

Science Books: How to Choose?

A GIFT OF READING lasts a lifetime—as much a pleasure to give as to receive. But in any bookstore, you'll find hundreds of attractive children's books. How do you choose?

The book you select can have lasting effects on a child's understanding and enthusiasm. That's why two panels at the National Science Teacher's Association work to select the best in children's books in science. Their recommendations come in two forms. *NSTA Recommends* is an online searchable database of teacher-to-teacher book reviews. There are nearly 2000 highly rated books in the system now. Teacher, parents, librarians and even children can put in their favorite topic—from animals to zoology—and get links to reviews and information on how to buy the best in science literature. A second NSTA group works in partnership with the Children's Book Council to select between 40 and 50 of the best books published each year. You can find their list on NSTA's website, too, as well as in the March issue of each NSTA journal.

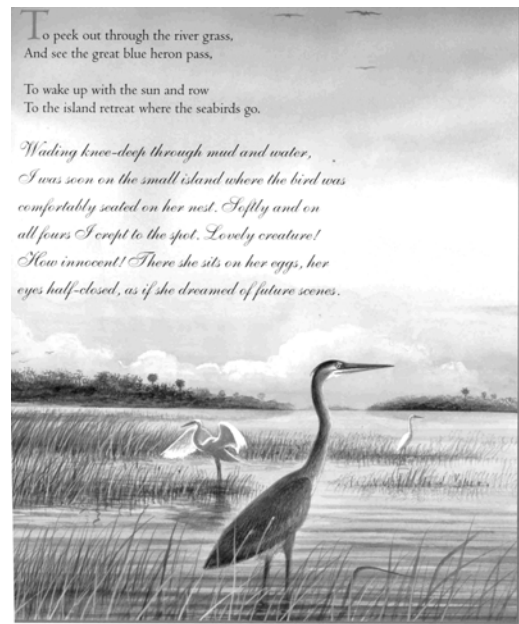
As they examine thousands of titles each year, NSTA's reviewers learn a lot about what makes a good children's book. Their criteria can help you at that trip to the bookstore, too.

📖 **Readability**—That's not just a formula, that takes in words and sentence lengths and spits out a grade level. Everyone knows a five year old who can read *Diplodocus* with ease! Readability also depends on the book's font (the size and style of type), the amount of white space, and the way the text is arranged.

📖 **Text clues**—Children who love to read often reach well beyond their grade level. What makes a text comprehensible to them? Good titles and subheads can help children decode complicated text. Text boxes that highlight a few important ideas are great too. A struggling reader will start with the titles and boxes, then move back to find that information in the text.

📖 **Pictures**—They're not just for decoration. Modern publishing technology has made it possible for almost all books to have attractive color prints, but the best books use them to support the text. Pictures should be opposite the text that describes them and have clear captions.

📖 **Content**—That's hard to check as you skim a few pages, but there are some important clues to the accuracy of the sci-



ence in the book you choose. Check the experience of the author. If the author isn't a scientist, are there good reviews? Check that the book doesn't mask myth or superstition as science.

📖 **Cut the "Cute"**—dancing bears and flying buses may be popular with some children but they never get the highest ratings from professionals. These elements can embed misconceptions in young children that last for years, making real science harder to learn.

Books that earn the highest honors meet all these criteria and more. They are creative and inspire *inquiry* in their readers. They will stand out on a bookstore shelf and in the memory of the child that treasures them for a lifetime.

—Juliana Texley, Ph.D.