

***Mia's Thumb*, by Ljuba Stille. 2014. New York: Holiday House. 32 pp. Ages 2 to 6.**

Thumb sucking is a common habit, and it satisfies a young child's need for comfort, but outgrowing the habit is often dealt with in a negative way. This text offers a humorous and developmentally appropriate story from Germany about a thumb sucker named Mia. The book validates and honors her love of thumb sucking—which will resonate with young children. Her family's frustration with her thumb sucking will be relatable and her grandparents' humor and support, which ultimately help Mia outgrow the habit, will inspire. The text is simple and straightforward, yet rich at the same time. It captures the essence of why she does it: "It comforted her when she was sad. . . . And it encouraged her when she needed to be brave. . . . Mia needed her thumb when a movie was too exciting. . . or too boring." Hilarious illustrations take those simple statements and bring them to life (she sucks her thumb in the face of a neighbor's monster-sized dog that supposedly "just wants to play"). The collage illustrations are bold, charming, and uncluttered, but the pages are filled with the emotion emanating from Stille's expressive characters.

***Dinosaur Farm*, by Frann Preston-Gannon. 2014. New York: Sterling Children's Books. 32 pp. Ages 2 to 6.**

Books about a farmer's day often portray the idyllic aspects of farm life, but this farmer's day is a little different. He wakes up with a droll and overwhelmed look on his face. What could possibly be wrong? As it turns out, the farmer operates a dinosaur farm. (We should have known when he sat down for breakfast to a soft-boiled egg that was as big as his head!) As he sets out to do what every farmer must—feed and clean his animals



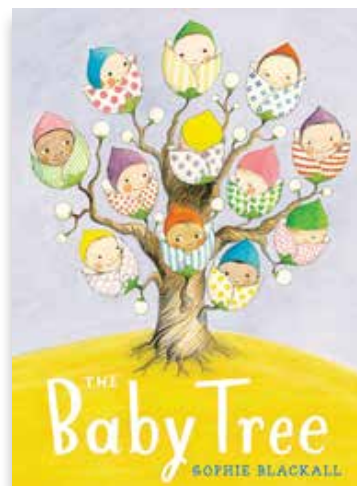
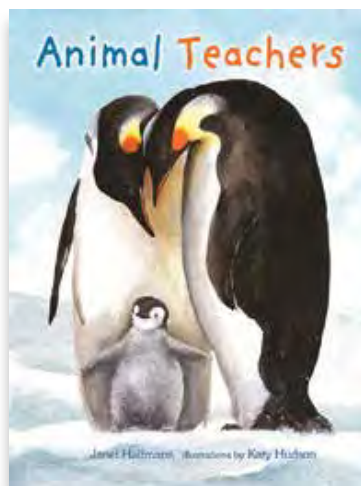
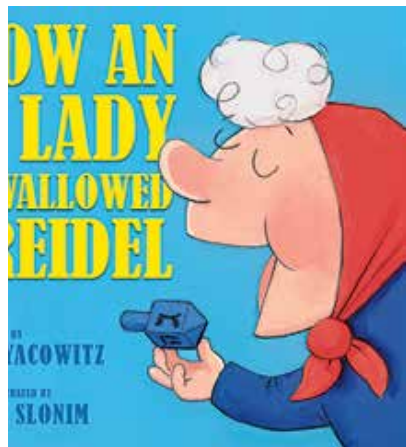
and tend to the grounds—the reader discovers that such basic tasks are anything but basic. Unexpected challenges include the farmer hauling sides of beef for the dinosaurs' meals, moving giant mounds of manure, and using a ladder to bathe them. A page about new life on the farm adds intrigue: a small dinosaur is hatching from an egg. This fantastic and zany book is fully believable and lots of fun. Writer-illustrator Preston-Gannon was the first UK recipient of a fellowship through which she spent a month living with and learning from famed author-illustrator Maurice Sendak.

***I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Dreidel*, by Caryn Yacowitz. Illus. by David Slonim. 2014. New York: Arthur A. Levine Books. 32 pp. Ages 3 to 8.**

Enjoy this Hanukkah book all year long. Based on the song "I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly," this version follows the traditional building blocks of the original song, while incorporating a story of an old woman celebrating the festival of lights with her family. Just like the original, this version is absurd. She washes the dreidel down with a "pitcher of oil, 'bout ready to boil," and then eats a platter of latkes to fry in the oil. The near-fatal items she swallows include a menorah, gelt, and brisket.

The illustrations turn this solid hit into a home run. David Slonim, known for his cartoonish work in children's books, is also a fine artist. Here, he combines both loves to humorous effect. Using his traditional cartoon style, he remakes famous works of art to fit the story line. For example, the diner in Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* is recast as a restaurant serving latkes all night. His goal, as he explains in a note at the back, is to transcend the traditional images of the holiday and speak to the





universality of a celebratory family gathering. In doing so, Slonim borrows the emotional weight of these legendary images, blends them with the story, and gives adult readers a chuckle at the same time.

***Animal Teachers*, by Janet Halfmann. Illus. by Katy Hudson. 2014. Maplewood, NJ: Blue Apple Books. 32 pp. Ages 3 to 8.**

This lovely title about animal behavior centers on the premise that parents are our first teachers (it's a great pick for family engagement!). Children know how much they learn from their family, but do they know how much animals learn, too? Each spread shows a different animal child-parent duo learning fundamental skills that most readers probably assume the animals are born with. For example, a chick pecks at everything—even its own feet—until its mother teaches it to peck for seeds. A mama otter teaches her baby to swim much like a human would—backing up a few feet and encouraging the baby to bridge the gap. Baby elephants are taught to use their trunks to suck up water. At first, they make a big bubbly mess! The large text is simple enough for younger readers, and smaller text adds detail for older readers. “More Animal Facts” at the back provides information about all 12 animals featured in the book.

***The Baby Tree*, by Sophie Blackall. 2014. New York: Nancy Paulson Books. 32 pp. Ages 4 to 8.**

When a young boy is told that “a new baby is coming,” he can’t help but wonder where his family is getting the baby from. All the people he relies on during the day give him a different answer. His teenage babysitter tells him that you plant a seed and it grows into a baby tree. His teacher says

that they come from the hospital. His grandpa tells him that the stork brings the baby. When his parents give him a more honest answer, he realizes that everyone except Grandpa had one piece of the story right (the dad offers something like a seed, and most babies are delivered at a hospital). The book ends with a picture of the boy explaining everything to his grandfather, who listens intently with a sweet knowing look in his eye.

The content of the book is graduated, explaining on multiple levels how babies are made. The story itself would be appropriate to read to even the youngest preschoolers, and information at the end offers more details for older school-age children. The notes at the back also give adults language to use when discussing where adopted babies come from and where babies with two moms or two dads come from. All the answers are honest but simple. Sophie Blackall’s masterful illustrations don’t disappoint, providing intrigue, curiosity, and love on every page.

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