* is a poignant look at the the history of the Mi’kmaq peoples, from pre-Columbian contact, through early confederation, to the introduction of residential schools and the devastating impact this has had on the Mi’kmaq community. Above all else it is a story of resilience and hope as readers will be reminded that the Mi’kmaq are still present today and still practicing their culture.

**Fung, Rosena. Living with Viola. Annick Press. (2021 List)**

This debut graphic novel explores mental health, cultural differences, and the trials and tribulations of middle school in an honest and quietly funny way. It is hard enough for Livy, being the new girl at school. But add in Viola- the shadowy embodiment of Livy’s anxiety, and things just get worse. Livy tries to push back against Viola, but nothing seems to work until she makes some new friends. But when tensions at home and school rise, Viola gets stronger and more powerful than ever. Livy must learn to ask for help and face her anxiety so that she truly can live with Viola. Drawing on the authors own experiences with anxiety and the pressures of growing up the child of Chinese immigrants, this charming novel is the perfect combination of heartfelt and humour.

## **Young Adult Fiction**

**Leth, Kate. Mall Goth. Colorist Diana Sousa. Letterer Robin Crank. Simon & Schuster. (2023 List)**

Liv Holme is not exactly thrilled to be moving to a new town with her mother. After all, high school can be brutal, even more so when you’re a fifteen-year-old, bisexual goth. But Liv is determined to be who she is, bullies or not. Still, being the new kid and the only out student brings her a lot of unwelcome attention, and Liv flounders in her search for community. The only person who makes time for her is one of the teachers, but Liv isn’t sure how to feel about the way he behaves toward her.

Thankfully, she’s found the perfect escape: the mall. Under its fluorescent lights, Liv feels far away from her parents’ strained marriage and the peers who don’t understand her. Amid the bright storefronts, food court smell, and anonymous shoppers, Liv can safely blend in and can feel in control of her own life for once. While embracing her retail refuge, Liv sets off on a journey of self-acceptance while navigating the complicated world of teenage friendships and relationships. This graphic novel wonderfully illustrates the nostalgic 2000s setting filled with pop culture references while also telling a story with a powerful message.

**Nasemian, Abdi. The Chandler Legacies. HarperCollins. (2022 List)**

Five mismatched teens come together to challenge the status quo at their elite boarding school. The Circle is a coveted writing group that is known for creating life-long friendships and revealing truths about the members that they did not even know about themselves. Beth, Sarah, Spence, Ramin and Freddy are told by their professor to write their truth, but is the truth enough to take down the culture of abuse that has permeated Chandler for generations? And can their friendship survive the fallout? Reminiscent of bestseller My Dark Vanessa, Abdi Nazemian tells a story about the power of coming together to expose a longstanding tradition of bullying, hazing and powerful men taking advantage of those subordinate to them. Featuring a diverse cast of characters this book is full of courage, hope, and the vision of the future where things change from “the way it has always been.”

**Nielsen, Susan. Tremendous Things. Penguin Teen. (2021 List)**

Wilbur is excited to start his first day of middle school after being homeschooled for many years. Unfortunately, Wilbur accidentally reveals his most embarrassing moments to his entire class. Fast forward to the ninth grade where Wil’s class is hosting exchange students from Paris and Wil is partnered with Charlie, a tall stylish young woman who Wil falls instantly in love. When Charlie breaks his heart, Wil’s friends and elderly neighbour stage a Queer-Eye style intervention to help Wil build his confidence and win back Charlie.

**Philippe, Ben. Charming as a Verb. HarperCollins Canada. (2020 List)**

Henri “Halti” Haltiwanger is charming. He is a popular student at his prestigious New York school, the picture perfect first-generation Haitian son, and a successful dog walker for his wealthy neighbours. But his easy smile and charming personality masks his burning ambition to attend his father’s dream school, Columbia. When the only person immune to his charms, unapologetically “intense” classmate Corinne, uncovers his dog walking job is a less than honest business, she blackmails him into helping her become more well-liked. What starts as a mutually beneficial arrangement develops into something neither of them expected, and Halti begins to realize the only thing harder than being charming all the time is also scarier—being himself.