



Ted Zaleski

Great Readers, Great Leaders

We are delighted to introduce the first in a series of bookmarks featuring books recommended by great readers and leaders in Carroll County. Our first great reader is Ted Zaleski, Carroll County Director of Management and Budget.

Ted's Bio

A lifelong learner, Ted regularly read books to his children. One night his daughter asked him, "Why are we always reading books about boys?" Ted notes, "Chastened by my daughter's question I set out to find good books about girls. It was harder than I expected. They were out there, but I had to dig for them. I began to wonder how many girls were being fed a diet of books about boys by default. It occurred to me that other parents might be interested in the same kind of books I was looking for." This led Ted to write, "Making Their Own Choices: Strong Female Characters in Fantasy Literature - One Hundred Books for Late Elementary to High School Readers."

In his thesis, Ted also explored the idea of strong female characters, the roles they play and why he believes we need them. He also provided a brief history of fantasy literature, and the important role that fantasy fiction can play in shaping the worldview of young readers. We are honored that Ted allowed us to share his work by creating an annotated bookmark listing 10 of his favorite books from his list of 100. Please stop by any CCPL branch to pick up a bookmark. A complete list of all 100 titles on Ted's list is attached.

Ted's Reads

[Tuck Everlasting by Natalie Babbitt](#)

Winnie is an ordinary girl caught up in extraordinary circumstances. She makes a difficult decision, choosing between what she believes is right and what is expected of her, and then acts on her decision. It is beautifully written and raises very interesting questions of right and wrong.

[The Wizard of Oz by L. Frank Baum](#)

Baum's Dorothy is stronger and more a leader than Dorothy of the movie. An early example of a female on the heroic quest, Dorothy is single-mindedly focused on one goal—getting back home.

[Matilda by Roald Dahl](#)

The daughter of extraordinarily bad parents, Matilda wants to get along, but won't be bullied or let others dictate the course of her life. For Matilda, reading and learning are things to be cherished, not just endured.

[A Wrinkle in Time by Madeline L'Engle](#)

Meg isn't willing to pretend to be something other than what she is just to make others happy. Meg doesn't think of herself as strong, but in the end everything depends on her strength. A wonderful story, it tackles big ideas.

[Ella Enchanted by Gail Carson Levine](#)

At birth, Ella was given a gift—or a curse—which leaves her in the power of anyone who gives her an order. Within its constraints, Ella struggles to live life on her terms. It is a fun and suspenseful retelling of the Cinderella fairy tale.

[The Hero and the Crown by Robin McKinley](#)

Aerin is not content to play her proper role in society. She overcomes criticism and obstacles to create her own role and becomes a traditional questing hero, in a great adventure.

[Squire by Tamora Pierce](#)

Kel perseveres in her attempt to break into an all-male world as she continues her quest to become a knight. Not only does she gain acceptance, she is recognized as a leader, a leader of men. Kel remains true to her beliefs and committed to doing what she believes is right.

[Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone by J.K. Rowling](#)

This is Harry's story, but friend Hermione plays an important role as a good example of a strong female character in a supporting role. Though they initially regard her as a goody-goody showoff, Harry, Ron, and Hermione become friends as her knowledge and cool head save them all in difficult situations.

[Mary Poppins by P.L. Travers](#)

Mary Poppins is probably best known as a movie character. Though the book Mary is not a particularly likeable character, she is unquestionably in control of her life. Mary acts, and expects others to act accordingly.

[Charlotte's Web by E.B. White](#)

What other book that can be read by a third-grader examines the philosophy of what it means to be a spider, not to mention, friendship, loyalty, and life and death? Spider Charlotte makes her own choices, decides how to live her life and what she wants her relationships to be.



**Making Their Own Choices:
Strong Female Characters in Fantasy Literature**

One Hundred Books for Late Elementary to High School Readers

Ted Zaleski

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What is this book and who will want to use it?

Let me start by assuring you that this is not a textbook or literary criticism. I write, not as a professor of literature or a critic, but as a nearly life-long reader and a parent who reads to his children. I hope you will find this book to be an easy-to-use guide to fantasy literature with strong female characters and books likely to be enjoyed by late elementary school to high school readers. I have included descriptions of one hundred such books. My fervent hope is that my selections and their descriptions will help young readers and parents, who want to read to their children, find books that they will enjoy and remember. Possibly teachers and librarians struggling with too little time and too much to do will also find it to be a useful resource as they guide the reading experiences of their students.

If you are interested in more than just a list of books and descriptions, I also explore the idea of strong female characters, the roles they play and why I believe we need them; I provide a brief history of fantasy literature, attempt to differentiate fantasy from other types of literature, and look at the important role that fantasy fiction can play in shaping the worldview of young readers. I suggest a connection between the blossoming of fantasy in recent decades and those of us of the baby boom generation who possibly perceived a hole in our cultural fabric. For students interested in further academic pursuit of these ideas, I included a bibliography of books I found useful in understanding fantasy fiction and the role it plays.

I was richly rewarded for my efforts to provide this guide for other readers. I found books and authors that I enjoyed immensely and that I would have been very sorry to have missed. I hope my work leads you, whatever your age, to books that you will enjoy now and for a lifetime.

Why did I write this book?

Credit or blame my daughter. She enjoys reading and being read to. Beginning at a young age, I read books to her that were more difficult than she was likely to read on her own, or ones that she wasn't likely to choose, wanting her to experience the variety of stories available. One evening, when she was seven or eight years old, she asked why we always read books about boys. Her question caught me by surprise. It had never been my intent to read her books about boys. I wanted to read her good books, fun books, books that she would remember and want to read again. I had never really thought about stories being about boys or girls.

With new awareness, I realized that finding good books about boys is easy. You don't really even need to find them; they'll find you. Quickly name some books you think children should read, what comes to mind – King Arthur, Robin Hood, Treasure Island, Winnie-the-Pooh, The Wind in the Willows? Hardly a female character to be found let alone a strong one. Books featuring boys have historically dominated lists of classic books. On reflection, this is hardly surprising given how heavily our culture has leaned toward the male. After all, it was only eighty years ago that women won the right to vote and only in the last twenty years that women became, more or less, fully accepted in the work place. Why then should we be surprised to find that female characters, in general, have played a secondary role in children's books?

Chastened by my daughter's question I set out to find good books about girls. It was harder than I expected. They were out there, but I had to dig for them. I began to wonder how many girls were being fed a diet of books about boys by default. It occurred to me that other parents might be interested in the same kind of books I was looking for. My basic desire remained unchanged. I still wanted books that were fun, interesting and memorable; books that my daughter would want to read again, just some that included strong females.

I looked for help and found no shortage of books about children's literature. Unfortunately, most were academic discussions of theory, development and criticism. Many books were listed or analyzed, some indices included girls, women or females as subjects, but generally they were little help in easily identifying the kind of books I was looking for. I did find one nice book, Kathleen Odean's *Great Books For Girls: More Than 600 Books To Inspire Today's Girls And Tomorrow's Women*. Odean offered the kind of help I was looking for but the book suffered, for my purposes, from too broad a scope. More than half of the books were intended for very young readers and a significant number were non-fiction. While valuable, including these books reduced the space available for the books I was really looking for, fiction with strong female characters for more capable readers. Disappointed that I couldn't find the help I was hoping for, I decided to develop a resource that other parents could use, leading to the identification of one hundred books of fantasy fiction with strong female characters. I will discuss the criteria I used to choose the books and provide descriptions of each book, but first I want to tackle several questions: what is a strong female character, why should anybody care about strong female characters, what are the roles that girls and women play in the chosen books and why did I choose fantasy?

What is a strong female character?

Undoubtedly, the idea of a strong character can mean different things to different people. Arguments could be made for physical prowess, bravery, morality, strength of character, willingness to sacrifice, playing the protagonist or antagonist, or being a hero in the style of Ulysses or King Arthur. Central to my idea of a strong female character is choice. A strong female character is a girl or woman who makes her own choices, whose reactions to life are not solely or even primarily determined by others. By others I mostly mean boys and men. These strong characters may be wives, daughters, sisters and girl friends, but they are not defined by their relationships. Strong female characters try to change the world around them. Changing the world can be as big as Harry's attempt to save a culture and people from destruction in Robin McKinley's *The Blue Sword* or as personal as Georgie's desire to fly in Jane Langton's *The Fledgling*. It didn't escape my notice that the two examples I just offered are both girls with boy's names. I can't assure you that my choices don't reveal some deeper meaning about a pervasive maleness in our culture, but I don't think I used them for any reason other than because they were the first two books that occurred to me that illustrated significantly different magnitudes of change.

Strong characters drive events; they don't wait for things to happen to them. They act on what they believe is right. This is a crucial point – their actions are driven by what they believe is the right thing to do, not what someone else tells them they should do. Nine-year-old Amber, in Janet Lisle's *The Forest*, faces down a mob of armed men because she thinks they are wrong and that she knows what is right. But strong, as I use it here, does not necessarily imply good. A character could be very good; a dutiful wife and mother who takes care of her family and home.

Possibly she desires some change in her world, but doesn't act on it. Not acting doesn't make her bad, but she isn't strong. A daughter who agrees to an arranged marriage that she doesn't want because it is her parents' desire, isn't bad, again just not strong.

Strong female characters can be bad; I would argue that some should be bad. As I searched for strong female characters, I sometimes found myself longing for a villain, not a shrewish or hen-pecking wife, but a strong character to dislike – a female Captain Hook to root against. I didn't find many female villains, possibly a perverse indication that girls and women still play a second-class role in fiction. If female characters truly make their own choices, some of them are going to make choices that society frowns upon. Consciously or not, it seems writers may be hesitant to create strong negative images of females; maybe they don't want to provide negative role models for girls. If so, the same concern doesn't seem to exist for boys. Strong male villains are easy to find. Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham are both strong characters, but we generally aren't concerned that boys will want to emulate the Sheriff instead of Robin.

One memorable strong female villain is Mrs. Coulter in Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, a series with two great female characters. She drives much of the conflict of these stories and there is little to like about her. She is manipulative, self-serving and amoral; she is also very strong and leaves no question about who makes the decisions in her life. It is interesting that Disney, who has been accused with some justification of turning out a string of female characters whose happiness depends on being saved by a handsome prince, has given us some memorable, if cartoonish, female villains like Cruella De Ville in *101 Dalmatians* and Madame Medusa from *The Rescuers*.

Being the main character isn't a prerequisite for being a strong character. Certainly a strong character can be the protagonist or antagonist, but a strong character can also share the stage or even play a smaller role. Corinna in Franny Billingsley's *The Folk Keeper* is clearly the center of attention. Although Val in Suzy McKee Charnas' *The Silver Glove* is the protagonist, her grandmother, also a strong character, has a critical role in the story. Hermione, in the *Harry Potter* books, is a great example of a strong female character playing a supporting role.

Another quality of the strong female character is an unwillingness to accept a traditional role or to avoid the untraditional just because that is the way things are done. Kel in Tamora Pierce's *Protector of the Small* series refuses to accept that a girl can't be a knight; Billingsley's Corinna won't accept that she can't be a Folk Keeper, and Princess Cimorene in Patricia Wrede's *Enchanted Forest Chronicles* would rather be eaten by a dragon than live the life of a proper princess. Corinna is forced to live for a time as a boy to do what she wants. Even with the greater freedom offered by fantasy, girls disguising themselves as boys to gain the freedom to act the way they want is a recurring theme.

While fantasy can allow greater freedom for females in non-traditional roles, being a strong character is about choices made regardless of the difficulty. This is a good spot to consider the question, what are the roles that strong female characters can play? The simple answer is that they can play any role that anyone would play in any fiction. But it seems to me that rather than identifying the roles that strong female characters can play, we should avoid creating such a list. What may at first seem like liberation to play new roles becomes nothing more than a new larger cage. I chose to focus on fantasy, in part, specifically because of the greater freedom it offered. Because fantasy isn't 'real,' readers are generally more willing to put aside their biases or assumptions about the roles females should play. Acknowledging that

females can, in theory, play any role, it may be more useful to consider the types of roles I found in the books I chose. A character can be a very ordinary person, like Sara in Betty Levin's *Mercy's Mill*, who is thrust into a very unusual situation when she tries to help a boy who is stranded out of his time or she can be a dragon-killer and questing hero like Aerin in Robin McKinley's *The Hero and the Crown*. Regardless of what I or other characters think of her, a strong character doesn't always see herself as particularly unusual. Pippi Longstocking may sometimes wonder why others are acting strangely, but she sees nothing out of the ordinary in her own behavior. Tamora Pierce's books are overflowing with exceptional characters that, if asked what motivated them to act, would respond with a puzzled look and answer that they were just doing what needed to be done. The previously mentioned Mrs. Coulter from Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy was the finest female villain I came across. She absolutely sees herself as exceptional, a unique person in her world, and she expects to be regarded that way by others. Having just argued against creating a list of the roles that female characters **can** play, I believe there may be value in looking at the roles they do play in the fantasy fiction I selected for this guide. Rather than creating a formal, rigid set of categories, my goal is to create groups of similar roles. The categories I selected are certainly not mutually exclusive and I'm sure that good arguments could be made to move any number of books from one category to another or to place them in more than one category.

Roles of strong female characters in selected fantasy fiction

The ordinary person thrust into extraordinary circumstances describes characters in many, maybe even most of the selected books. Repeatedly we meet girls who live very ordinary lives, lives that we can recognize as similar to our own, who find themselves faced with circumstances far from ordinary. The great thing about a character like this is that a girl, having recognized herself in a character, can wonder how she would react if she were thrust into those extraordinary circumstances. Though many of the selected books could fit more than one category, the following examples of an ordinary person thrust into extraordinary circumstances are ones that don't obviously fall into one of the other categories.

Winnie Foster from Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting* is a great example of a character in this category. Winnie lives an unremarkable life until she finds a spring whose waters give eternal life and meets a family who drank from it. The unexpected encounter forces her to consider questions of life and death, and right and wrong that any of us could struggle with. Any of the characters from Edward Eager's books fit this category. In each book a set of ordinary children stumble into a chance to use magic, though it never works quite like they expect. In Louise Cooper's *The Boggart*, Emily and her brother have no special powers, but they develop a relationship with an ancient mischievous spirit. Before Maggie, in Sylvia Cassedy's *Behind the Attic Wall*, befriends a pair of dolls the most unusual thing about her was the number of schools she had been kicked out of.

Closely related to the ordinary person thrust into extraordinary circumstances is **the reluctant hero**. The reluctant hero is also an ordinary person thrust into extraordinary circumstances, but there is an expectation that they must act to save someone or something. The

reluctant hero's first reaction is usually something like this is too big for me, or why me? Similar to books with an ordinary person thrust into extraordinary circumstances, the reader of a book with a reluctant hero can consider how they would respond; could they act, would they act?

My favorite example of the reluctant hero is Meg in Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*. Meg is more than reluctant; she fights the responsibility that falls to her. With the fate of her father, little brother and maybe even the Earth in her hands, she wants someone else to take the responsibility. But in the end, she does what needs to be done. Meg is faced with similar challenges in *The Wind in the Door* and remains just as reluctant a hero. Another reluctant hero is Val in Suzy McKee Charnas's *The Bronze King*. Val isn't as violently opposed to being a hero as Meg is, but she doesn't understand why she should be the one to have to save the Earth. She is sure there is some kind of mistake. In the succeeding books, *The Silver Glove* and *The Golden Thread*, Val becomes a little more used to the idea of being a hero, but never embraces it. In Gail Carson Levine's *The Two Princesses of Bamarre*, Addie is timid and quiet unlike her sister, Meryl, who is brave and adventurous. Meryl is prepared to save her kingdom from the Gray Death, until she too becomes sick. Saving her sister and the kingdom is left to Addie. Though she is certain that she is not capable of such a task, love of her sister forces her into action. In Robin McKinley's *The Blue Sword*, Harry desperately wants a change in her life, but doesn't see herself as a hero. Nevertheless, she finds herself, Blue Sword in hand, going to war against tremendous odds as the Hillfolk's Damalur-sol or Lady Hero. Mel and her brother promise their dying father that they will restore their mother's family to the throne in Sherwood Smith's *Crown Duel*. Mel would never have considered action except for that promise. She turns out to be the stronger of the two, though she would not only deny being a reluctant hero, she would deny being a hero at all.

A few books have **characters that are unaware that anything is unusual**. In these books the reader and other characters are aware that something unusual is happening, but the character in question isn't. Unlike the preceding categories, this one doesn't really allow speculation by the reader on how they would act. It does allow for fun or interesting situations where a female character can play a strong role. I really enjoyed Georgie in Jane Langton's *The Fledgling*. Four-year-old Georgie is certain she could fly if only she could figure it out. When a goose helps her to do just that, she isn't at all surprised because all along she expected to fly. Readers and Georgie's neighbors don't share the same expectation. Pippi Longstocking, in the three books bearing her name lives a very unusual life, but she has no sense that anything out of the ordinary happens. I think part of Pippi's appeal to younger readers is that she is unaware of the extraordinary events that occur wherever she goes.

A fourth category is **fairy tale characters**. These characters are very familiar to us from their roles in fairy tales, stories with a strong presence in our culture. Unlike the fairy tale characters we know, these are well-developed characters that feel like people we could know or be. Their problems are real and unlike in most fairy tales they actively seek solutions. These fairy tales revisited provide some balance to the message received in traditional tales, stories with helpless female characters whose lives are changed only through rescue by a man. In this category are some books I enjoyed very much, including three excellent books by Robin McKinley that take fresh looks at fairy tales. Remarkably, she successfully revisited *Beauty and the Beast* twice with *Beauty: A Retelling of the Story of Beauty and the Beast* and *Rose Daughter*. She also gave new life to *Sleeping Beauty* with her *Spindle's End*. I'm not aware that Gail Carson Levine's *Ella Enchanted* is a retelling of an actual fairy tale, but it sounds like one and may leave you wishing that it had been. Patricia Wrede's four books in *The Enchanted*

Forest Chronicles are not based specifically on any fairy tales, but Wrede repeatedly pokes fun at the fairy tale canon as we follow the adventures of Cimorene, a princess who has no interest in acting like a proper princess.

Fantasy is home to a number of female **questing heroes**. Like Ulysses searching for home or the knights in King Arthur's court seeking the Holy Grail, these characters undertake long, difficult, even perilous journeys in search of something. Arguably the mother of the female quest stories is L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*. The Dorothy of the page is stronger and more of a leader than the better-known screen Dorothy. Like Ulysses, she travels a long way and faces many difficulties in her quest to find her way home. Gwinna from Barbara Helen Berger's *Gwinna* sees a mountain that is invisible to others and hears music that no one else hears. She leaves her home to seek the source of the music. Aerin in Robin McKinley's *The Hero and the Crown*, though daughter to the king, is left behind when he goes to war, because in Damar women don't fight. In his absence, Aerin becomes a renowned dragon-killer. Acclaimed though she is, Aerin, still not content, leaves to seek the lost crown, source of all that is good in Damar. Sabriel in Garth Nix's *Sabriel* travels over the wall that divides two kingdoms, one with magic, the other without and into Death to find her father. In Sherwood Smith's aptly named *Wren's Quest*, Wren battles mountains, weather and magic to find her family and then her best friend.

In the section, "What is a Strong Female Character?" I mentioned **girls disguising themselves as boys** to gain freedom to act outside of cultural norms. In these books girls live as boys, sometimes for years, to be able to do things that girls don't do. Corinna from Franny Billingsley's *The Folk Keeper* masquerades as Corin, because only boys can be Folk Keepers. Alanna in Tamora Pierce's books *Alanna*, *The First Adventure* and *In the Hand of the Goddess* is determined to be a knight. She enters training as a boy named Alan, because girls aren't

allowed. The *Alanna* books wrestle with questions of fairness in limitations on the roles girls can play. In Vivian Vende Velde's *Dragon's Bait* Alys disguises herself as a boy as she seeks revenge against the townspeople who offered her as a sacrifice to a dragon, because girls don't travel.

Some characters I thought of as **foxes** – wily, planning and scheming. I don't intend this as a negative label, just as an indication that they cause change in subtle intellectual ways. Both Matilda in Roald Dahl's *Matilda* and Sophie in his *The BFG* are at home in this category. Though both are young girls, they change the world around them in big ways primarily by thinking and planning. Rizka in Lloyd Alexander's *Gypsy Rizka* is almost Machiavellian in her manipulation of the town officials. Though she is often blamed, rarely can events be directly attributed to her actions.

Many of the characters are **discontent with their lives**. They don't want to live the lives they are being told they must. Rather than continue unsatisfactory lives, they act to change, sometimes at great risk to themselves. Lenora in Carol Matas and Perry Nodelman's *Of Two Minds* has the ability, like everyone in her country, to make things real by thinking. By consensus and tradition, the powers aren't used. Lenora can't accept what she believes is the incredible stupidity of not using their abilities. In Eloise McGraw's *The Moorchild*, Moql doesn't feel that she fits in with the villagers. She leaves and finds that there is good reason for her discontentment. Kestrel in William Nicholson's *The Wind Singer* lives in a land where your status and treatment are determined by a never-ending series of tests. Convinced that there must be a better way to live, she leaves even though she has no idea where to go or even where she can go. Sylvie in Roderick Townley's *The Great Good Thing* is a character in a book. The characters believe that the book is the world and they are there to play their parts over and over.

Sylvie feels she needs to accomplish something, a great good thing, before she can ever be content with her life. So far, I have avoided using books in more than one category, but you may recall that I didn't intend the categories to be mutually exclusive though I did avoid repetition in order to highlight a larger number of books. I'm going to make an exception by again highlighting Wrede's *The Enchanted Forest Chronicles*. If I had to pick just one character from the one hundred books to represent the strong female character, it would be Princess Cimorene, so I don't feel too badly giving her double duty. Cimorene is so determined to avoid life as a proper princess that is willing to take her chances with dragons, dragons she assumes will eat her, rather than stay at home.

Why should we care about the availability of strong female characters?

Earlier I related the story about my daughter questioning the scarcity of girls in the books we were reading. That the question even occurred to her implies the hole (a hole I think I grew up with and that I will talk about shortly) she perceived in my selections. I don't think it occurred to her that there was any lack of books with girls in them; she just wondered why I wasn't reading them. What message is sent to girls – and boys – by the absence of strong female characters? How many readers don't even note the absence as their view of the world is being subtly influenced? It seems to me that an absence of strong female characters can't help but shape how girls and boys see their world, leading not just to an expectation, but also to an unspoken, maybe even unthought, assumption that boys, not girls, are leaders and decision makers.

As I think back to my youth I struggle to recall any books that I read with the kind of characters I have included here. What if I broaden my scope to include television and movies? I remember a class trip to see the movie *Oliver*. One of my enduring memories is of Bill beating his girlfriend to death (out of our sight) for helping Oliver to escape. I know she had a name, but I can only remember her as Bill's girlfriend. She had a moment of strength, but was promptly and ruthlessly punished for it. My family went to see *Mary Poppins*, one of the books I've included. The film Mary is a strong character, not as strong as in the book, but still – she is a nanny, a very traditional role. What about television? My earliest television memories, in the early Sixties, are like many, I suppose, of cartoons. As I think of the Warner Brothers and Hanna-Barbera dominated cartoons that I watched, I am now struck by the scarcity of female characters. Yogi Bear occasionally tried to rescue his girlfriend, Cindy, from some predicament. An unnamed cat repeatedly tried to avoid the amorous advances of the skunk Pepe le Pew.

Granny would save Tweety from Sylvester. Male characters overwhelmingly dominated the cartoons. Casper's friend, Wendy the good little witch, stands out a little from the crowd for rebelling against her aunts' wishes for her to be bad. I recall Natasha as more or less an equal partner with Boris Badenov in *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*. In shows other than cartoons Mrs. Cleaver in *Leave it to Beaver*, like many television mothers of the time, took care of her husband and sons. Jeannie in *I Dream of Jeannie*, with all of her powers, only wants to take care of her master, Major Nelson. I do recall my mother enjoying *The Avengers*, a slightly shocking show because of the leather clad Diana Rigg beating up bad guys.

Today I see less television and fewer movies than in the past making me something less than a perfect judge of change, but I have noted signs. Diana Rigg playing a law enforcement role in *The Avengers* was a novelty, but today on a show like *NYPD Blue* women in the police squad room are numerous and taken for granted. A recent movie, *Laura Croft, Tomb Raider*, stars a woman in an action-oriented adventure. *Space Jam*, with both real and cartoon characters, includes a female counterpart to Bugs Bunny. She is the best basketball player among the Toons. In the recent film version of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* the action at a crisis point is given to Arwen, an elf princess. This example is particularly interesting because they changed the book, apparently a specific attempt to create an act of female bravery. I occasionally see the cartoons my kids watch. Angelica in *Rugrats* isn't a very likable character, but clearly she is a decision maker as she runs her life and the lives of the kids around her. Similarly, Helga in *Hey, Arnold* schemes to shape the world to her vision. *The Powerpuff Girls* battle assorted bad guys.

Video games didn't exist when I was young, but have a huge presence today. Boys have been the primary users of video games, but the hottest game in recent years, *The Sims*, has

attracted both girls and boys. Interesting parallels between the ideas I have presented and the success of *The Sims* emerge in Bob Thompson's article "Guys and Digital Dolls" in the April 14, 2002 issue of *The Washington Post Magazine*.

"To simplify a complicated argument: Over most of the short history of digital gaming, a cadre of mostly male designers has developed products 'based on their own tastes and cultural assumptions.' The result: lots of games that serve up large helpings of violent action with mostly males doing the acting. If women show up at all, it's usually as victims or rewards."

"The reason why this is so appealing to women is because we didn't *try* to make it appealing to women," Wolosenko says firmly, summing up. "It was just about life. And women as well as men are experts on life."

The main points seem to be the same, historically a male perspective has dominated and change is possible by creating books or games that allow room for both boys and girls to enjoy them through their own perspectives.

It seems to me that change in female roles is happening and I think it is possible that the baby boom generation saw or felt the absence of females playing meaningful roles in books and other media and did something about it. I'm not suggesting something equivalent to the civil rights movement, but quietly, the baby boomers grew up and became writers, filmmakers and the audience for the books and films they are creating and began to include females in a different way. We are seeing, not explosive change, but a gradual reshaping of how we see the world.

I don't believe that reading about girl heroes will magically create self-esteem in a girl who lacks it. I don't believe that reading about Aerin slaying dragons and finding the lost crown of Damar in Robin McKinley's *The Hero and the Crown* will propel girls into a life of action anymore than I expect every boy who enjoyed *Robin Hood* to devote his life to fighting corruption. A lack of strong female characters doesn't prevent a girl from becoming strong any more than living in a poor neighborhood with few role models prevents a child from succeeding. We can correctly point out that Amelia Earhart was not kept from a life of adventure because of a lack of fictional heroes like herself, but she seems to stand out as an exception. It seems to me

that it is more important to ask the name of the second and third female pilots who come to mind. Saying that a lack of strong female characters doesn't prevent a girl from being strong is not nearly the same as saying that an abundance of strong female characters might not increase the chances of a child breaking with tradition or expectations. Or even that expectations might begin to change.

I do believe that reading about strong characters can reveal possibilities and open doors for the reader, doors that may lead to action. Strong female characters should not automatically be expected to be role models for young girls. Girls should have the opportunity to see females as naturally occurring heroes and doers, not just as explicitly presented role models. I think we must distinguish between a list of real women who have changed the world and a body of fiction with strong female characters. The first parades a list of exceptional women as shining beacons of inspiration. The second shows strong females as an accepted, ordinary part of life.

This is not just about girls. Boys need to see strong female characters too. Books that are obviously intended to show a girl as a hero are likely to be perceived by boys as "girl books;" but books that boys can enjoy that just happen to have a girl driving the action may foster a more natural acceptance that the leader isn't always a boy. The books I chose are, in my opinion at least, enjoyable to read – not enjoyable for girls, just enjoyable. Even though I am a male, a father and in my forties, I would gladly read three-quarters of these books again. I had in fact read approximately one-fifth of them before this project existed. The ultimate goal should not be to create or identify a set of books for girls, but to include girls, in a meaningful way, in the books we read.

Girls will continue to be, and I strongly believe should be, exposed to books that have endured, books that have been admired and enjoyed for years even though boys dominate them.

Historically, strong female characters are not well represented in these ‘classics,’ but the goal, I believe, should not be to supplant the male-dominated, time-tested books, but to broaden the selection, to add some balance. My hope is that some of the books I have identified will pass the test of time and enrich the body of books girls and boys will be introduced to.

Why fantasy?

If we accept the premise that there is a cultural expectation that boys are more naturally leaders, inclined to action and heroic, and girls less so, then part of the means of change is creating an environment where those expectations are more easily overcome. Fantasy by its very nature of not being ‘real’ allows the reader to more readily accept things that are not consistent with expectations of our world. We typically don’t expect a female to lead an army, though we can scratch for a few examples. Joan of Arc was real, but feels like fantasy. There seems to be little historical basis for the Amazons and even if there is historical basis for the ancient Irish queens, they are for most people more legend than an accepted part of our world. Fantasy, because it isn’t real, makes it okay for a woman to lead an army into battle. That is not to suggest fantasy must be about wars or slaying dragons. Princess Cimorene lives with dragons – by choice. She finds life with dragons preferable to playing the proper role of a princess. Because it is a fantasy we accept the dragons, but the story is really about a girl’s unwillingness to accept a traditional role. Georgie in *The Fledgling* is very ordinary except for flying with a goose. Fantasy allows us to more easily read a story without raising the question, consciously or unconsciously, would a girl be doing this?

Strong female characters are only meaningful if they are in books that kids will want to read. I wasn’t looking for political or sociological texts demanding that girls be allowed to do whatever boys are or explicitly urging women to throw off their shackles. Fantasy can be fun; allowing the imagination to run free in a world, no matter how similar, that is different from ours. It is fun to imagine flying with a goose. That it is a little girl doing the flying becomes secondary.

Have you experienced a moment when the sky was so bright and clear that it seems like you are looking through a freshly washed window or that the protective plastic covering has been stripped off? Fantasy is like that; it can strip away the protective covering on the world and let us more easily see what is real. Like spending time with a long-time co-worker in a different environment and finding out she is different than what you thought, fantasy can provide a new context that allows you to look at yourself and our world in a different way, maybe even more honest way. Carl Tomlinson says, “Although the events could not happen in real life, modern fantasies often contain truths that help the reader to understand the world,” and “When reading a work of fantasy, children can delight in imagining other worlds and the limitless possibilities that can be opened up in the human mind. Fantasy enables the reader to see realities that extend beyond the normal range of human vision.” (121)

When we read fantasy we accept events, actions and ideas that we ordinarily wouldn't. Opening our minds to the out-of-the-ordinary makes it easier to accept females in unexpected roles. Fantasy is sometimes disparagingly called escapist, but ‘escaping reality’ can be considered as a natural and necessary activity. “Fantasy is ‘escapist’ literature, which, by the way, is badly needed in these sordid days. Escapist literature is somewhat akin to dreams. If you dream a dream with a happy ending, you wake up and are happy to have dreamed it. If it's a horrible dream, you wake up and you're glad you're awake.” Elliot (16)

What is fantasy?

The identification of fantasy as a distinct category of literature is a fairly recent phenomenon, but the roots of fantasy are deeply entwined with the roots of all literature. *Beowulf*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy* are all ancestors of modern fantasy. Fairy tales and myth have a prominent place in the family tree, playing a significant part in developing acceptance of the fantastic in otherwise ordinary lives.

C.W. Sullivan III identifies some closer relations. "These four nineteenth-century novels – *Frankenstein*, *The Water Babies*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, and *The Wood Beyond the World* – are important because they set the standards for the two major branches of fantasy popular in the twentieth-century: science fiction and High Fantasy...These novels establish the subject matters and the styles, the patterns and the themes, of the fantasy that is read today." (104) Butts Written in 1865, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* stands out as an early fantasy written for children, but it also stands out in its uniqueness for the time.

Fantasy as we know it is to a great extent a product of the Twentieth Century with significant development in the second half. Around the turn-of-the-century talking animal fantasies like Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902) and Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), and a little later *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) began to appear. It wasn't until after World War II with the publication of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *Pippi Longstocking* that modern fantasy truly emerges.

Definitions of fantasy and literary argument over the fine points of those definitions are abundant. My preference is for a simple definition, one that allows the identification of fantasy by quick reaction rather than laborious analysis, much like noting the passing flight of a goldfinch without examining its beak, feet and markings. Kathryn Hume provided such a

definition when she said, “By fantasy I mean the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal.” (xii) The critical idea, I think, is that the story must contain an element of the unreal; something that is not generally recognized as part of our world. The magnitude of the unreal is irrelevant. Georgie’s world in *The Fledgling* is unremarkable except that with the help of a goose feather Georgie is able to fly. In contrast, though J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings Trilogy* bears strong resemblance to ours, it is heavily populated by hobbits, elves, dwarves, wizards and orcs, rings of power and other forms of magic that make it very different from ours.

If we keep the definition simple, fantasy is a broad category. For my purposes I chose to, without narrowing the definition of fantasy, place some limits on what I would include, omitting books that could be considered fantasy, but also could be identified as notable subset of fantasy. Prominent among them is science fiction.

Though there are strong arguments that science fiction is a subset of fantasy, I chose to focus on the distinctions rather than the similarities and exclude science fiction for my purposes. Wishing to avoid a protracted discussion of the relationship between fantasy and science fiction, I will focus on what I believe is the one crucial difference. Fantasy accepts the fantastic as unexplainable – it just is. Even if explanations are not apparent, science fiction assumes that scientific and technological explanations are available.

I excluded two other prevalent subsets of fantasy, ghost and talking animal stories. The explanation for the fantastic in all ghost stories is more or less the same; somehow connected to our world is another level of existence or semi-existence. That idea is so commonly understood and, in fact, accepted by some as true, that my desire to focus on stories with an element of the fantastic in order to give girls greater freedom to escape traditional roles is undermined. I chose

not to include talking animal stories because I wanted stories with girls, not with rabbits or squirrels standing in for girls. Sharp readers will undoubtedly note that I have in fact included books with communication between humans and animals including E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, Janet Lisle's *Forest* and a number of Tamora Pierce's. Though there is communication with animals, the animals clearly remain animals in a human world. That they can communicate with humans is fantastic in contrast to books like Richard Adams' *Watership Down* or Brian Jacques *Redwall* series where the talking animals can be regarded as substitutes for humans.

The Criteria for Selecting the Books

My approach to selecting these books was admittedly subjective. Following no rigorous standards or means of evaluations, I looked for books that fit the general concept.

1) I wanted books that were enjoyable to read; books could be read more than once. I'm not going to suggest that I enjoyed every book equally. I wouldn't want to read the Edward Eager books or the Pippi Longstocking books again, but I recognize that beginning readers may find enjoyment where I don't. I found authors that I had not been familiar with, but that I enjoyed immensely including Suzy McKee Charnas, Louise Cooper, Robin McKinley, Tamora Pierce and Sherwood Smith. I revisited very enjoyable books by Monica Furlong and Madeline L'Engle. As we mature intellectually it is possible to learn to appreciate books that we don't enjoy, but younger readers need to enjoy what they are reading.

2) Related to being enjoyable reading I wanted books with staying power. I can't pretend to predict with certainty which books will still be read fifty years from now. Some books have already demonstrated staying power. *The Wizard of Oz* is more than one hundred years old, *Mary Poppins* more than seventy, *Charlotte's Web* and Eager's books are approximately fifty years old and L'Engle's books are thirty to forty and all of them are still readily available. There are some newer books on the list that I do expect to still be on library shelves in fifty years including Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting*, McKinley's *The Blue Sword* and *The Hero and the Crown*, and Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series.

3) They had to have strong female characters. I already discussed the idea of strong female characters at some length. These books contain quite a variety of characters,

some stronger than others, but all of them make their own decisions and aren't content to just let life happen to them.

4) The last criterion, of course, was that it be fantasy fiction. You may recall that I chose fantasy primarily for two reasons, to limit the eligible books to a manageable number and because fantasy, by virtue of not being 'real,' eases the acceptance of females in non-traditional roles. I defined fantasy elsewhere, but I do need to note that possibly I stretched my own definition with Lloyd Alexander's *Gypsy Rizka* and Janet Taylor Lisle's *Afternoon if the Elves*. I liked the books so much that if I stretched a bit, I am willing to say so be it.

I probably should mention some high profile books that don't appear in this guide and the reasons for their absence. Where is Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*? *Alice*, the book, deserves recognition as one of the very early fantasies and I highly recommend reading it, but Alice the character doesn't fit my criteria. Her adventures are really a series of accidents that happen to her. She doesn't drive events. I included only three of the seven books of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Much as I like these books, I struggled with C.S. Lewis's portrayal of girls. He often seems patronizing and limits his female characters even as he includes them. Lewis let loose of two of his characters enough that I thought I could reasonably include them. That brings me to the exclusions that hurt the most, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. I'm a big fan of these books and absolutely recommend reading them, but they are overwhelmingly populated with male characters. Females are almost nonexistent. There actually are two females that could qualify as strong characters, but he gives them very little room to work.

If I have left off one of your favorites, don't assume that I thought it was unworthy. I am still discovering books and authors; I just may not have found yours yet. For a quick start into fantasy fiction with strong female characters, simply find Tamora Pierce on your library or bookstore shelves. She wrote eighteen of the one hundred books I describe for you and left me anxious to read whatever is coming next.

One Hundred Books

For each book I have provided the author, publisher, the year of publication and a description. The descriptions are in two parts, a brief summary of the story and my thoughts about the character(s) and the book including an indication of the difficulty. I intentionally kept my difficulty rating very simple to keep from discouraging readers from trying a book that is ‘too hard.’ Even limiting myself to elementary, middle and high school ratings, I suspect that if I have erred it will be on the side of underestimating the readiness of readers. Use my ratings as nothing more than a general guide. In some cases, the rating may also reflect my concern that the language or certain topics may be considered inappropriate. Specific comments are included for those books. Of course, the final judgment is yours.

Adler, C.S. *Good-Bye, Pink Pig*. New York: Avon Books, 1985.

Fifth-grader, Amanda is quiet, shy, unexceptional, and doesn’t measure up to her mother’s expectations. When Amanda talks her mother doesn’t quite seem to hear. Amanda loves her older brother, but he isn’t around much. She does have one friend at school, but is worried about losing her. Amanda does have Pink Pig, a rose quartz miniature that comes to life and takes Amanda to Little World where Pink Pig comes to life.

With quiet strength Amanda faces her problems in this world. In the Little World, Amanda stands up for others against the trouble-making Wizard when no one else is willing to. *Good-Bye, Pink Pig* should be accessible to many middle school readers and ambitious elementary school readers.

Adler, C.S. *Help, Pink Pig*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1990.

In this sequel to *Good-Bye, Pink Pig*, Amanda is reunited with her mother in a Los Angeles apartment after six months with her grandmother in Schenectady. Amanda misses her grandmother, feels like she doesn't satisfy her mother, has no friends in her new school, and has trouble with a bully, but she does get Pink Pig, a rose quartz miniature, back from her mother. With the magical Pink Pig, Amanda returns to the Little World where she helps to resolve new troubles.

Amanda is an ordinary girl with ordinary problems. She handles her problems without obvious heroism or ease, but she does handle them. *Help, Pink Pig* should be accessible to many middle school readers and ambitious elementary school readers.

Ahlberg, Allan. *The Giant Baby*. London: Viking, 1994.

Alice wants a baby brother, but her parents aren't interested in adding to the family. Unexpectedly, a giant baby is left at their doorstep. Adding a baby to a family causes change; adding a giant baby causes giant change. Alice thwarts the kidnapping of the baby by a circus, takes care of the baby with a host of friends, changes the heart of a government bureaucrat, and saves the baby from a possibly mad scientist. After all of her efforts, Alice loses the baby back to his mother, but finds her wish fulfilled another way.

Alice plans and acts to protect her new baby brother, taking on anyone who threatens him. In addition to her own actions, Alice is a leader, rallying others to act for the benefit of the giant baby. *The Giant Baby* should be accessible to many elementary school readers and can be read to even younger readers.

Alexander, Lloyd. *The Arkadians*. New York: Puffin, 1995.

Joy-in-the-Dance, daughter of the Lady of Wild Things, is Woman-Who-Talks-to-Snakes, an oracle. After her prophecy to the King of Arkadia is badly received, Joy-in-the-Dance finds herself on the run and her life suddenly entangled with Lucian, a one-time clerk in the royal counting house, who is also on the run. Among others, they fall in with a group that includes Fronto, a poet turned jackass, and Op, a chieftain turned scapegoat. Joy-in-the-Dance and Lucian avoid their pursuers as they try to help the poet regain his human form.

Arkadia is a land with open animosity between devotees of the Lady and followers of the King who believe women don't understand the natural role of men as leaders. Joy-in-the-Dance is intelligent, unflappable and resourceful. Faced a difficult situation in a hostile environment, Joy-in-the-Dance's efforts lead to significant changes in Arkadia. *The Arkadians* should be accessible to some elementary school readers and is a good book to read even to children who aren't ready to read it on their own.

Alexander, Lloyd. *Gypsy Rizka*. New York: Puffin, 1999.

Rizka lives on the edge, on the edge of town, on the edge of society and always on the edge of trouble. The town officials despise her and are always looking for a way to get rid of her, but Rizka is quietly loved by most of the citizens of Greater Dunitsa. Rizka gives both groups good reasons for their feelings. She delights in tormenting bullies, the pompous and the overly officious, and spends much of her time and energy finding ways to make their lives miserable, often to the benefit of their victims. All of this is Rizka's way of passing time while she waits for the return of her Gypsy father. Though he left her when she was very young, she

remains certain that he is returning for her. The Gypsies do return and the townspeople openly express their affection for Rizka, leaving her with a difficult decision.

Gypsy Rizka has the feel of a not quite believable folk tale or legend, but just barely qualifies as fantasy. Rizka is such a great character and the book is so fun I included it anyway. Rizka is a trickster and lives life by her rules as she confidently fights bullies and helps those who need it. *Gypsy Rizka* should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Babbitt, Natalie, *Tuck Everlasting*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975.

Ten-year old Winnie Foster goes into the woods and discovers a spring whose waters grant eternal life and meets a family who drank from it. The Tucks, as far as they know, are the only people in the world who know the secret of the spring. They temporarily kidnap Winnie to allow them time to convince her not to drink the water, to explain that eternal life is not as attractive as one might think. Though he doesn't understand it all, one other person knows that the Tucks are special, a man in the yellow suit who has spent his life searching for them and their secret. Planning to become wealthy by selling the water, the man in the yellow suit tries to force the cooperation of the Winnie and the Tucks, and ends up dead at the hand of Mae Tuck. Winnie decides to help Mae and the rest of the Tuck family escape and is left with a decision; should she drink the water?

Winnie is an ordinary girl caught up in extraordinary circumstances. She makes a difficult decision, choosing between what she believes is right and what would be expected of her, then acts on her decision, putting herself in danger. *Tuck Everlasting* is beautifully written and raises very interesting questions of right and wrong. *Tuck Everlasting* should be accessible to many middle school readers and to ambitious elementary school readers.

L. Frank, Baum. *The Wizard of Oz*. London: Puffin Books, 1982 (1900).

Many readers will already be familiar with Dorothy from the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. Transported by a tornado, Dorothy finds herself in a strange land far from home. Grateful to her for killing the witch who had plagued them, the local inhabitants urge her to see a far off wizard who may be able to help her get home. She travels great distances through unfamiliar and dangerous territories. Along the way, she kills another wicked witch, frees a race of slaves, faces down a lion, stands up to a wizard, and helps several creatures realize their dreams. After all she goes through, Dorothy is still left uncertain how to get home.

Baum's Dorothy is stronger and more of a leader than the Dorothy of the movie. She is an early example of a female on the heroic quest. Dorothy is single-mindedly focused on one goal – getting back home. Though the book doesn't dwell on her difficulties, she faces significant hardship and danger, not of her own making, in an attempt to get home.

Berger, Barbara Helen. *Gwinna*. New York: Philomel Books, 1990.

Childless and unhappy, a couple turns to the Mother of the Owls for help. She agrees to help with the understanding that the couple must send her the child when she turns twelve years old. Their daughter is a joy to them and because they don't want to lose her they try to hide Gwinna's growing wings and they don't send her to the Mother of the Owls when the time comes. Gwinna finds her way to the owls anyway and eventually leaves on a journey to find a mountain that she sees and music that she hears, but others don't. She flies to the far off mountain and discovers the source of the music. Gwinna would be content to stay forever at the mountain, but she had promised to come back.

Gwinna gives up her family, home and friends to go on a quest for the source of the music. Though she goes through physical hardship and significant change, she doesn't forget her parents, friends and the Mother of the Owls. *Gwinna* has the feel of a folk tale, but it is an original story. Frequent color illustrations may attract the younger reader. *Gwinna* should be accessible to many elementary school readers and is a nice book to read to children who aren't quite ready to read it on their own.

Billingsley, Franny. *The Folk Keeper*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 1999.

Corinna, whose hair grows two inches every night and who feels some strange connection to the sea, is a Folk Keeper. She feeds the Folk and absorbs their anger, quieting their destructive urges and protecting the estate. Because Folk Keepers are always boys, Corinna masquerades as Corin. Sent away under mysterious circumstances as a baby, she is brought back to her home at the deathbed request of her father. Corinna returns as the new Folk Keeper, still ignorant of the identity of her parents and unknowingly gets involved in a life-threatening dispute over ownership of the estate. Corinna discovers that she is one of the Sealfolk, able to live both as a human on land and as a seal in the water. After her sealskin is damaged she is forced to choose life as one or the other.

Corinna is strong-willed, brave and fiercely independent. Caught up in difficult and changing circumstances, she always remains in control of her life. Corinna would not understand the concept of letting someone else make her choices. *The Folk Keeper* is a book of some complexity, but should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Cassedy, Sylvia. *Behind the Attic Wall*. New York: Avon Books, 1983.

Maggie, a twelve-year old orphan, has been kicked out of boarding school after boarding school for being difficult and not fitting in. Kicked out again, Maggie is sent to stay with two great-aunts in a one-time boarding school for girls. Her aunts don't really want much to do with her, leaving Maggie with a great deal of time to herself. Maggie hears unexplained bits of conversation, but she can't tell from who or where they are coming from. The voices become clearer and more frequently heard until, at last, they lead her to a remote room occupied by two talking dolls. Maggie begins spending all of her free time with her new friends until her aunts discover her in the room. The dolls become lifeless and Maggie once again, is being sent away. Time is running out for Maggie to help the dolls back to life before she is sent away, probably never to see them again.

Maggie is strong-willed and independent, truly to a fault. In the dolls she finds the connection to others that she has been missing. *Behind the Attic Wall* should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Charnas, Suzy McKee. *The Bronze King*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985.

This is the first of three books about Valentine Marsh. Valentine's parents are divorced, she is worried about her schoolwork, the cool kids are picking on her, her friends seem to be changing, and things are disappearing. First her sandwich disappears, then a doorknob, her sneakers; one thing after another including a statue in Central Park. Valentine finds herself working with a fiddle-playing wizard and her magical grandmother to save the Earth from an evil monster.

Valentine says that she isn't a fighter, but she learns something about herself. She knowingly puts herself in danger, battles hoodlums and helps defeat a world-threatening monster. Valentine's grandmother is an impressive character as well. Language and some sexual references may make *The Bronze King* most appropriate for high school readers.

Charnas, Suzy McKee. *The Golden Thread*. New York: Bantam Books, 1989.

In this third of three books about Valentine Marsh, she struggles with her feelings about having magical powers. She and her friends join hands on a rooftop trying to send a New Year's comet to the universe. They succeed in sending a signal that draws what seems to be a very strange teenager, but turns out to a powerful alien who is willing and able to use her powers to wreak havoc as she searches for lost relatives. Val has been through two previous adventures with her magical and very resourceful grandmother, but this time her grandmother is in the hospital, near death, and the problem is in Val's hands.

In many ways Val seems like an ordinary teenager with ordinary teenage problems. Val stands out in her resourcefulness in dealing with situations that are quite out of the ordinary. She is determined, brave and not easily swayed by others, even when going along would seem to be the easier choice. *The Golden Thread* is a captivating, suspenseful story that should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Charnas, Suzy McKee. *The Silver Glove*. New York: Bantam Books, 1988.

In this second of three books about Valentine Marsh, Val and her magical grandmother fight a powerful wizard who steals souls to install in the bodies of casualties of his war with Sorcery Hall. The wizard, Dr. Brightner, needs the magical powers of Val, her mother and her

grandmother to strengthen his own powers. Granny is on the run and Val fails in her attempts to keep Brightner from romancing her mother and putting her under a spell, but stays free herself, protected by a magical glove given to her by her grandmother. Val and her grandmother end up fighting Brightner in Central Park at three o'clock in the morning in an attempt to rescue her mother and stop his scheme.

In many ways Val seems like an ordinary teenager with ordinary teenage problems. Val stands out in her resourcefulness in dealing with situations that are quite out of the ordinary. She is determined, brave and not easily swayed by others, even when going along would seem to be the easier choice. *The Silver Glove* is a captivating, suspenseful story that should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Cooper, Louise. *The Boggart*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books, 1993.

Emily and her younger brother Jessup visit Scotland and Castle Keep, a small castle on a lake inherited by her father from a distant relative, the last of the MacDevons. Unable to keep the castle, the family sells it and returns home to Toronto. They are accidentally accompanied home by a boggart, one of the Old Things, a mischievous spirit who has lived with the MacDevons for centuries. Back home Emily and Jessup become aware of the Boggart through his tricks, some of which get them in trouble. They develop a relationship with the Boggart and try to help him get back to his home in Scotland.

Emily and Jessup are more or less equal partners, each bringing their own skills and perspectives. Emily is an ordinary young girl for the most part. Her strengths are in her willingness to tackle a problem and stay with it until it is solved, and to depend on others, not to

lead her, but to help her. *The Boggart* is a fun to read book that should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Cooper, Louise. *The Boggart and the Monster*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books, 1997.

In this sequel to *The Boggart*, Emily and her brother go back to Scotland to visit Castle Keep and the Boggart. They find the Boggart who is overjoyed to find a relative, another of the Old Things. His cousin, Nessie, has forgotten how to shape change, trapping him in the shape of a plesiosaur in his long time home, Loch Ness. The Boggart, with Emily and others, encourage Nessie to return to more boggart-like behavior. While trying to relearn forgotten shape-shifting skills, Nessie is seen and pursued by a researcher, a reporter and tourists. Nessie needs the help of Emily and the others to escape and return to the proper life of a boggart.

Emily and Jessup are more or less equal partners, each bringing their own skills and perspectives. Emily is an ordinary young girl for the most part. Her strengths are in her willingness to tackle a problem and stay with it until it is solved, and to depend on others, not to lead her, but to help her. *The Boggart and the Monster* is a fun to read book that should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Cooper, Louise. *Seaward*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983.

Cally's parents are taken to the sea to be cured by a woman who tells Cally that they will soon meet again. Left alone for a couple of days while she waits for her aunt to come, Cally hears a singing voice that she thinks must sound like the sea and finds herself stepping through a mirror into another land where she meets Westerly who has come into the same land through a hidden door. Cally and Westerly are both trying to get to the sea, and they are pursued by Lady

Taranis, ruler of the world they are in, and the same lady who took away Cally's mother and father. Cally discovers that she is a Selkie with the ability to live in the sea as a seal or on land as a human. Together, Cally and Westerly make the difficult trip to the sea, only to be faced with choices between life and death, eternal unchanging life or an opportunity to grow, and finding their parents or staying together.

Cally is thrown into a difficult situation, but never gives up. She and Westerly jointly hold onto their plan of reaching the sea. Cally and Westerly are truly partners, each taking the lead at different times in their quest for the sea. *Seaward* should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Cooper, Louise. *The Sleep of Stone*. New York: Atheneum, 1991.

Ghryszmyxychtys, or Ghysla, is one of the Old Folk; shape-changing, long-lived creatures of magic not subject to human needs like food and shelter. Alone for centuries, Ghysla falls in love with Anyr, a human prince who likes to spend his time alone at the sea with the seals and other animals. Afraid to approach Anyr in her natural shape, human-like, but with wings, sharp teeth and owl-like eyes, Ghysla goes to him as a seal. Thrilled with her success, Ghysla changes into a doe and a songbird to spend more time near him. Convinced that her love is returned, she is confused when she hears Anyr is to marry. Believing the marriage must be against his will she turns Anyr's bride-to-be to stone and takes her shape and her place at the wedding. During the ceremony her plan falls apart and she is heartbroken to discover that Anyr doesn't love her. Following the turmoil she caused, Ghysla finds another of the Old Folk and has to choose between allowing Anyr's bride to remain in stone or to release her by turning to stone herself.

Ghysla isn't good, at least not in human terms. She does have the strength of character to pursue something she wants against great odds and then to give it up for the benefit of another. Ghysla isn't human, but it isn't hard to identify with her and to read with interest about internal struggle. I thought the book was good enough to stretch my criteria a little to include it. *The Sleep of Stone* should be accessible to most middle school readers.

Cresswell, Helen. *The Secret World Of Polly Flint*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1982.

Polly's mother so often says, "Polly – don't", that Polly thinks her name should be Polly Don't instead of Polly Flint. Polly and her parents are forced to move to another village with her Aunt Em after her father is hurt in a mining accident. Intrigued by a local legend of a vanished village and the possibility of hearing their church bells if you listen to the ground by the maypole on Christmas Day, Polly is determined to find the village. She sees dancers on May Day, hears the bells at Christmas and sees villagers who have "slipped the net of time", though no one else can. One family from the vanished village gets stuck in Polly's time and fears they will never go home. Polly comes up with a plan that may allow them to return.

Polly lives a very ordinary life except for her interactions with the villagers from another time. She handles her own difficult situation well, but even more important she is the one who pieces together the bits of information and figures out a way to help the lost villagers. *The Secret World of Polly Flint* is fairly easy reading and should be accessible to many ambitious elementary school readers.

Dahl, Roald. *The BFG*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982.

Sophie is a little girl living in an orphanage. Very late one night, Sophie sees a skinny, black-cloaked giant peering in the second story windows of the houses on her street. Unfortunately the giant sees Sophie too. Reaching through her window he grabs her and takes her to his home in the land of the giants. Fortunately for Sophie, the BFG, short for Big Friendly Giant, is the one giant who thinks eating humans is wrong. The BFG doesn't want to be mean, but tells Sophie he can never let her go for fear that if his existence became known humans would come to kill him. Sophie creates a plan to stop the giants from eating people, to keep the BFG from being hurt and to get back home. To make it work all she needs to do is get the cooperation of the Queen of England.

Not only does Sophie keep her head in an unusual and frightening situation, she uses her head to take control when she is at a huge physical disadvantage. Dahl's humor, wordplay and unusual perspectives will appeal to many young readers. *The BFG* is a good book to read to young readers who may not be prepared to read a lot of unfamiliar words.

Dahl, Roald. *Matilda*. New York: Puffin Books, 1988.

Matilda is an extraordinarily mature and intelligent five-year old, and the daughter of extraordinarily bad parents, who are annoyed, even repulsed, by her intelligence. Her mother eats and watches television, while her father brags of cheating customers at his used car lot. The terrifying Miss Trunchbull, a bully who throws children out windows and dangles them by their ears, is the headmistress of Matilda's school. For a while Matilda uses her intelligence to quietly fight back. Then discovering that she has special powers, Matilda frees herself of her parents and Miss Trunchbull, and begins a new life with her teacher, Miss Honey.

Matilda wants to get along, but won't be bullied or let others dictate the course of her life. For Matilda, reading and learning are not something to be endured, but something to be cherished. *Matilda* should be accessible to ambitious elementary school readers.

Eager, Edward. *Half Magic*. New York: Harcourt, 1954.

Jane, Mark, Katherine and Martha are brother and sisters. Jane, the oldest, finds a coin that she initially assumes to be a nickel, but is in fact a magic talisman. Through the first accidental wishes they figure out that the wishes are only half-granted, often in some peculiar way. When they wish their cat could talk, it begins talking, but in gibberish. The kids gain better control over the results of their wishes, but still their adventures typically take some unexpected path. Catching moments of their comings and goings, their mother believes that she is going crazy. Before passing the magic charm on to the next user, the kids use their last few wishes to ease their mother's mind and to help her remarry.

Jane, Katherine and Martha don't stand out as unusual characters; in fact they seem very ordinary. Jane and Mark are the leaders, but that is only because they are the oldest. The strength of these characters is that each of their roles is just as significant as those of the boys. The motives and actions of each of the kids could easily be traded among them with no impact on the story. *Half Magic* is a pleasant, easy to read book that will be accessible to many elementary school readers.

Eager, Edward. *Knight's Castle*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1956.

Roger and Ann are sent to stay with their cousins Jack and Eliza for the summer. Roger takes his lead soldiers with him and one of them turns out to be magic. The combination of the

lead soldier and a present from his aunt of a castle and lead knights allows them to enter the world of the knights. They meet Ivanhoe, Robin Hood, Prince John and King Richard, go to battle and in one of Eager's frequent twists, they rescue three lead soldiers from Ann's neglected dollhouse dolls.

Roger, Ann, Jack and Eliza don't stand out as unusual characters; in fact they seem very ordinary. The girls are the youngest and to some extent suffer the typical bossing by their older brothers, but when the action starts the strength of these characters is revealed in roles that are just as significant as those of the boys. The motives and actions of each of the kids could easily be traded among them with no impact on the story. *Knight's Castle* is a pleasant, easy to read book that will be accessible to many elementary school readers.

Eager, Edward. *Magic by the Lake*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1957.

Jane, Mark, Katherine and Martha from *Half Magic* make a second appearance in this story about summer vacation at a lake house. Helped by a magic turtle they have some adventures including meeting a mermaid, having a run in with treasure-burying pirates and a trip to the South Pole. In one of Eager's twists, the group is saved from cannibals by the children-to-be of Katherine and Jane. For readers of other of Eager's books, the other side of that story is told in *The Time Garden*.

Jane, Katherine and Martha don't stand out as unusual characters; in fact they seem very ordinary. Jane and Mark are the leaders, but that is only because they are the oldest. The strength of these characters is that each of their roles is just as significant as those of the boys. The motives and actions of each of the kids could easily be traded among them with no impact

on the story. *Magic by the Lake* is a pleasant, easy to read book that will be accessible to many elementary school readers.

Eager, Edward. *Magic or Not?* New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1959.

Laura and her brother James move to a new house in the country and find a wishing well on their property. Along with their new friends Kip, Lydia and Gordy they experiment with the well's powers. Unlike Eager's other books, the rules of the magic are less clear. They don't wish themselves to an island with buried treasure or to another time, but a number of more ordinary wishes are fulfilled.

Laura and Lydia don't stand out as unusual characters; in fact they seem very ordinary. The strength of these characters is that each of their roles is just as significant as those of the boys. The motives and actions of each of the kids could easily be traded among them with no impact on the story. *Magic or Not?* is a pleasant, easy to read book that will be accessible to many elementary school readers.

Eager, Edward. *Seven-Day Magic*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1962.

Five kids from two families living on opposite sides of the same street are friends. Three of the five are girls: Susan, the fifth grade president, captain of the girl's soccer team and a good chess player, Abbie, the middle child, jolly and friendly, and Fredericka, the fierce-tempered baby of the family. On one of their frequent trips to the library Susan checks out a shabby red book with the title worn off of the cover. As they check out the librarian points out that it is a seven-day book. The beginning of the book is about the five kids, capturing their words and actions, but they are unable to open the beyond the moment just passed. Correctly guessing that

it is a magic book waiting for their wishes, they get caught up in a series of adventures driven by their impulsive wishes. At the end of a week they return the book now with a new gilt-lettered title, *Seven-Day Magic*.

Susan, Abbie and Fredericka don't stand out as unusual characters; in fact they seem very ordinary. The strength of these characters is that each of their roles is just as significant as those of the boys. The motives and actions of each of the kids could easily be traded among them with no impact on the story. *Seven-Day Magic* is a pleasant, easy to read book that will be accessible to many elementary school readers.

Eager, Edward. *The Time Garden*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1958.

While their parents are in England, Roger and Ann spend the summer with their cousins Jack and Eliza at house on the water near Boston. With the help of a talking toad and a variety of thymes they find in the garden the kids find that they can travel in time. They get caught up in differing opinions of the relationship between England and the Colonies during Paul Revere's ride of warning and help hide slaves heading to Canada on the Underground Railroad. Then they spend a day with the girls from *Little Women*. In a surprising twist for readers of other books by Eager, they save their mothers from a wish gone wrong when they were young. That story is told in *Magic by the Lake*. In an attempt to see their parents, they end up talking to Queen Victoria before catching a brief glimpse of their parents on a London street.

Ann and Eliza don't stand out as unusual characters; in fact they seem very ordinary. The strength of these characters is that each of their roles is just as significant as those of the boys. The motives and actions of each of the kids could easily be traded among them with no

impact on the story. *The Time Garden* is a pleasant, easy to read book that will be accessible to many elementary school readers.

Eager, Edward. *The Well-Wishers*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1960.

James, Kip, Laura, Lydia and Gordy from *Magic or Not?* make their second appearance in an Eager book. The kids are worried because the wishing well isn't working anymore. Gordy successfully demands that the well get back to work. The magic does start working again, but like in *Magic or Not?* it is quiet magic that just seems to help the kids make more ordinary things happen like bringing together a lady with an orchard she doesn't want and a farmer without an orchard.

Laura and Lydia don't stand out as unusual characters; in fact they seem very ordinary. The strength of these characters is that each of their roles is just as significant as those of the boys. The motives and actions of each of the kids could easily be traded among them with no impact on the story. *The Well-Wishers* is a pleasant, easy to read book that will be accessible to many elementary school readers.

Furlong, Monica. *Juniper*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990.

Juniper is the daughter of King Mark of Cornwall. Her Aunt Meroot is determined to see her son and Juniper's playmate, Gamal, as the next king. Sent to live with her godmother, Juniper trades a life of ease and luxury for one of hard work and poverty. Juniper discovers that she has special powers and learns to use them. Her learning and her courage are tested when she must fight her aunt to rescue Gamal and to protect her newborn brother.

Juniper is a prequel to Furlong's *Wise Child*. Juniper's will and strength of character allow her to not only survive a difficult situation, but to grow into her powers. She may doubt her ability, but she never shirks her responsibility even when it means putting herself in danger. Meroot is not a likable character, but she is strong and willing to act to change the world around her. *Juniper* should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Furlong, Monica. *Wise Child*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.

A nine-year-old girl, teasingly known as Wise Child, finds herself with no family when her grandmother dies. Her parents are alive, but her mother left her and her father has been at sea for years. By the custom of the remote Scottish village, someone must take her into their home. Wise Child goes to the home of Juniper, the local healer. Though the villagers use Juniper in times of need, she is generally feared as a witch. Wise Child cooks, cleans and gardens. She has lessons in Latin and English, history and herbs. Though she initially resents being made to work, she becomes comfortable with the new rhythm of her life with Juniper. Wise Child's mother, Maeve the Beautiful, disturbs the rhythm when she asks her to come live with her. Village priest, Fillian, compounds Wise Child's problems when he incites the villagers against Juniper.

Juniper unquestionably lives a life of her choosing and is also content living with the consequences of her choices. Life just happens to Wise Child as she asks, "What will happen to me?" Over time, living with Juniper, Wise Child learns to choose her own path. Wise Child is severely tested as events present her with choices that will change her life. *Wise Child* should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Griffin, Peni R. *A Dig in Time*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books, 1991.

Nan and her younger, poem writing, brother Tim are staying with their grandmother in San Antonio while their parents are on an archeological dig in the Mideast. Nan her starts her own dig and begins discovering artifacts from her family's past. They accidentally discover that Tim's poems and the artifacts take them back in time to related events. After several trips into the past, they find themselves involved in a pivotal moment in their family's history.

A Dig in Time is Nan and Tim's story, but generally she is the adventurous one, taking chances and making things happen. Tim is an observer, Nan gives him something to observe. On what turns out to be their final trip to the past, Nan's action is critical to her family. *A Dig in Time* should be accessible to many middle school and ambitious elementary school readers.

Griffin, Peni R. *Switching Well*. New York: Macmillan, 1993.

Twelve-year-old Ada lives in 1891 and wishes she lived one hundred years in the future. Twelve-year-old Amber lives in 1991 and wishes she lived one hundred years in the past. Simultaneously making their wishes at the same San Antonio well they each find their wish granted. Ada finds her self caught in the modern child welfare system and Amber in an old-fashioned orphanage. They each struggle to adapt to the unfamiliar ways of their new centuries, while working to find their ways home. In an interesting time travel twist Ada and Amber reach across a century to try and help each other get home.

Ada and Amber both show the strength to deal with their problems and the courage to try to change. The stories of the two girls illustrate the different problems girls have faced over the years and common problems that span the years. Switching between the two times provides an interesting opportunity to consider the changes in women's rights and their role in American

society. *Switching Well* should be accessible to many middle schools readers. Caution - *Switching Well* includes references to drug use, child abuse and divorce.

Kaye, M.M. *The Ordinary Princess*. New York: Doubleday, 1980.

The King and Queen's seventh daughter, traditionally the luckiest, receives her christening day gifts from the fairies. The most powerful fairy gives the last gift. To the dismay of the kingdom she gives the baby the gift of being ordinary. Unknown to the others Amy often leaves the castle to spend her time in the forest. Her parents, unable to find her a husband, consider hiring a dragon to lay waste to the countryside to attract a prince who would "win the hand of the princess". Not wanting any part of the plan, Amy runs away and gets a job in a kitchen. Still spending her free time in the forest, Amy meets a young man who is also trying to escape his life.

Though *The Ordinary Princess* has a traditional fairy tale sort of ending, Amy reaches that end through untraditional means. It is her very unconventional choices that drive events. Amy is content with life as long it is the life she chooses. *The Ordinary Princess* should be accessible to ambitious elementary school and many middle school readers.

Langton, Jane. *The Fledgling*. New York: HarperCollins, 1980.

Four-year old Georgie wants to fly and is sure that she can, if she could just figure it out. Watching a flock of migrating geese pass overhead, Georgie is sure that one of them looked at her and waved. Using a goose feather dropped from above, Georgie doesn't quite fly, but does rise from the roof of her porch to the top of the house and then makes a soft landing on the ground. Her goose shows up at her bedroom window and takes her for a ride on his back. After

several trips, Georgie, at the urging of the goose, slides off his back and learns to fly on her own. Trouble comes Georgie's way when Mr. Preek, the banker, decides that the goose is a menace that must be gotten rid of.

Georgie doesn't let the opinions of others dissuade her from her beliefs. She is determined to make her dream of flying come true in spite of the skepticism of others, some good-natured, some not. *The Fledgling* is an easy to read, but not simple book, that should be accessible to many elementary school readers.

L'Engle, Madeline. *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*. New York: Bantam, 1978.

In this sequel to *A Wrinkle in Time* and *A Wind in the Door* Meg and her brother Charles Wallace again have to save the Earth, this time from nuclear destruction by Mad Dog Branzillo, President of the small country of Vespugia. Charles Wallace and a unicorn are at the center of the action as they stay in place, but move in time through the chain of events leading to the current predicament. Charles Wallace goes *within* a number of people from the past, losing himself in their being, trying to find the right Might-Have-Been that can save them.

Meg is now married and pregnant, but not beyond her insecurities. Though Charles Wallace is thrust into the action, Meg supports him by kything, something like mental telepathy, but more. Meg actually experiences what Charles experiences. In addition to acting as Charles Wallace's lifeline, Meg finds a vital link between the past and present that helps him find the right Might-Have-Been. Though Meg plays a smaller role than in the previous books, fans of hers will enjoy her new role as a mother-to-be. *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* should be accessible to many middle school readers.

L'Engle, Madeline. *A Wind in the Door*. New York: Bantam, 1973.

In this sequel to *A Wrinkle in Time* Meg is faced with another battle against evil. Extinguished stars, war on Earth and the serious illness of Meg's little brother, Charles Wallace, are all caused by the Ecthroi who want to turn everything to nothing. Meg discovers that size is meaningless as she gazes on galaxies and enters Charles Wallace's body as a microscopic object. The Ecthroi are unNammers, Meg is a Namer. She has to pass three undefined trials to learn how to use her Naming skill to save Charles and more.

As in *A Wrinkle in Time*, Meg is a reluctant hero, and again her strength and willingness to tackle the seemingly impossible are critical to the life of her brother and maybe her world. In *A Wind in the Door* the difficulties of being Meg haven't gone away, but she has grown and become more comfortable with herself. *A Wind in the Door* is an excellent companion to *A Wrinkle in Time* and should be accessible to many middle school readers.

L'Engle, Madeline. *A Wrinkle in Time*. New York: Bantam, 1962.

Meg is very good at math and science, but doesn't fit in at all at school. The principal and teachers think that she is belligerent and uncooperative. Meg's physicist father, involved in top-secret work for the government, is missing and they have had no communication from him. Three unusual ladies, Mrs. Whatsit, Mrs. Who and Mrs. Which, take Meg to a faraway planet, where her father is held prisoner by an evil intelligence. With the help of her extraordinary five-year old brother, Charles Wallace, and Calvin, a newfound friend, Meg finds herself not only in a fight to rescue her father, but also to save the Earth and other worlds from the Darkness.

Meg isn't always happy with herself, but she isn't willing to pretend to be something other than what she is just to make others happy. Meg doesn't think of herself as strong, but in

the end everything depends on her strength. Meg's mother is a beautiful and intelligent research scientist, as well as a mother and a wife. *A Wrinkle in Time* is among the best-known fantasies for children for good reason. It is a wonderful story that tackles big ideas in a context that will be familiar to most adolescents. *A Wrinkle in Time* should be accessible to most middle school readers.

Levin, Betty. *Mercy's Mill*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1992.

Sarah wants to move back to Brookline, just outside of Boston, doesn't like her step-father, doesn't want to deal with a foster sister, doesn't have any friends at school and is dealing with the after effects of having run away for three days. At the mill that her parents are rebuilding a boy and a crow mysteriously appear during an unusual winter thunderstorm. Jethro is wary, but as she brings him food and clothes, she slowly learns his story of coming through the mill from before the Civil War and the story of Mercy who passed through the mill from Colonial times to Jethro's. Trying to help Jethro and trying to convince herself that his story could be true, Sarah learns about Colonial witch hunts, slavery, the Underground Railroad and the role the mill played in each.

Sarah's strong will creates difficulty for her and her family. Her self-reliance helps her keep an incredible secret and to deal with a difficult and unusual situation. *Mercy's Mill* should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Levine, Gail Carson. *Ella Enchanted*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997.

At birth, the baby Ella is given gifts by each of the fairies in attendance including the gift of obedience. Though well intended, the gift leaves Ella in the power of anyone who gives her

an order. Because Ella must comply with any order no matter how silly or dangerous, her gift, or curse, is a carefully guarded secret. In an accidental meeting, Ella becomes friends with Prince Charmont. After her mother dies, Ella is sent to finishing school with two sisters, one nice and the other a bully. Unfortunately the bully figures out the curse. Ella flees the school and again has an accidental encounter with the Prince. His business in ruins, Ella's father marries the mother of the two sisters and begins looking to marry off Ella. Through correspondence during a year spent in another country, the Prince declares his love for Ella. Because she loves him, Ella knows that she can't marry him and endanger him with her curse. On his return, Ella, hoping for another glimpse of the Prince, goes to a ball held in his honor.

Within the constraints of her curse, Ella struggles to live life on her terms. *Ella Enchanted* is a fun and suspenseful retelling of the Cinderella fairy tale that should be accessible to many middle school readers and ambitious elementary school readers.

Levine, Gail Carson. *The Fairy's Mistake*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.

The fairy Ethelinda observes Rosella's kindness and rewards her by having gems drop from her mouth every time she speaks. Ethelinda punishes Rosella's twin sister Myrtle for her nastiness by having snakes, toads, insects and other creatures drop from her mouth every time she talks. Ethelinda is pleased with herself until things start to go awry. A prince asks Rosella to marry him, but he seems to be primarily interested in making her talk so that he can collect the jewels she produces. Myrtle, on the other hand, has found that she can use her affliction to extort what she wants from the villagers. Rosella allows herself to be led by the Prince for a while, then becomes determined to change things.

In this fairy tale retelling, Rosella is content for a time to be a pleasant girl who tries to make others happy. She begins to understand that she can't make everyone happy and acts on her evaluation of what is really important. *The Fairy's Mistake* is a short, easy to read book that should be accessible to middle school and ambitious elementary school readers.

Levine, Gail Carson. *The Two Princesses of Bamarre*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

Addie and Meryl are sisters and princesses in Bamarre. Addie is timid and quiet and always is rescued by the brave and adventurous Meryl in the stories they act out. Bamarre faces the very real problem of the Gray Death, which is slowly killing off the population. Meryl is determined to go on a quest for the cure and save her kingdom when she is stricken by the Gray Death. Watching her sister weaken and knowing that she only has days left, Addie decides that she will find the cure. Addie finds herself fighting ogres, griffins, specters and dragons as she searches for the cure.

Addie is afraid of everything and thinks of herself as someone to be taken care and protected. Faced with the loss of her sister, Addie not only finds courage and resourcefulness she didn't know she had, but discovers she is quite formidable. *The Two Princesses of Bamarre* should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Lewis, C.S. *The Last Battle*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1956.

In this last book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Jill and Eustace are called back to Narnia. Calormenes from the south have invaded and a donkey in a lion skin is posing as Aslan, the creator of Narnia. Jill and Eustace fight with the last king of Narnia and are present at the end of Narnia.

Jill is right in the middle of events. She leads the King and his few companions through the forest and overcomes her fears as she ably uses her bow and arrow during the battle. I have mixed feelings about Lewis's female characters. He generally assumes that a man should be in charge and the boys get swords while the girls are off to the side with bows. But Lewis's patronizing aside, I like this series so much that I include three of the seven books with girls who are strong characters.

Lewis, C.S. *The Magician's Nephew*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1955.

This sixth book of *The Chronicles of Narnia* returns to the creation of Narnia. Polly and Digory find rings that allow them to travel through worlds. They accidentally return to their world with an evil queen who wreaks havoc as she seeks to establish her power. Polly figures out how to get rid of the queen and sets off a chain of events that lead to the creation of Narnia.

Polly never loses her head and is decisive in her actions. It is her quick thinking that saves her world and leads to the beginnings of Narnia. I have mixed feelings about Lewis's female characters. He generally assumes that a man should be in charge and the boys get swords while the girls are off to the side with bows. But Lewis's patronizing aside, I like this series so much that I include three of the seven books with girls who are strong characters.

Lewis, C.S. *The Silver Chair*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1953.

In this fourth book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Jill and Eustace are called to Narnia and sent on a quest to rescue a missing prince. With Puddleglum, a dour Marsh-wiggle, they travel through freezing wastelands, meet giants who want them for a meal and travel into the Underland in their search for the prince.

Jill and her companions all play a part in the quest, sometimes leading and sometimes following. Faced hardships and little chance of success, Jill never gives up. I have mixed feelings about Lewis's female characters. He generally assumes that a man should be in charge and the boys get swords while the girls are off to the side with bows. But Lewis's patronizing aside, I like this series so much that I include three of the seven books with girls who are strong characters.

Lindbergh, Anne. *Bailey's Window*. New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1984.

Brother and sister Carl and Anna are enjoying their summer vacation with their friend Ingrid when they find out that their obnoxious cousin Bailey is coming for a visit. Bailey is as bad as they remember, but they discover that he can paint magic windows that allow them to travel in time. The unexpected change in their vacations doesn't improve their relationship with Bailey until they help him try to find his lost dog Fox. During their last trip through a magic window Ingrid is faced with a life-changing decision.

Anna and Ingrid are not particularly special. They perform no heroic deeds, but they neither do the boys. Sometimes the girls are leaders, sometimes followers. Their characters are noteworthy because it doesn't really matter that they are girls. *Bailey's Window* is about very ordinary characters facing unusual events and should be accessible to ambitious elementary and many middle school readers.

Lindgren, Astrid. *Pippi Goes on Board*. New York: Puffin, 1957.

Pippi still lives in her home, Villa Villekulla, with her monkey, Mr. Nilsson, and a horse, and spends much of her time playing with her neighbors, Tommy and Annika. Pippi takes the

neighborhood children on a shopping spree, punishes a man who is beating his horse and fights an escaped tiger at the fair. When Tommy and Annika express their interest in being shipwrecked like Robinson Crusoe, Pippi arranges for them to be shipwrecked on an island. Shortly after their return, Pippi is surprised by a visit from her father who was lost at sea. He had made his way to the South Pacific island of Kurrekurredutt where he is now king. Captain Longstocking tells Pippi she can return with him to be a princess.

Pippi is in charge of every situation; nobody runs her life. For younger readers the world of *Pippi Longstocking* may seem like how they would run the world if they were in charge and Pippi the kind of person they would like to be. Older readers may not be as enchanted.

Lindgren, Astrid. *Pippi in the South Seas*. New York: Puffin, 1959.

Pippi's father, king of Kurrekurredutt, brings her and her friends, Annika and Tommy, for a visit to the South Pacific island. Pippi battles sharks and pirates, goes over a waterfall in a barrel and generally has fun although adults don't know what to think about her.

Pippi is in charge of every situation; nobody runs her life. For younger readers the world of *Pippi Longstocking* may seem like how they would run the world if they were in charge and Pippi the kind of person they would like to be. Older readers may not be as enchanted.

Lindgren, Astrid. *Pippi Longstocking*. New York: Puffin, 1950.

Pippi is a very unusual nine-year old. Her mother died and her father was lost at sea. She lives alone except for her horse and a monkey. She is strong enough to lift a horse and she climbs the roof of her house as if she were a monkey. Pippi lives her life according to her rules. She doesn't try to cause trouble, but sometimes does just because she doesn't see things the same

way as others. Pippi brings a great deal of excitement into the previously boring lives of the kids next-door, Tommy and Annika.

Pippi is in charge of every situation; nobody runs her life. For younger readers the world of *Pippi Longstocking* may seem like how they would run the world if they were in charge and Pippi the kind of person they would like to be. Older readers may not be as enchanted.

Lisle, Janet Taylor. *Forest*. New York: Orchard Books, 1993.

Twelve-year-old Amber Padgett, angry with her father, spends the night in a giant white oak tree. Though she can't communicate with them, she is sure that she has found intelligent squirrels living in the tops of the trees. The squirrels, who are indeed intelligent, debate the intelligence and intentions of Amber and the other inhabitants of what they call the Lower Forest. Even though the actions of Amber and her brother demonstrate their goodwill, the distrust of some of the squirrels and Amber's father shooting a squirrel leads to war between the Lower and Upper Forest. Only Amber stands between the army of men her father gathers and the army of squirrels.

Amber is the voice of reason in the conflict. Her intelligence and leadership are critical to its resolution. *Forest* is fairly easy reading, accessible to many middle school readers and possibly elementary school readers.

Lisle, Janet Taylor. *Afternoon of the Elves*. New York: Orchard Books, 1989.

Hillary is a very ordinary nine-year-old living a very ordinary life until Sara-Kate, a mysterious eleven-year-old who lives next door, shows her the elf village in her back yard. Her friends warn Hillary that there is something wrong with Sara-Kate. Even faced with the

possibility of losing her friends, Hillary is drawn to the elf village and the fascinating information Sara-Kate provides her about elves. Believing that she has moved, Hillary searches Sara-Kate's house and discovers her secret and the reason why Sara-Kate is so different.

It could be argued that *Afternoon of the Elves* isn't a fantasy. The end of the book suggests that it probably isn't, but I think the door is left open. This is another book that I liked enough to give the benefit of the doubt on whether or not it met the criteria. Hillary and Sara-Kate are interesting characters, each acting on their beliefs of what is right. *Afternoon of the Elves* should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Matas, Carol. *Of Two Minds*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Lenora is a princess in a land where everyone can change reality by imagining change. By mutual agreement and long established custom no one does. Lenora is bored with her world and thinks it is silly to not use her power to change. She and Coren, a prince that her parents want her to marry, are drawn into another world ruled by Hevak. Initially, Hevak and his plan for a perfect world awe Lenora. She changes her mind after he throws her in the dungeon for asking about some little people that nobody else can see. To help the invisible little people and to try and find a way home, Lenora fights Hevak, eventually engaging him in a battle of their powers.

Lenora is impulsive, headstrong and discontent. She is also brave, responsible and willing to act on her beliefs. Thrust into a difficult situation, her better qualities emerge. Lenora learns a lot about herself when she discovers who Hevak really is. The plot of *Of Two Minds* gets complicated, but it should be accessible to many middle school readers.

McGraw, Eloise. *The Moorchild*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books, 1996.

Moql, daughter of a Folk mother and a human father is brought up as one of the Folk until it is determined that she is too in lacking essential skills to remain. After changing Moql into a baby, the Folk secretly trade her for a human baby. Over time Moql forgets that she is of the Folk though she never fits in with the others. The villagers avoid the Moor and Moql's parents forbid her to go there, but the Moor is the only place she truly feels comfortable. Fearing that Moql is a Changeling the villagers begin to blame her for all of the village's troubles and threaten to get rid of her if her family won't. Moql decides to make her own way in the world and finds herself in the Folk Mound with a big decision to make.

Knowing no alternative, Moql puts up with a life that fills her with discontent. When growing knowledge shows her other alternatives she acts to change her life and doesn't shy away from the choices that result. *The Moorchild* is a fairly complex book, but should be accessible to some middle school readers.

McKinley, Robin. *Beauty: A Retelling of the Story of Beauty and the Beast*. New York: HarperCollins, 1978.

After her father's shipping business is ruined, Beauty, her father and sisters move to an isolated village far from the city. Though she misses her books and time to read, Beauty and her family adapt to their new lives. She even discovers that she enjoys and is good at gardening. Her father returns to the city when news reaches them of the arrival of a ship they had presumed to be lost. Returning home, her father is lost in a blizzard and finds himself at an enchanted castle. After picking a rose as a present for Beauty, her father is confronted by a beast that

allows him to leave, but demands that he or one of his daughters return. Over the objections of her family, Rose insists on returning to the Beast in her father's place. Life with the Beast is not what Rose expects and she is eventually faced with a life-changing decision.

Though frightened, Rose goes to the Beast in place of her father. She doesn't do as a sacrifice, but goes because she thinks it is the right thing to do. Rose doesn't think she does anything out of the ordinary, but she is stronger than she thinks. Not only does Rose survive in the Beast's castle, she changes it. *Beauty* is an enjoyable retelling of the familiar story that should be accessible to high school and some middle school readers. Nearly twenty years later, McKinley revisits this story in her book *Rose Daughter*.

McKinley, Robin. *The Blue Sword*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1982.

After the death of her father, Harry Crewe is sent to live with her brother in a distant military outpost on the frontier. Drawn to the land beyond the outpost, the remnants of the kingdom of Damar and to the last of the Damarians, the Free Hillfolk, Harry dreams of a different life. On a visit to the outpost seeking help in an impending war, the Hillfolk recognize the *kelar*, or gift, in Harry and kidnap her. After enduring the Hillfolk equivalent of boot camp and then dominating a traditional tournament, Harry is given an ancient Hillfolk treasure, Gonturan, the Blue Sword, the sword of Aerin, an ancient Damarian hero. The Blue Sword in hand, Harry finds herself going to war against tremendous odds as the Hillfolk's Damalur-sol – Lady Hero.

Harry isn't content to play her predetermined role in life and has the opportunity for change unexpectedly thrust upon her. Not only does Harry accept the change, her strength and perseverance become critical to the future of the Hillfolk. *The Blue Sword* is a complex and

fascinating story that should be accessible to many high school readers and some middle school readers.

McKinley, Robin. *The Hero and the Crown*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1984.

This prequel to *The Blue Sword* returns to the time of the legendary Aerin and the origins of Gonturan, the Blue Sword. Aerin is the daughter of the King. Her mother, who died at childbirth, is rumored to be a witch. Those who dislike Aerin, and there are many jealousies and ambitions in the Royal House, claim that it was only through enchantment that the King married her mother. Aerin is clumsy, awkward and has no interest in power. She is very interested in swords and horses, and wants nothing more than to accompany her father to war, but in ancient Damar, women do not go to war. Left behind, Aerin becomes a renowned dragon-killer. Acclaimed though she is, Aerin isn't content and leaves to seek the lost crown, source of all that is good in Damar.

Aerin is not content to play her proper role in society. She overcomes criticism and obstacles to create her own role, and becomes a traditional questing hero. *The Hero and the Crown* is a great adventure that should be accessible to high school and some middle school readers.

McKinley, Robin. *Rose Daughter*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1997.

Beauty is the youngest of three daughters whose mother died and whose father is a wealthy merchant. When his business fails they leave the town for the remote Rose Cottage. After a life filled with servants, the girls learn to provide for themselves. Word comes to Rose Cottage that one ship from Rose's father's fleet has returned. Planning his return to the city, he

asks his daughters what he can bring them. Rose asks only for a rose. Lost in a snowstorm on his way home, the father finds himself in an enchanted castle. After spending the night, he takes a rose from a vase on the table. A terrifying beast confronts him and demands his daughter as payment for the crime. Over her father's protests, Rose goes to the Beast's castle. Rose, now called Beauty by the Beast, finds her life at the castle tolerable, even in some ways enjoyable, except that she misses her family, and that the Beast keeps asking her to marry him. Desire to return to her family grows and the Beast reluctantly agrees to allow her return. Rose rushes back to a near-dead Beast and faces a choice that can save him and determine their futures.

Rose Daughter is a very enjoyable retelling of the Beauty and the Beast fairy tale. Remarkably this story is McKinley's second retelling of the fairy tale. Her earlier *Beauty* is just as good. Rose/Beauty is gentle, but very strong and courageous in a quiet way as she faces her fears. *Rose Daughter* should be accessible to high school and some middle school readers.

McKinley, Robin. *Spindle's End*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2000.

A baby is born to a king and queen. On her name-day, Casta Albinia Allegra Dove Minerva Fidelia Aletta Blythe Domina Delicia Aurelia Grace Isabel Griselda Gwyneth Pearl Ruby Coral Lily Iris Briar-Rose receives gifts from twenty-one of the local fairies. She receives an unexpected gift from Pernicia, an uninvited, grudge-carrying fairy. Pernicia's gift is a poisoned sleep and death from the prick of a spinning wheel spindle. Katriona, a young girl representing her village at the wedding, with the brief help of another fairy, steals the baby to raise and help her to avoid Pernicia's gift. For twenty-one years, Kat and her aunt raise Rosie until Pernicia finds them. Pernicia's gift is only partially realized as Rosie and many others are

put to sleep and trapped in a house-swallowing hedge of briar rose. Rosie is left alive to fight for her life as well as the lives of the others.

Rosie grows up headstrong, rambunctious and absolutely unwilling to be limited to proper activities for a girl. She hangs around the village smithy and likes to doctor animals. It is when her life and the lives of those she loves are attacked that Rosie's strength really emerges. *Spindle's End* is a well-written retelling of the Sleeping Beauty tale that should be accessible to high school and ambitious middle school readers.

Nicholson, William. *The Wind Singer*. New York: Hyperion, 2000.

In this first book of a planned trilogy, Kestrel lives in a society that determines where you live, how you live, how you dress and what you do by a series of never-ending tests. Expected to strive ever upward, you are only as good as your last test. Kestrel, her twin brother Bowman, and a classmate rebel and set off to recover the voice of the wind singer, a mysterious pipe organ-like contraption that is part of the ancient roots of her country, Amaranth. With only a vague notion of where they are going and no idea what the voice is, they encounter deserts, mountains, a mile deep chasm, warring tribes and the inexhaustible Zed army.

In a reversal of traditional male/female roles, Bowman feels things and Kestrel does things. Kestrel's initial rebellion is more temper tantrum than philosophical revolution, but once started she becomes an effective leader with a clear goal of changing life in Amaranth. *The Wind Singer* is a complex book that should be accessible to many high school readers.

Nix, Garth. *Lirael*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

Lirael is desperately waiting for the Sight, the power to see pieces of the future that is the trademark of the Clayr. Much to her dismay, the years continue to pass with no sign of the power. In part, to hide, Lirael successfully applies for a job in the Library, an ancient place full of more than just books. Using her free time to explore the Library, she discovers and develops her Charter Magic abilities. Her visit to the oldest part of the Library begins an adventure that will determine the fate of the entire Old Kingdom.

Lirael is physically brave and determined to see problems through to the end even when she puts herself in danger. She literally sails into danger to play her part in stopping the evil that has come to the Old Kingdom. *Lirael* is a complex book with some violence and sexual references that should be accessible to many high school readers.

Nix, Garth. *Sabriel*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

Sabriel is nearing graduation when a spirit form brings her a set of bells from her father, the Abhorsen. The Abhorsen has powers over the land of Death, binding dead creatures to Death and sometimes bringing someone back from Death. The bells were his tools. Sabriel feels sure her father isn't dead and sets off for the Old Kingdom to find him. In the Old Kingdom she finds herself being drawn into a problem much bigger and more dangerous than the disappearance of her father. She finds companions along the way, but also attracts enemies, one who threatens to upset the balance of her world.

Sabriel is physically brave and determined to act on what she believes is right. She risks herself for a cause much larger than simply finding her father. *Sabriel* is a complex book that should be accessible to many high school readers.

Pierce, Tamora. *Alanna, The First Adventure*. New York: Random House, 1983.

This first book of the *Song of the Lioness Quartet* introduces Alanna and other characters that will become familiar to readers of Pierce's books. Alanna is about to be sent to the Daughters of the Goddess to learn magic and to be a lady, her twin brother Thom to the King to become a knight. Neither is happy. Alanna, against all convention, wants to be a knight. Thom wants to develop his magic. Talking Thom into trading places, Alanna disguises herself as Alan, Thom's twin brother, and Thom goes to the Daughters of the Goddess who also train boys in magic. Training for knighthood is harder than Alanna expected, but she is good at it. Even though she is only a page, she becomes close friends with a group of Squires including Prince Jon who trusts her so much that it is Alan (Alanna) he turns to for help for a deadly challenge.

Alanna is so determined to choose her own path that she is willing to live a lie and to live for years as a boy. Determination and perseverance carry her through her difficult situation. Alanna ponders the iniquity of taking choice away from girls and women. *Alanna, The First Adventure* should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Pierce, Tamora. *Briar's Book*. New York: Scholastic Press, 1999.

This fourth book of the *In the Circle of Magic Quartet* follows the continued training of Sandry, Tris, Daja and Briar in the use of their magic. Briar's discovery that a friend from his days in the sewers has a mysterious illness draws him, his friends and teachers at Discipline into a battle against an unknown plague. As in the other *Magic Circle* books, everyone plays a part in finding a cure for the disease.

Though this is *Briar's Book*, his three friends and fellow apprentices in magic each have an important role to play. Briar looks to the three girls as friends and equals. *Briar's Book* is every bit as good as the previous three and should be accessible to most middle school readers.

Pierce, Tamora. *Cold Fire*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2002.

In this third book of *The Circle Opens Quartet* Daja journeys with her mentor Frostpine to visit other smiths as part of her education. Like her friends Sandry and Briar in *Magic Steps* and *Street Magic*, Daja discovers a student, in this case twin sisters, with untrained magic. Though it doesn't fit into her plans, she is obligated to teach them. As if her work and teaching the twins isn't enough, Daja finds herself involved in the investigation of a series of arson fires.

Daja once again demonstrates her bravery and her commitment to meet her obligations. In the end, the town depends on her to solve the arsons and to stop the person responsible. *Cold Fire* should be accessible to many middle school readers. Descriptions of the victims of the fires may be disturbing.

Pierce, Tamora. *Daja's Book*. New York: Scholastic Press, 1998.

This third book of the *In the Circle of Magic Quartet* follows the continued training of Sandry, Tris, Daja and Briar in the use of their magic. Daja, who is a non-person in the eyes of her people, the Traders, finds herself with an unexpected opportunity for interaction when the Traders want to trade for a growing flower of metal that she created with her magic and smithing skills. Nearness to her people and participating in the trading rituals revive her suppressed longing to go home. Daja is faced with a choice between two lives after she and her friends save the Traders from destruction in a fire and they offer the opportunity to rejoin her people.

Though this is *Daja's Book* it is really about all four of the magic apprentices, three of them girls. They each bring their own perspective and skills to the problems they face; each plays an important role. Daja's magic works through metal and metalwork. Like the metals she works, Daja's personality is marked by her hardness, her rigidity and her unyielding strength. *Daja's Book* should be accessible to most middle school readers.

Pierce, Tamora. *Emperor Mage*. New York: Atheneum, 1995.

In this third book of *The Immortals Quartet*, Daine goes on a Tortollian peace mission to Carthak. She heals the Emperor Ozorne's ailing birds and discovers an ability to bring dead creatures back to life, a power that others have an interest in. Though the Immortals send signs that Ozorne is heading for trouble, he persists in his pursuit for power including taking over Tortolla. Daine finds herself deeply involved in the effort to stop Ozorne and finds out that her father is one of the Immortals.

Daine has grown more aware of and sure of her powers. She remains committed to doing what she believes is the right thing regardless of the opinions of others. *Emperor Mage* contains some mild sexual references and should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Pierce, Tamora. *First Test*. New York: Random House, 1999.

In this first book of the *Protector of the Small* series, ten-year-old Kel is the first girl to train for knighthood as allowed by a proclamation of ten years earlier. Unlike others in training, Kel is on a year's probation at the insistence of the royal training master, Lord Wyldon. Alanna the Lioness, a character from *The Song of the Lioness Quartet* and *The Immortals Quartet*, is very interested in Kel's success, but is forced to disassociate herself from her training.

Struggling through the rigorous training with along with the others, Kel faces the additional difficulty of the general opposition to her presence. A grudging Lord Wyldon treats Kel fairly, but makes no secret of his belief that she doesn't belong and some of the boys actively work to sabotage her training. Kel has occasional interaction with Daine, the central character in a number of Pierce's other books.

Kel is committed to her training regardless of the difficulties of training and the additional burden of being a girl in a place where girls aren't wanted. Reading *First Test* I couldn't help but think about the first females in our service academies and military schools. *First Test* isn't preachy, but of the books included most directly highlights the idea that in certain arenas girls can't get by being just as good, they have to be better. *First Test* is a good story that should be accessible to ambitious elementary and most middle school readers.

Pierce, Tamora. *In the Hand of the Goddess*. New York: Random House, 1984.

This second book of the *Song of the Lioness Quartet* follows Alanna, still masquerading as Alan, as she continues her quest to become the first woman knight in one hundred years. Alanna finds a companion, receives a gift from the Great Mother Goddess, and makes a powerful enemy. She goes to battle, fights several duels, is kidnapped, and faces the Ordeal of the Chamber, the last test for knighthood.

Alanna is strong-willed, committed and a fighter. She is set on becoming a knight even though women are never knights. She lives as Alan to keep her dream alive, but she doesn't understand why it should be necessary. Pierce openly questions thinking that limits opportunities for females. *In the Hand of the Goddess* includes sexual references and is probably accessible to many middle school readers.

Pierce, Tamora. *Lioness Rampant*. New York: Atheneum, 1988.

In this fourth book of the *Song of the Lioness Quartet* Alanna has not only gained acceptance as a female knight, she has become legendary. She doesn't find being a legend particularly satisfying and she is bored with her life as a knight errant; she needs a new challenge. She finds it in the translation of a map she received during a rescue in *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man*. The map locates the Dominion Jewel in mountains to the north called the Roof of the World. The Jewel, in the hand of the right ruler, can bring peace and prosperity. Alanna wants the Jewel for her king and country. Tortall is facing a series of difficulties including the return to life of her enemy Roger of Conte. All of her life Alanna has hated the cold, now she finds herself in the company of small group of friends headed for harsh, frozen mountains to attempt in the face of what seem to be insurmountable odds to return with the Jewel. A blizzard stops the group short of their goal, but Alanna sneaks out on her own to do battle for the Jewel.

Having overcome the odds against a female becoming not only a knight, but also an awe-stirring legend isn't enough for Alanna. She continues to seek new challenges; seeks a new path rather than contentedly continue on another. *Lioness Rampant* contains sexual references and should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Pierce, Tamora. *Magic Steps*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2000.

This first book of *The Circle Opens Quartet* follows Sandry as she leaves her friends and teachers from the *In the Circle of Magic Quartet*. Sandry lives with her great-uncle, the Duke Vedris. Having stumbled across a boy who dances magic, but doesn't know his power, Sandry is

obligated to teach him. A series of seemingly unexplainable murders and the presence of ‘unmagic’ draw Sandry into the search for the killers. A desperate attempt to stop the killers depends on Sandry’s powers, but even more on how well she has taught her student.

Away from those who know her and her powers, Sandry encounters skepticism and is treated like a helpless girl. Not only isn’t she helpless, in the end the doubters are counting on her to stop the menace that threatens them all. *Magic Steps* should be accessible to many middle school readers. While Pierce doesn’t dwell on the murder scenes, the descriptions may be disturbing.

Pierce, Tamara. *Page*. New York: Random House, 2000.

In this second book of the *Protector of the Small* series, Kel continues through her second, third and fourth years of training for knighthood. Royal training master, Lord Wyldon agrees that Kel has earned the right to continue training, but still believes she shouldn’t be there. Kel has earned the respect of many boys, but others are still committed to ending her training. When a training exercise unexpectedly turns into an actual battle, Kel takes a leadership role. When her adversaries kidnap Kel’s maid on the day of her final test, she sets out to rescue her, jeopardizes her four years of training and faces her greatest fear.

Kel continues to grow in *Page*. No longer just a stubborn, talented girl in a boy’s world, she becomes a leader and remains true to her values as she risks her four years of struggle to do what she believes is right. *Page* continues a good story and should be accessible to ambitious elementary and most middle school readers.

Pierce, Tamara. *The Realms of the Gods*. New York: Atheneum, 1996.

In this fourth of *The Immortals* series, the breeching of the magical barrier separating the realms of mortals and The Immortals by Emperor Ozorne of Carthak in *Emperor Mage* continues to trouble Tortall as the conflicts between various combinations of mortals and Immortals escalate. Fighting against Tortall are previously unknown creatures, the Skinners. Everything they touch dies, but they can't be killed. Magic may slow them, but doesn't stop them. Waking from a battle with the Skinners, Daine finds herself reunited with her dead mother in the Realms of the Gods and finally meets her father, the god Weiryng. In an attempt to shift the balance of the fighting, Daine and the mage Numair set off on a dangerous trip to the Dragonlands to enlist the help of the Dragons.

Daine has grown into her strengths. Her brave acts and her care for others, even those she dislikes, are not simply blind action, but based on conscious principles. *The Realms of the Gods*, the fourth book in the series, is no letdown. Pierce leaves you wishing for more of Daine and the rest of the characters. *The Realms of the Gods* has some mild sexual references and should be accessible to most middle school readers.

Pierce, Tamara. *Sandry's Book*. New York: Scholastic Press, 1997.

In this first of the *In the Circle of Magic Quartet*, four kids who are having difficulty getting along are found by a mage and taken to Discipline where they discover their magical talents. While the book is titled for the character Sandry, it is really the story of the four of them as grow individually and as a group. Their very different backgrounds and talents don't blend easily. Sandry's magic works through spinning and it is her weaving of the group's powers that saves them in a life-threatening situation.

Though noble-born, it is Sandry who is most comfortable with the group's situation and who works hardest to bring the four individuals together. Sandry is more concerned with accomplishments than with her station. Three of the four equal partners are girls. *Sandry's Book* should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Pierce, Tamora. *Squire*. New York: Random House, 2001.

This third book of the *Protector of the Small* series continues Kel's quest to become a knight. Kel has served her time as a page and is now squire to Sir Raoul, commander of the King's Own. She had hung on to her dream of being squire to Alanna the Lioness, but if it couldn't be Alanna then being with Raoul was the next best position. Kel is soon fighting – against foes of the kingdom and, once again, foes of a female in training for knighthood. Already burdened with a difficult situation, Kel finds herself mothering a baby griffin, one of the Immortals. One test is left for Kel, the Ordeal Chamber.

Kel perseveres in her attempt to break into an all-male world. Not only does she gain acceptance, she is recognized as a leader, a leader of men. Kel remains true to her beliefs and committed to doing what she believes is right even when it makes the road to knighthood more difficult. *Squire* should be accessible to middle school and ambitious elementary school readers.

Pierce, Tamora. *Street Magic*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2001.

This second book of *The Circle Opens* quartet follows Briar as he leaves Winding Circle and his friends and teachers. Briar runs into Evvy, a young stone mage, who needs a teacher. Evvy has managed to live on her own without joining any of the local gangs. Evvy is wary of

Briar, but is won over by the chance to learn. Evvy is rejected by a teacher and kidnapped as she tries to begin her new life.

Street Magic is a continuation of the stories of Briar and his three girl friends, but introduces a new character in Evvy. Evvy is strong enough to have survived on her own and smart enough to see an opportunity for a better life. Evvy meets challenge after challenge including being kidnapped. *Street Magic* should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Pierce, Tamara. *Tris's Book*. New York: Scholastic Press, 1998.

This second book of the *In the Circle of Magic Quartet* continues to follow the training of four young mages. Though they come from widely varying backgrounds and have very different magic abilities, their adventures in *Sandry's Book* have closely bound them and their magic. Summersea and the Winding Circle have been attacked by pirates before, but this time the pirates have potent magic and a new weapon. Fearing for their safety, the four friends are kept out of the way by their teachers. Tris, unwilling to sit back and wait, decides to take things into her own hands.

Tris is difficult to get along with, distrustful and a bit of a loner. She is also a formidable opponent when she gets angry. Tris' unwillingness to leave her fate in the hands of others leads to an opportunity for her friends to help her fight back. *Tris's Book* should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Pierce, Tamara. *Wild Magic*. New York: Atheneum, 1992.

In this first of four books in *The Immortals* series, bandits kill thirteen year-old Daine's mother and grandfather. She doesn't know who her father is. Her way with horses lands her a

job with the Horse Mistress for the Queen's Riders headed for the capital of Tortall. Badger, one of the Immortals, fulfilling a promise to Daine's father, watches over her and gives her guidance. After a fight with some Stormwings, more of the Immortals, Daine without realizing what she is doing heals dead and wounded birds. Daine finds Numair the wizard who was injured in the shape of a hawk. She meets a legend, Alanna the Lioness, the Queen's Champion, who also has the power of healing. Her new friends recognize "wild magic" in Daine and help her to learn how to control it. She gets better at shape changing but is reluctant to continue fearing that she will forget who she is.

Strong-willed and determined Daine is smart, kind and loyal, but most of all she is brave. She would argue that she isn't particularly brave; she just does what needs to be done. For sparrow or king, mortal or Immortal, Daine always does what she thinks is right, simply because she thinks it is right. *Wild Magic* is a great story and should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Pierce, Tamara. *Wolf Speaker*. New York: Atheneum, 1994

In this second of four books in *The Immortals* series, Daine can communicate with wild animals mind-to-mind, can control their behavior though she dislikes doing it, has the power of healing, and can shape change. After bandits killed her mother and grandfather - she never knew her father - she changed into a wolf and hunted the bandits down with a wolf pack. Though her wizard teacher, Numair, has created a spell that separates her magical self from her human self she still worries that she will forget she is human. Daine is also raising a baby dragon, one of the Immortals, and is watched over by another of the Immortals, Badger. Trying to find out what

has happened to missing members of the Tortallon army, Daine and Numair find themselves in a war against enemies, mortal and Immortal, of their king and queen.

Strong-willed and determined Daine is also smart, kind and loyal, but most of all she is brave. She would argue that she isn't particularly brave; she just does what needs to be done. For sparrow or king, mortal or Immortal, Daine always does what she thinks is right, simply because she thinks it is right. *Wolf-Speaker* is a great story and should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Pierce, Tamara. *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man*. New York: Random House, 1987.

In this third book of the *Song of the Lioness Quartet* Alanna, now a knight and no longer pretending to be Alan, looks for adventure in the southern deserts. She finds herself adopted into a desert tribe where she is known as the Woman Who Rides Like a Man. Alanna becomes a shaman, a teacher, and uses her healing powers to keep the Voice of the Desert alive until he can pass his knowledge to the next Voice. She turns down an opportunity to marry the next king and worries that her sorcerer brother may be trying to bring her enemy, Roger of Conte, back to life.

Alanna continues to challenge tradition. The desert tribesmen respect her and her abilities, but think of her as a woman who acts like a man. Through her actions, Alanna brings change to the desert tribe and their traditions. *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* includes sexual references and is probably accessible to many middle school readers.

Pullman, Phillip. *The Amber Spyglass*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

In this third book of *His Dark Materials* trilogy, Lyra and Will, both sought by many, are searching for each other. Will rescues Lyra from Mrs. Coulter and together they visit the world

of the dead. Lyra and Will survive the final confrontations, but are left with decisions to make that they could never have imagined.

The Amber Spyglass has two excellent strong female characters, Lyra and Mrs. Coulter. Lyra is resourceful, brave and a leader. Mrs. Coulter is the finest example of a female villain that I found. She drives much of the conflict of these stories, but there is little to like about her. She is manipulative, self-serving and amoral; she is also very strong and leaves no question about who makes the decisions in her life. *The Amber Spyglass* is a rich, deep and complex book probably beyond the reading skills of most elementary school readers and some middle school readers. Younger readers may be frightened at some parts and there are questions of religion that some parents may find objectionable.

Pullman, Phillip. *The Golden Compass*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

Lyra and her daemon, kind of an alter ego in animal form, have the run of Jordan College in Oxford before she becomes involved with events involving her father, Lord Asriel, a man with power and a desire for much more, the very powerful Church, kidnapped children, war and fundamental questions of religion and man's role in the universe. Mrs. Coulter, a threat to Lord Asriel's power and unknown to Lyra, her mother, plans to take Lyra north with her in the struggle for power. Lyra, after finding out more about Mrs. Coulter, runs away, but ends up back in the center of events.

The Golden Compass has two excellent strong female characters, Lyra and Mrs. Coulter. Lyra is resourceful, brave and a leader. Mrs. Coulter is the finest example of a female villain that I found. She drives much of the conflict of these stories, but there is little to like about her. She is manipulative, self-serving and amoral; she is also very strong and leaves no question

about who makes the decisions in her life. *The Golden Compass* is a rich, deep and complex book probably beyond the reading skills of most elementary school readers and some middle school readers. Younger readers may be frightened at some parts and there are questions of religion that some parents may find objectionable.

Pullman, Phillip. *The Subtle Knife*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

In this second book of *His Dark Materials* trilogy, Lyra moves into another world, similar to her own, but with significant differences. She meets Will, from a third world, and they end up with a knife that allows them to choose to move between worlds. The knife is more important than either of them knows. People, witches and angels each with a part to play in the approaching war desperately seek them.

The Subtle Knife has two excellent strong female characters, Lyra and Mrs. Coulter. Lyra is resourceful, brave and a leader. Mrs. Coulter is the finest example of a female villain that I found. She drives much of the conflict of these stories, but there is little to like about her. She is manipulative, self-serving and amoral; she is also very strong and leaves no question about who makes the decisions in her life. *The Subtle Knife* is a rich, deep and complex book probably beyond the reading skills of most elementary school readers and some middle school readers. Younger readers may be frightened at some parts and there are questions of religion that some parents may find objectionable.

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. New York: Scholastic Press, 1998.

In this second book of the Harry Potter series, mysterious attacks on students revive long dormant speculation about a monster in a hidden chamber. Harry and his friends are determined

to solve the mystery and release Hogwarts from fear. They uncover some important history of Hogwarts and face several difficult situations.

Hermione doesn't play as large a role as she did in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, but readers who enjoyed the first book will enjoy this one as well. Hermione is intelligent and a talented witch. She works very hard at her studies and doesn't allow the other students to distract her from goals even when they make life difficult for her. The Harry Potter books are long and complex, but Rowling has written stories that have captured the interest of readers who wouldn't typically tackle such a difficult book.

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2000.

In this fourth book of the Harry Potter series, the school is overflowing with excitement over the first Triwizard Tournament, in one hundred years. Harry represents Hogwarts against two other schools of wizardry. As if the tournament isn't enough, Harry has to deal with the return of Voldemort, an evil wizard who killed Harry's parents. Hermione starts the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare in an attempt to get pay and better working conditions for the elves that cook and clean at Hogwarts. Her help on Harry's tournament tasks is invaluable.

Hermione is intelligent and a talented witch. She works very hard at her studies and doesn't allow the other students to distract her from goals even when they make life difficult for her. Hermione's knowledge and cool head save them all in difficult situations. As the title suggests, this is Harry's story, but Hermione plays an important role and is a good example of a strong female character in a supporting role. The Harry Potter books are long and complex, but Rowling has written stories that have captured the interest of readers who wouldn't typically tackle such a difficult book.

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. New York: Scholastic Press, 1999.

In this third book of the Harry Potter series, the infamous Sirius Black escapes from Azkaban, the prisoners for wizards and everyone thinks Harry's life is in danger. Hermione gets a time-turner that allows her to travel in time so that she can take more classes. Time travel and Hermione's cool head are key to resolving a dangerous situation.

Hermione is intelligent and a talented witch. She works very hard at her studies and doesn't allow the other students to distract her from goals even when they make life difficult for her. Hermione's knowledge and cool head save them all in difficult situations. As the title suggests, this is Harry's story, but Hermione plays an important role and is a good example of a strong female character in a supporting role. The Harry Potter books are long and complex, but Rowling has written stories that have captured the interest of readers who wouldn't typically tackle such a difficult book.

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. New York: Scholastic Press, 1997.

Orphan Harry Potter is a wizard, but his aunt and uncle never told him. He finds out when he is invited to Hogwarts, a school for young wizards. Harry becomes good friends with Ron and Hermione. Together they get through their first year of school try to stop the recovery of the powerful Sorcerer's Stone by Valdemort, a wizard gone bad. Harry, Ron and Hermione all have critical roles in the attempt to stop Valdemort.

Hermione is intelligent and a talented witch. She works very hard at her studies and doesn't allow the other students to distract her from goals even when they make life difficult for her. Hermione's devotion to learning is evident when she said after escaping a dangerous situation with Harry and Ron, "We could have all been killed – or worse, expelled." Though

they initially regard her as a goody-goody showoff, Harry and Ron eventually become her good friends. Hermione's knowledge and cool head save them all in difficult situations. As the title suggests, this is Harry's story, but Hermione plays an important role and is a good example of a strong female character in a supporting role. The Harry Potter books are long and complex, but Rowling has written stories that have captured the interest of readers who wouldn't typically tackle such a difficult book.

Sherman, Josepha. *Child of Faerie, Child of Earth*. New York: Walker, 1992.

Percinet, a Faerie Prince is in love with Graciosa, a mortal with an undeveloped talent for magic who doesn't even know he exists. Graciosa's father, a count, is soon to wed a cruel woman who dislikes Graciosa intensely. To escape her stepmother she goes with Percinet to Faerie, but gives up her life there when she finds out that her father believes that she is dead. She returns home only to be imprisoned by her stepmother. Even buried alive she never gives up and lives to return to Faerie and with the aid of the Faerie Queen rescue the imprisoned Percinet.

Initially, Graciosa isn't always willing to act on her beliefs. Spurred by her stepmother's cruelty she learns to be strong. *Child of Faerie, Child of Earth* is a fairly complicated book. Its difficulty and a scene of attempted rape probably make it most appropriate for late middle school and high school readers.

Smith, Sherwood. *Court Duel*. New York: Harcourt, 1998.

In this sequel to *Crown Duel* Mel is fighting battles of a different sort as she learns about life in the royal court. As much she disliked fighting for the crown, she likes the politics and subtleties of behavior at Court even less. And as unwilling as she was to give up her fight for the

crown because the odds were against her, she is even less willing to give herself up to the Court and be something she doesn't want to be. Even as Mel begins to master Court life she is thrown again into a fight for the crown.

Mel remains true to her beliefs, but learns control and diplomacy. Once again she shows herself to be a hero that legends are made of. *Court Duel* is a fairly complex book that should be accessible to many high school and ambitious middle school readers.

Smith, Sherwood. *Crown Duel*. New York: Harcourt, 1997.

Meliara and her brother Branaric promise their dying father to fight the king, protect the Covenant with the Hillfolk and restore their mother's family to the throne. Unable to match the king's army they turn to guerilla warfare and successfully prolong the war months longer than anyone expected. Mel is captured, imprisoned and escapes. She leads the army on a chase through the country before being recaptured. An unlikely savior limits her second imprisonment to just a few minutes.

Mel is hot-tempered and impulsive, but always true to her beliefs. Her actions, rash that they may be, are born of her choices. Mel would deny being a hero, but her acts are heroic nonetheless. *Crown Duel* is a fairly complex book that should be accessible to many high school and ambitious middle school readers.

Smith, Sherwood. *Wren's Quest*. New York: Jane Yolen Books, 1993.

In this second of the three *Wren* books, Wren and her old orphanage friend, Princess Teresa, are now part of the royal court in Cantimoor, Teresa as Princess and Wren as her friend and rescuer. Wren is learning magic, but quickly tires of court life and wishes adventure would

come her way. After an attack by an unknown magician, Wren follows up on a lead to try and find out who her parents were. She and her friend Connor find themselves being followed and under attack, but they don't know why. Wren arrives safely home from her quest to find her family only to find out that Teressa has been kidnapped.

Wren is adventurous, fiercely loyal and fully committed to the actions she chooses. She could live a comfortable life at the royal court, but she prefers a life of action. *Wrens's Quest* should be accessible to ambitious middle school and many high school readers.

Smith, Sherwood. *Wren to the Rescue*. New York: Jane Yolen Books, 1990.

In this first of the three *Wren* books, Wren finds out that her orphanage friend, Tess, is a princess. Hidden for years because of a threat against her life, the king and queen believe it is now safe for Tess to return to court. Wren, who badly wants more adventure, is thrilled to find out that she can live with Tess. Shortly after their arrival, Tess is kidnapped. Not content with the efforts being made to rescue Tess, Wren sets off to rescue her herself. Though previous testing indicated that Wren had no magical abilities, she finds that she has a natural aptitude for certain types of magic. In fact, her abilities outstrip those of others with training. Wren finds two like-minded companions and tackles the almost impossible task of rescuing Tess.

Wren yearns for adventure. When adventure comes unexpectedly she doesn't turn away even though it isn't as fun or romantic as she dreamed. Wren is a doer. She isn't unthinking, but she definitely prefers action to talking, thinking and planning. If she were older and male she would be called a "man of action". *Wren to the Rescue* should be accessible to ambitious middle school and many high school readers.

Smith, Sherwood. *Wren's War*. New York: Jane Yolen Books, 1995.

In this third of three *Wren* books, Wren again finds herself in the middle of adventure, this time war against the sorcerer, Andreus who in previous books attacked Wren and kidnapped her friend and princess, Tess. As an unknown, Wren was able to use her determination and magical abilities to thwart Andreus' ambitions, but now he knows who she is. Internally there are family members who are challenging Tess's right to the throne. As usual, Wren isn't content with the pace of action and heads off on her own to do something about Andreus. Overmatched by the size of Andreus' army and facing internal dissension, Tess's hopes to gain the throne may depend on Wren.

This third book of the *Wren* series is just as enjoyable as the first two. Wren remains the same "get it done" character who will risk everything to do what is right without even thinking about it. *Wren's War* should be accessible to ambitious middle school and many high school readers.

Somtow, S.P. *The Vampire's Beautiful Daughter*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 1997.

Rebecca Teppish's father is a vampire. She meets Johnny, another semi-outcast at their high school. Johnny is one-quarter Lakota, but doesn't have any vampires in the family. Rebecca has an identity problem, but not like those of most teenagers. She is a few days from her sixteenth birthday when she will need to decide if she is a human or a vampire. With time is running out, falling in love with Johnny complicates an already difficult decision.

Though *The Vampire's Beautiful Daughter* is told from Johnny's point of view, Rebecca and her decision are just as compelling as Johnny and his problems. Rebecca faces a "life and

death” decision with calmness and strength. Some scenes of violence and sexual suggestiveness probably make *The Vampire’s Beautiful Daughter* most appropriate for high school readers.

Thesman, Jean. *The Other Ones*. New York: Viking, 1999.

Bridget has many typical teenage worries and troubles. She also has powers not typically shared by her classmates; powers she would prefer to ignore so that she can be normal. Problems are piling up around Bridget and she isn’t getting any help from the people she thinks should be helping. A few people, aware of her powers, hint at her ability to solve some of the problems if she would just acknowledge and accept her powers, but Bridget just wants to be normal. When it becomes clear that Bridget is the only one who can help someone she cares about, she is forced to decide between being normal and accepting her powers.

Bridget spends most of her time avoiding taking charge and being the hero, though she does stick up for someone in a difficult situation. She is making a conscious choice to not choose a path that she is being encouraged to take. *The Other Ones* should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Townley, Roderick. *The Great Good Thing*. New York: Athenum Books for Young Readers, 2001.

Sylvie is a twelve-year-old princess in a book. She is the heroine of an exciting story, but the story is always the same. The other characters believe their story is the world and that the role of Readers is to read. Sylvie isn’t content with that worldview. She can’t talk about it with the others, but she is sure that there must be more. She’s also sure that she must do a great good thing before she can settle into her life. Sylvie crosses the edge of her book into a Reader’s

dream and finds herself caught up in the lives of the Readers and in a desperate struggle to save the story.

Everyone knows that the story is the world, everyone except Sylvie. She isn't willing to accept that there isn't more just because everyone says so. Sylvie has the courage to question convention and to look for what might lie beyond. When she finds problems and dangers she could never have imagined she doesn't shrink from action. *The Great Good Thing* is an unusual book that should be accessible to many middle school readers.

Travers, P.L. *Mary Poppins*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1934.

Jane, Michael and the baby twins, John and Barbara, are in need of a new nanny. Saving their parents the trouble of advertising and interviewing, the wind drops off Mary Poppins at their door. Telling Mrs. Banks that she never gives references, Mary accepts the position without actually receiving an offer. Jane and Michael quickly discover that Mary isn't the typical nanny as they watch her empty a roomful of belongings out of what appears to be an empty carpetbag. Mary involves the children in a series of unusual adventures without ever acknowledging, even expressing her displeasure with the suggestion, that anything unusual has happened. In their last adventure the children find that Mary is not only unusual, but also unusually important.

Like Dorothy of *The Wizard of Oz*, Mary is probably best known as a movie character. Though the book Mary is not a particularly likeable character, she is unquestionably in control of her life. Mary acts and expects others to act accordingly. Mary's decisions leave no room for debate or compromise. *Mary Poppins* will appeal to many elementary school readers, and it is a book to be read to younger readers.

Vande Velde, Vivian. *Dragon's Bait*. New York: Harcourt, 1992.

Unfairly condemned as a witch, Alys is staked out as a sacrifice to a local dragon. Not only does the dragon not eat Alys, but he offers to help her seek revenge on the Inquisitor and the villagers responsible for her troubles. With Alys disguised as a boy and the dragon appearing as a boy they return to her village, but she finds revenge more difficult and troublesome than expected. After the Inquisitor captures the dragon, Alys offers herself back to the villagers as a witch in order to save him.

Alys demonstrates great bravery and a determination not to give up even when there seems to be little hope of recovering any normal life. Though she is unwilling to give up, Alys is willing to give herself up to save the dragon. *Dragon's Bait* should be accessible to many middle school readers.

White, E.B. *Charlotte's Web*. New York: HarperCollins, 1952.

Fern saves the runt of a litter of pigs from an untimely death and is given the responsibility for raising him. Under Fern's care, the pig, now named Wilbur, grows healthy and moves into the barnyard of Fern's uncle. Fern can understand the talk of the barnyard animals and spends as much time as she can watching and listening to what is going on. Wilbur is devastated when he finds out that he is being fattened up for slaughter. Charlotte, a spider with a web just above Wilbur offers to help save him.

Charlotte's Web is another of my criteria stretching selections, but is too good to leave out because of a minor detail like the strong female character being a spider. The spider, Charlotte, makes her own choices, decides how to live her life and what she wants her

relationships to be. What other book that can be read by a third-grader examines the philosophy of what it means to be a spider, not to mention, friendship, loyalty, and life and death?

Woodruff, Elvira. *The Summer I Shrank My Grandmother*. New York: Holiday House, 1990.

Ten-year-old Nelly Brown is a budding scientist spending the summer at the beach with her grandmother. She finds a very special chemistry set in the basement of the beach house. Frightened by signs of her grandmother's advancing age she decides to find a way to make her grandmother younger. She succeeds too well and watches her grandmother get younger and younger. Nelly has to figure out a way to save her grandmother from disappearing entirely.

Nelly's interest in science gets her in trouble, but she is somewhat unusual being a ten-year-old girl who is interested in science and actively seeks to change the world through her efforts. *The Summer I Shrank My Grandmother* should be accessible to many elementary school readers and can be read to younger readers, but probably will have little appeal for older readers.

Wrede, Patricia. *Calling on Dragons*. New York: Scholastic, 1993.

In this sequel to *Dealing with Dragons* and *Searching for Dragons* Cimorene, now the Queen of the Enchanted Forest, King Mendanbar, Morwen the witch, and Kazul, King of the Dragons, are joined by a magician named Telemain, a blue donkey named Killer and a couple of cats as they take on another adventure. The wizards have stolen King Mendanbar's sword, the source of the magic of the Enchanted Forest. With the sword gone from the kingdom, Mendanbar can't leave, so it is up to Cimorene and the others to recover it.

The cast of characters grows, but Cimorene, Kazul and Morwen continue to play leadership roles. *Calling on Dragons* is as enjoyable as the preceding books and Wrede continues to find new ways to have fun with fairy tales and fairy tale characters.

Wrede, Patricia. *Dealing with Dragons*. New York: Scholastic, 1990.

Much to the dismay of her parents, the King and Queen of Linderwall, Cimorene, unlike her six older sisters, isn't a proper princess. And Cimorene is very unhappy being a princess. Anything that she thinks is interesting, like fencing or magic, isn't proper. Anything that is proper, like dancing and etiquette, isn't interesting. After Cimorene's parents arrange a marriage for her, she runs away to the mountains, taking her chances on being eaten by a dragon to avoid the life that has been planned for her. She does meet a dragon, Kazul, who hires her as a cook rather than eating her. Cimorene fights wizards and a traitorous dragon to help Kazul in her effort to become King of the Dragons.

Cimorene is intelligent, brave and resourceful. Rather than submit to a life that she doesn't want, she chooses to find another life. Cimorene isn't the only strong female character. The dragon Kazul is a wise and forceful leader. The witch, Morwen, who always seems to be in control of the situation, helps Cimorene in her adventure. *Dealing With Dragons*, the first of four books in *The Enchanted Forest Chronicles*, is a good adventure and very funny, as Patricia Wrede has some fun with fairy tale conventions.

Wrede, Patricia. *Searching for Dragons*. New York: Scholastic, 1991.

Cimorene, Morwen and Kazul are back in this sequel to *Dealing With Dragons*. Cimorene meets King Mendanbar as he tries to find out why magic is disappearing from the

Enchanted Forest. Mendenbar is as unhappy with the expectations for royal behavior, as Cimorene was with the expectations for her as a princess. After they get to know each other and realize that neither of them is what people expect them to be, together they attempt to rescue the kidnapped Kazul and thwart the wizard's plans for power.

While Cimorene shares the stage with Mendenbar, they are unquestionably equals, with Cimorene at least as likely to lead. Morwen, the witch, again plays an important role and continues to demonstrate her confidence and willingness to act. *Searching for Dragons*, the second of four books in *The Enchanted Forest Chronicles*, is a good adventure and very funny, as Patricia Wrede continues her fun with fairy tale conventions.

Wrede, Patricia. *Talking to Dragons*. New York: Scholastic, 1995.

In this sequel to *Dealing with Dragons*, *Searching for Dragons* and *Calling on Dragons* the action shifts from Cimorene, Kazul and Morwen, but they each continue to play a part. King Mendenbar has been imprisoned by wizards' magic in his castle for years with no contact with the outside. Cimorene raised her son Daystar with no knowledge that she was a queen or that his father was a king. When he turns sixteen she sends him off with the sword that is the source of the magic of the Enchanted Forest with orders not to come back until his task is complete. She can't tell him what his task is. Like his mother in her previous adventures he picks up companions along the way, including Shiara, a fire-witch.

Though Cimorene doesn't play as prominent role as in the first three books, it is Cimorene's plans and actions that allow Daystar to go on his quest. Morwen and Kazul play important roles and the new character Shiara, like the other female characters before her, is not

content to just come along for the ride. *Talking to Dragons* is the fourth book in *The Enchanted Forest Chronicles*, but feels as fresh as the first.

Yolen, Jane. *The Pictish Child*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999.

Two days after the events of *The Wizard's Map* Jennifer and Peter visit a Scottish retirement home Gran and their little sister Molly. Jennifer has a nagging feeling that something is wrong and one of the residents gives Molly a talisman that she throws by accident into a cemetery. A young girl who obviously doesn't belong to their time appears and demands the stone. They take the girl home with them and trouble soon follows.

Unlike in *The Wizard's Map* Jennifer isn't left alone to save everyone, but she, Peter, Molly and Gran stick together to figure out what is going on and handle the problems that come their way.

Yolen, Jane. *The Wizard's Map*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999

Thirteen-year old twins, Jennifer and Peter are on a family trip to Scotland and their mother's childhood home. In the attic their four-year old sister Molly finds an old map that is magically connected to the land. The map and Molly's previously unknown magic bring back a nasty thirteenth-century wizard who promptly takes Molly, then their parents and their mother's cousins, and then Peter too is gone, leaving Jennifer on her own. She gets unexpected help from a dragon, unicorn and dog that she freed from a garden chair. With their help Jennifer finds Michael Scot's cave and her family, but only she can rescue her family and stop Michael Scot.

Jennifer is thrust into a situation she couldn't have previously imagined. Though scared and unsure what to do, she willingly walks into danger and confronts magic and power. *The Wizard's Map* should be accessible to middle school and some elementary school readers.

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