Heroes Ancient, Modern and Mythic: A Bibliography

Nonfiction and Fiction Books to Promote Heroism in Children of All Ages

This bibliography of books about heroes and heroism has been compiled with the help of many librarians and teachers across the country. It is presented in two sections—one for younger children and another for older children and young adults. It provides over two hundred nonfiction titles—as well as numerous fiction ones—to support teachers as they implement the ELA Common Core State Standards.

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Books to Promote Heroism in Young Children

This bibliography was compiled by Fran Wilson, second grade teacher and Elementary Language Arts Instructional Leader for Madeira City Schools and past chair of NCTE’s Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children.

Nonfiction for Young Children

Excerpts of real and fictionalized heroes are interspersed among this unique guidebook. Children enjoy hearing and discussing these suspenseful heroic stories. Teachers will find this guide a valuable resource for instilling heroism within their students.

Society learned about the undersea world from the photos/movies done by Jacques. He raised society’s awareness of the need to care for our oceans.

After overcoming personal challenges, Carver selflessly gives of himself to teach others to respect nature.

This eleven-year-old author tells of her mission to help save the birds of the Gulf Oil Spill. Her actions will inspire all readers to make a difference.

Henry Knox demonstrates perseverance and bravery hauling cannons almost 300 miles through mountains, snow, and over lakes to Boston for Washington to use during the Revolutionary War.

Horace Pippin is a self-taught artist. When he returns home wounded after fighting in WWI, he perseveres to find a way to continue to create his paintings.

After becoming blind at age 5, Louis is determined to find a way to read. He invents an alphabet to read by touch that is used by blind people today.

Peter Mark Roget collects words and organizes them to have the just right word at the right time. He realizes that others might appreciate a source to quickly select the best word. The book reminds us that we all have treasures to share.

A carrier pigeon helps a lost battalion of soldiers to be rescued during WWI.

Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin demonstrate their bravery as they sacrifice their lives to land on the moon and even set foot upon it.


After Red Bird is sent away to boarding school, she feels caught between two cultures. She uses her developing talents to be a voice for her people.


Manjhi is determined to help the starving people of his village by digging a hole through the mountain that separates them from a village where food grows in abundance. This is based on a true story.


Joyce Chen uses something she loves, cooking, to bring comfort during a time of transition. She then decides to share her talent with others and watches as her dreams come true.


Harriet Tubman's roles as conductor of the underground railroad, suffragist, and spy are described in this picture book biography.


Helen’s teacher, Annie Sullivan, perseveres in finding a way to teach Helen to communicate.


Phillis Wheatley, a seventeen-year-old slave, demonstrates perseverance and courage while being questioned about the authorship of her own poems.


This book highlights thirteen American women in history who persisted through various obstacles in their lives.


This story shows courage displayed by young Ruby Bridges, the first African American child to be sent to an all-white school.

Corey, S. *Here Come the Girl Scouts!* New York: Scholastic, 2012.

This is the story of Juliette Gordon Low and her work to establish the Girl Scout organization in the United States.


Viv and her classmates find a way to save the sea turtles on the South Carolina coast.


The people of Mali work together to continue the peaceful coexistence between the desert elephants and themselves.

Coach McLendon believes that basketball could diminish people’s prejudices and so he arranges for a secret illegal game to be played in segregated North Carolina.


George Ferris perseveres and makes what many view as an unlikely invention, a magical ride for all people to enjoy.


A young Maasai man returns to his village after 9-11. He asks the elders to bless his offering of a cow as a gift to the Americans. The elders, touched by his story, offer some of their cows as a gift. They are presented to the American Ambassador.


Florence Nightingale’s work to make army hospitals safer resulted in transforming the world of medicine for all of us today.


A marine keeps encountering a dog, he names Nubs, while on duty in Iraq. The marine helps the malnourished dog and raises money to send Nubs to live in the U.S.


The people of Samso, an island in Denmark, work together and learn to use the energy of the wind and drastically reduce their carbon emissions.


Millo Castro Zaldirriaga’s courage to dream leads her to become a world famous musician and to forever break the taboo against female drummers in Cuba.


Martin Luther King Jr. uses wisdom and courage to determine the right words to inspire the nation.


Malala Yousafzai believed that girls deserved an education and stood up to the Taliban. Even when they tried to kill her, she would not stop fighting.


Arun experiences the gentle leadership from his loving grandfather. Gandhi shares with him words of wisdom for channeling his anger in positive ways.


Dogs served as heroes after the deadly 9-11 attack. The many roles of the dogs in the rescue efforts are highlighted.
This book contains real examples of dogs as heroes. Readers learn of the dogs that call 911, help police officers, guide the disabled, and more.

Mary Blair grows up collecting colors and becomes one of the first women hired by Walt Disney. Although her colorful ideas are resisted by the men she works for, Disney himself asks her to create the Small World ride.

Tom, Allie, and their golden retriever, Isabella, save three tiger pups after their mother abandons them.

An old turtle, Mzee, befriends a hippo that is orphaned after a tsunami. The two animals become close friends and develop a way to communicate with one another.

A young dolphin is rescued from a trap and taken to an aquarium. Although the dolphin learns to swim like a fish after her tail falls off, it is harmful to her spine. Engineers and scientists then create a special prosthetic tail for her.

As a young child Paul’s talent and love to complete math problems is apparent. His frequent collaborations with others helped to advance the field of mathematics.

Children are presented with many practical ways they can be heroes and help to care for our earth.

Kate Olivia Sessions loved trees. She studies and discovers just the right trees to transform the desert town of San Diego into a lush leafy city with shade for all to enjoy.

Wangari Maathai uses her wisdom, faith, and compassion to promote the rights of the women of Kenya while planting trees to save the land of the country.

An old fireboat is waiting to be sold for scrap when it is purchased by a group of friends for fun. The old fireboat is called back into action to help battle the fires of 9-11.
This book shows a young girl’s quest to learn more about our sixteenth president. Interesting facts are discovered along with the reasons why he was a hero.

Three of the dogs living on the farm work daily as heroes at their jobs. The fourth dog is an everyday hero by doing her job of caring for all of the other dogs.

Although FDR grew up in one of the wealthiest families in America, his heart was full of compassion for others. His battle with polio doesn’t stop him from leading our country and helping to make a difference in the lives of others.

This is the story of Wilma’s perseverance and drive to overcome polio and discrimination in her life.

A dog leads a blind cat away from the dangers of Hurricane Katrina.

Rachel’s love of nature and her keen observation skills lead to her writing the book, *Silent Spring,* which has a profound impact upon preserving the environment.

Nine-year-old Audrey wants to do her part to help change unfair segregation laws in Birmingham. Audrey is brave even when she is arrested.

Justice Ginsburg persistently fought for equal rights for women and became a member of the Supreme Court. Her belief that everyone be treated without prejudice has brought about change.

Clara Lemlich arrived in America as an immigrant and found herself working in a factory instead of attending school. She bravely stands up for her beliefs and fights for changed working conditions in the factories.

This book contains many short stories of animals helping people in danger. Children are especially intrigued by the story of the mother gorilla saving the toddler and the story of Frisky the dog saving George during Hurricane Katrina.

Baby pandas are raised at the Wolong Nature Center until they are strong enough to be released into the wild. These efforts will help this endangered species.
Thomas Gallaudet changes the world for Alice Cogswell and many other deaf people with the creation of a new language, American Sign Language. He also establishes a school for deaf students.

Based on a true story of war in Bosnia, a son of a florist learns how kindness can promote healing from a cellist who plays each day to honor the lives of those lost.

Although Helen Keller loses her sight and hearing, she perseveres to find a way to communicate with the help of Annie Sullivan. She finds a voice to speak out for others.

Jane Goodall’s curiosity leads her to uncover knowledge of the chimpanzee. Her determination and sense of responsibility guide her to help protect them.

Willie works hard and perseveres, in spite of the discrimination he experiences, to become a professional golfer and build a golf course for people of all color to use.

This story, written from a child’s point of view, tells how Dr. Greg helped the people of Korphe, Pakistan build a school.

Zeni dreamed of becoming a baseball player but after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he and his family are placed in an internment camp. Here he helps build a baseball field which provides those imprisoned with a sense of hope.

Ida Lewis loved helping her father, the lighthouse keeper. When her father becomes sick, she must come to the rescue of four boys who are in danger out in the harbor.

After Luciano Anastasini’s devastating fall as a circus performer on the high wire, he perseveres to find a way to continue to stay on with the circus. He successfully trains ten dogs in need of a home to become part of his circus act.

Frederick Douglass learned to read while a slave. After escaping to freedom in the north, he wrote and made speeches fighting for equality for all.

This is the story of Nelson Mandela’s determination to bring about change in South Africa and transform it into a country that believes in equality for all of its people.

Courage, perseverance, and determination are used by Wangari to lead a tree planting movement in Kenya to restore the land.


A young boy named Miles volunteers as a Seal Sitter. He finds a way to help to keep a baby seal safe from harm.


Long ago in America, libraries were not for children. Anne Carroll Moore wasn’t afraid to act upon her beliefs to help to create libraries for children and encourage reading.


Wangari Maathai worked tirelessly and courageously to help the people and land of Kenya with her Greenbelt Movement.


Alan stutters uncontrollably but he promises the animals if he can overcome this, he will save them. He makes a speech that leads to the first jaguar preserve in Belize.


This is the story of how determination and passion enabled a young child, who once wore braces on his legs, to become a dancer and director of Alvin Ailey.


Abraham Lincoln’s compassion and honesty allow him to lead the nation through a bitter Civil War. His wisdom is apparent in actual quotes that supplement the text.


Eleanor is tolerant and quiet. When the time comes for her to make a difference in the lives of others, she perseveres and speaks the words from her heart.


Despite being blind and deaf, Helen finds a way to learn and experience her world to the fullest with the help of her devoted teacher Annie Sullivan. Helen then used her strength and knowledge to impact the world.


Sickly Teddy Roosevelt grows up to be a president who uses his leadership skills to help Americans and create national parks.


Margaret loves math. When computers are introduced, Margaret discovers how they can be used to do math. Her work at NASA as a software programmer writing computer code leads to space missions to the moon.

Alice Paul uses her determination and creativity as a suffragette. This leads to President Woodrow Wilson supporting women’s right to vote.


Jackie was a true American hero demonstrating perseverance and patience that led to the desegregation of Major League Baseball.


Two brave suffragists trek across America in their car to spread the word about equal voting rights for women.


Dressed as a runaway slave, enlisted slave James learns information as a spy which leads to the American victory at the Battle of Yorktown.


After an eagle’s beak is partially shot off, a biologist and an engineer work together to create a new beak to save the eagle.

Rosenstock, B. *Ben Franklin’s Big Splash: The Mostly True Story of His First Invention*. Honesdale, PA: Calkins Creek, 2014.

As a child Ben loved swimming and his first invention was gear to help him swim like a fish. Ben believed in perseverance and sharing of inventions to benefit others.


Maya Lin entered and won the contest to design the Vietnam Memorial when she was a student at Yale. Her age and Chinese-American heritage caused some controversy but Maya endured and the memorial was created using her design.


After Marvin and his mama experience discrimination at the new shopping store and the lunch counter, Marvin wants to do something to help bring about change.


Aaron saves a baby elephant that falls into a pool in Zambia. When he visits the elephant at the nursery after its rescue, he cares for the elephant which has refused to eat. This begins his career as an elephant keeper.


This is a collection of profiles of women who have bravely fought for what they believed in. These rebellious women made powerful and lasting changes for our world.

Joe DiMaggio must prove he is skilled enough to become a major league player by playing against Satchel Paige and a team of African American players. While Joe earns his place on the Yankees, the talented Satchel continues to face discrimination.


At an early age Jane Addams was inspired to help others. She established a settlement house to help the poor. Jane's work for peace during World War I earned her a Nobel Peace Prize.


After seeing a ballet with her mother, Anna overcomes challenges to become a ballerina. She then shared the beauty of the dance with the poor as well as the rich.


Balto courageously leads the dog sled to deliver needed medicine to a remote town in Alaska. When his relief is not present to continue the sled run, exhausted Balto continues with the journey.


Buddy Walker recognizes the talent in Althea, even though all the people of Harlem see a girl in trouble. Buddy invests in a tennis racquet for Althea as well as time and encouragement to help her on her way to become the first African American woman to play in and win the Wimbledon Cup.


Elizabeth Cady Stanton recognizes the inequalities between men and women. She realizes that if women had the right to vote, life could be much better for them. She uses perseverance to make her idea come true.


This book shows the power of one individual to inspire another to do great things. Elizabeth Blackwell faced challenges to become a doctor and she paved the way for women to make a difference in the world.


Jane Addams, the first American woman to receive the Nobel Prize, carried out her vision for helping the poor by opening up her home as a community center.


Emmanuel, who is born with only one strong leg, cycles across the country of Ghana to show that people with disabilities can do things, too.


After Sylvia is denied entrance to a “whites only” school because she is Hispanic, her family takes action to end school segregation in California.
Franklin develops polio and uses his determination to help himself and our country, which is suffering from the Great Depression.

Parrots lived in Puerto Rico for millions of years but then they almost vanish. Scientists work together to help save this species.

Baraka, a young Kenyan boy with a disability, lives with his grandmother and eight cousins. When food becomes scarce, his grandmother must make a difficult choice.

Alfred Nobel is saddened when his invention of dynamite is used in harmful ways against other people. Upon his death, he leaves his fortune to establish a special award for those making great contributions to mankind. One special prize to be awarded is the peace prize.

Lena grew up a talented singer and performed on Broadway. As an actress she fought racism by refusing to perform in stereotypic roles.

A series of poems tells of Fannie Lou’s lifelong work for racial equality.

This biography tells of John F. Kennedy growing up from a sickly child to become the 35th president who handles the Cuban Missile Crisis and works for civil rights.

As a young girl Zaha dreamed of designing cities. Despite the rejection of her unique designs many times, Zaha becomes one of the world’s most celebrated female architects.

Malala bravely speaks out for the rights of girls to attend school in Pakistan.

Nasreen’s grandmother must save her granddaughter from her sadness. She takes a risk and finds a secret school to enroll Nasreen. The experience changes Nasreen.

Bird lovers speak out to save the home of the red-tailed hawks nesting in New York City.

Jane loved to watch nature as a child. When she grows up, she studies chimpanzees in Africa and eventually must speak out to save them from becoming extinct.
Winter, J. & Widener, T. *You Never Heard of Willie Mays?!* New York: Schwartz & Wade Books, 2013. Willie’s determination to win the game changed the quality of the sport as well as how players were treated because of the color of their skin.


Yousafzai, M. *Malala’s Magic Pencil.* New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017. While living in an area where the Taliban forbid girls to go to school, Malala Yousafzai used her writing and her words to make people around the world aware of the injustice in her region.

**Fiction for Young Children**

This list is necessarily incomplete, given the enormous number and variety of truly wonderful and timeless books featuring heroic characters. The books listed below are recently-published titles that we have found to be especially effective in introducing young children to the concept of heroes.

Cohn, D. *Crane Boy.* El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press, 2015. Young Kinga learns that the black-necked cranes that migrate each year to Bhutan are endangered. He searches for a way to save them and remind the people to protect them.

De Kinder, J. *Red.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015. At first Lisa finds it fun to tease Tommy and make him blush. As her friends join in, one of them takes it too far. Lisa realizing her mistake finds the courage to speak up to stop the bullying.

Draper, S. *Stella By Starlight.* New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2015. After Stella witnesses the acts of the KKK and experiences the hatred of discrimination, she works hard to develop her writing skills and use them to try to bring about a change.

Fosberry, J. *My Name is Not Alexander.* Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2011. Throughout the day young Isabella imagines that she is some of the amazing women who have changed history. She dreams about how she may use her qualities to become a hero herself.

Fosberry, J. *My Name is Not Isabella.* Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2010. Young Alexander imagines that he is some of the world’s remarkable heroes and he dreams of the hero he might become.


This is a simple book with a big message of being kind and passing on the positive things in life.

Abe’s childhood friend, Austin Gollaher, saves him from drowning in a rushing creek.

Nalvana notices all the special things her friends can do and wonders about her own superpower. Her mom helps her discover that her power is making others feel good about themselves.

Otis and his friends leave the frowning scarecrow alone when he makes no attempt to respond to their friendly smiles. One cold, rainy day Otis takes the first step to be a friend and include the lonely scarecrow in the friends’ game.

Jane imagines a career of helping animals in Africa and one day her dreams come true. The book contains a message from Jane that each of us has the potential to make a difference in the world.

A young girl learns the meaning of perseverance and fighting for a cause as she marches with “Aunt Susan” to promote women’s right to vote.

Young Conall spends his days working in the coal mine with his mule, Angel. When an underground tunnel suddenly collapses, Conall must find a way to rescue his brother and other trapped miners.

This story is based upon real life firefighter Mose Humphreys who became a fictionalized character with incredible heroic acts. Mose continues to represent the courage and strength of firefighters throughout history.

Although Auggie may look different, he’s just like every other kid. This book lets readers see the need to treat everyone with kindness.

Yazul loves creating kites with his grandfather but his father disapproves. When their han along the Silk Road is attacked by bandits, Yazul’s creative idea saves them all.

Neel learns that a young tiger cub is missing on his island in the Sunderbans of West Bengal. He wants to find it before someone else captures and sells it on the black market.
While stationed in the South Pacific, Johnnie befriends a young girl and helps the people of her village escape to safety. Years later he is surprised by her kindness that is returned to him.

This is a fictional account of two heroes meeting for tea to share their efforts on working for the right to vote for women and African Americans.

When the New England blizzard of 1978 strikes, families begin to run low on food while waiting for the plow to dig them out. Young John discovers a creative way to make snowshoes and bring groceries to those in need.

A young girl has a vision of exactly what she wants to create. Through perseverance, hard work, and some encouragement from her assistant, her dog, she succeeds.

This story of kindness is set in 1572 in Beijing, China. A nine-year old boy makes the emperor happy with his gift of a carved gourd cricket cage.

**Books to Promote Heroism in Older Children and Young Adults**

This bibliography was compiled by Barbara Ann Richman, Executive Director of the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, with help from librarians and teachers across the country.

**Nonfiction for Older Children and Young Adults**


Cook, K. “Ryan’s Well.” Reader’s Digest, June 2001, 144A-144C.


Layden, J. *Against the Odds.* New York: Scholastic, 1997


Michelmore, P. "Born To Win." Reader's Digest, April 1999, 62-68.


A female pediatrician and a famous surgeon team up to carry out a medical procedure for saving “blue babies” that is developed by an African American lab assistant in a segregated hospital.


**Fiction for Older Children and Young Adults**

This list is necessarily incomplete, given the enormous number and variety of truly wonderful and timeless books featuring heroic characters. The books listed below are ones that we have found to be especially effective in engaging older children in a study of heroes.


This free verse novel tells of Clara Lemlich’s tireless fight to improve the working conditions in the garment factories.


Young Conall spends his days working in the coal mine with his mule, Angel. When an underground tunnel suddenly collapses, Conall must find a way to rescue his brother and other trapped miners.


