

# Favorite Books of Middle School Students: Why They Are Favorite

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## 【摘要 Abstract】

本研究利用問卷調查 499 名之 6~8 年級美國中學生的閱讀嗜好，以探討中學生最喜愛閱讀的十本書和促使中學生選擇這些閱讀書類型的原因。在問卷中讓學生列出個人最喜愛閱讀的十本書名，並寫出選擇和閱讀這些書的原因，除了問卷以外，並與 23 名的學生當面訪談以對照印證問卷所得的結果。

根據問卷所列出各個學生所最愛閱讀的十本書，加以統計和分析而得以列出中學生最喜愛閱讀的十本書。閱讀老師在教學活動中所指定的書是中學生會選擇其所閱讀的書種的最大原因，書中的故事以及書中的角色是中學生選擇其所閱讀的書種的第二重要原因，其他如電影、書的封面、同學朋友的推薦、父母兄弟等家人的推薦也都會影響中學生閱讀時的選擇。

This study investigated the top ten favorite books of middle school students and their reasons for choosing these books. A total of 499 students, in grades 6-8, participated in the study. A student questionnaire was used to identify the students' favorites and their reasons of choosing these books. In addition, a small sample of 23 student volunteers was interviewed. The results of data analysis generated a list of ten favorite books for the school. Reading teachers were found to be the most significant reason for determining how the students chose their favorite books. The next most important reason was the story type and book characters. Movies, book covers, peers, and parents were also main reasons in students' choice of favorite books.

## 關鍵詞 Keyword

閱讀興趣 閱讀習慣 中學生 閱讀老師 教學媒體老師

reading interests; reading habits; middle school students; reading teachers; media specialists



## 1. Introduction

As the information center of any school, the library media center provides both materials for students to read and learn as well as resources for teachers to use in instruction. The school media center, as with academic or public libraries, must be service-oriented. Children's interests and needs should be taken into consideration when the library collection is being developed. In this way, the media center can become an attractive and functional place for students to utilize.

Often, school media specialists see students leaving the media center empty-handed, while claiming that they could not find a good book. A group of 254 students in grades 5-8 participating in the Heathington's survey indicated that one of the reasons for their non-reading habit was that there were no good books, interesting books, right books, or books on a certain topic. ① Adults who have daily contact with teenagers deplore the decline of reading among our young population. Based on a longitudinal study of the reading attitudes and behaviors of middle school students, Ley and Schaer stated that the frequency of students' voluntary reading decreased during the period of grades 6-8. ② Reading was ranked low in pleasure activity preferences among these middle school students, and approximately 30% never read for fun in their spare time.

Many young adults, including those able to read, no longer read for leisure. This situation contrasts with their counterparts from a few decades ago. Television is often considered a

major culprit for diverting time away from reading. ③ The media report that children and teenagers spend hours in front of a television as passive viewers and receivers. American 9-year-old children claimed to spend an average of three hours watching television per day, with 21% watching for over 5 hours, while 14-year-old teens watched an average of 2.5 hours per day. ④

However, in spite of numerous reports in the media, research has shown no clear evidence that television displaces reading. ⑤ Thus, television may not be the culprit for school children's lack of reading.

One of many causes for the decline in reading could be attributed to students' lack of reading time outside the classroom. ⑥ Class assignments, church activities, and teenage social activities all compete for students' time. Another primary reason for decreased reading, as claimed by some children, could be the absence of good or interesting books available in libraries and media centers. ⑦ This fact raises some important concerns.

Are books, which are considered good or interesting by school library media specialists, also accepted as such by children? Do children have their own set of criteria when choosing a book to read? If they do, do media specialists take these criteria into consideration? When book selection is based only on reviews, a media center could potentially house a large number of books "which have been selected not so much because children do read them as because teachers think that they should read them". ⑧ Children may not necessarily read the books



that reviewers have carefully selected for them; instead, they may read something else. ⑨

For children, it can be very frustrating to choose a right book from a huge collection in the media center. Children, unlike adults, read no journal reviews to help them in their selection. They obtain much of their reading materials from libraries ⑩, and the primary source of their reading materials is the school library media center. ⑪ If this is true, then it seems logical to assume that children's major review sources of good or interesting books are media specialists, teachers, and peers with whom they spend many of their waking hours each day. Therefore, it is imperative for media specialists and teachers to know what their students' favorite books are and why they choose these books, so that an inviting and useful library collection may be built to better serve students' needs and interests.

## 2. Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine middle school students' favorite books and the reasons they chose these books. This study attempted to answer two research questions:

- (1) What are the top ten favorite books of middle school students?
- (2) Why do students choose these books as favorites? In other words, what are the reasons that these books become favorite?

## 3. Methods

This study was conducted in a Georgia middle school, grades 6-8, in a rural and small

community. The school had approximately 1000 students and 80 teachers. Both English and Reading courses were part of the school curriculum.

### 3.1. Subjects

A total of 499 students, including 172 in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 180 in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and 147 in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, participated in the study. Students in special education classes and Chapter 1 classes (students from less privileged family background) were excluded. Special Education teachers declined to participate because they claimed that their students read very little, and might have difficulty in filling out the questionnaires. Gifted students were also not included since reading class was not available to them. Thus, the subjects in the study were mainstream reading class students.

### 3.2. Instrumentation

Two types of instruments were employed to collect data: student questionnaires and student interviews. The questionnaire, formulated by the author, asked students to list their ten favorite books and to state the reasons why they chose these books. Copies of the questionnaire were distributed and collected by reading teachers during regular class hours.

In addition, a reading teacher at school interviewed 23 student volunteers for further information. The interviewer held three sessions of focus group interviews, with 6-10 students attending one session at one time. An outline of topics regarding books and reading interests





served as a guide for asking questions. Cassette tapes were used to record the interviews.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Research Question 1 ascertained what students' favorite books were. Favorite books were operationally defined as the books that students read, liked, or heard them read, and would recommend to their peers. The book titles listed by students in the questionnaires were tabulated for each grade, and cumulatively for the whole school. Books that had been chosen by the most students were identified as top ten favorites.

Students' reasons for choosing a particular book were analyzed in a similar manner by listing the reasons, grouping them into categories, and then calculating the number and percentage of students who stated a particular reason for choosing a certain book. Reasons that were given by a majority of students were considered major ones affecting their choice of favorite books. The cassette tapes of interviews were transcribed, word by word, studied, and examined. Recurring themes for why the books were selected were categorized and coded. Data gathered from the interviews were subsequently used to compare and contrast with data collected from the questionnaires.

### 3.4. Limitations

Two limitations must be kept in mind when interpreting the research results of this study. First, the study was conducted in a Georgia school located in a small and rural community.

Second, participants in the study were limited to students from the mainstream student body. Consequently, research findings may only be generalized to mainstream students in middle school with similar geographical characteristics.

### 3.5. Results

#### 3.5.1. Top Ten Favorite Books

Data analysis from the questionnaires generated a list of top ten books of all three grades, as shown in Table 1.

Where the Red Fern Grows was the top favorite book of the school, chosen by 118 students, representing 23.6 percent of the student population. The book was also the top favorite of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders, with 35 students (19.4%) in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and 58 students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade (39.5%) choosing the book. The second most favorite book in the list was Hatchet and the third Charlotte's Web. The remaining seven favorite books, in descending order, can be seen in Table 1.

#### 3.5.2. Reasons for Students' Choice of Favorite Books

The results of data analysis indicated that teachers were the most significant reason for students choosing their favorite books. Another important reason was the type of story described or the characters portrayed in a book. Other reasons included current or past movies, book covers, peers, relatives, and the availability of a certain book. Parents, especially mothers, and siblings were also found to have great influence in why certain books were chosen as favorites.





Tables 2-4 show the reasons why students chose these ten books as their favorites in each individual grade. For the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, *Hatchet* was the top favorite, chosen by 42 students. Among these 42 students, 67% stated that teacher or class assignments were their reason for selecting this book. Seventeen percent chose the book as a favorite because they liked the story or the book character while 5% of students cited movies as their reason. Another 5% attributed their choice to the book cover. Some students did not give any reasons for choosing this book.

Like *Hatchet*, the eight other titles listed on Table 2 were also chosen as favorites predominantly because of teacher assignments or class

related work. *Charlotte's Web* was chosen by equal number of students because of teacher or class assignments and the story itself or its book character. *Jurassic Park*, the only exception on the 6<sup>th</sup> grade favorite list, was chosen because many students had seen the movie, and others loved dinosaur as the book character.

Table 3 demonstrates again that teacher or class assignments and the story or book characters also had a great influence in the 7<sup>th</sup> graders' choice of books. *The Wizard of Oz* is an exception, which became a favorite because of its movie version.

Table 4 displays the reasons, as given by 8<sup>th</sup> graders, why these ten books were chosen as their favorites. Again, teacher or class assignments

Table 1 Top Ten Favorite Books of Middle School Students

Book title and author	Chosen by numbers* and % of students							
	6th grade		7th grade		8th grade		All grades	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
<i>Where the Red Fern Grows</i> by Wilson Rawls	25	14.5	35	19.4	58	39.5	118	23.6
<i>Hatchet</i> by Gary Paulsen	42	24.4	18	10.0	27	18.4	87	17.4
<i>Charlotte's Web</i> by E. B. White	34	20.0	19	10.6	12	8.2	65	13.0
<i>Maniac Magee</i> by Jerry Spinelli	33	19.2	12	6.7	5	3.4	50	10.0
<i>Bridge to Terabithia</i> by Katherine Paterson	40	23.3	1	0.6	6	4.1	47	9.4
<i>Island of the Blue Dolphins</i> by Scott O'Dell	8	4.7	3	1.7	22	15.0	33	6.6
<i>Jurassic Park</i> by Michael Crichton	10	5.8	10	5.6	11	7.5	31	6.2
<i>The Outsiders</i> by S. E. Hinton	0	0	1	0.6	29	19.7	30	6.0
<i>Black Beauty</i> by Anna Sewell	7	4.1	19	10.6	1	0.7	27	5.4
<i>The Secret Garden</i> by Frances Hodgson Burnett	8	4.7	16	8.9	3	2.0	27	5.4

\* Total of student participants is 499: 172 in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 180 in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and 147 in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.





predominated, with seven titles being chosen for this reason. As for the remaining three titles, Charlotte's Web and Jurassic Park were chosen because of the movies, while White Fang was favored because of its story character.

#### 4. Discussion

The research findings indicated that classroom-related reading activities, including

project assignments, book reports, reading aloud in class, or recommending books in class, was the single most significant reason in determining what students chose their favorite books. In the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, nine out of the ten favorite books were chosen as a result of teacher-related activities. In the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, five favorite books were selected for the same reason while in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, seven titles out of ten were chosen.

Table 2 Top Ten Favorite Books of the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade and Reasons of Choosing Them

Book title and author	Student		Reasons
	#	%	
<i>Hatchet</i> by Gary Paulsen	42	24.4	Teacher or class assignment 67%; Story or book character 17%; Book cover 5%; Movie 5%; No reason given 6%
<i>Bridge to Terabithia</i> by Katherine Paterson	40	23.3	Teacher or class assignment 63%; Story or book character 20%; Book cover 5%; Peer 5%; No reason given 7%
<i>Charlotte's Web</i> by E. B. White	34	20.0	Teacher or class assignment 24%; Story or book character 24%; Movie 15%; Present or availability 12%; Peer 12%; Book cover 9%; Librarian 3%; No reason given 1%
<i>Maniac Magee</i> by Jerry Spinelli	33	19.2	Teacher or class assignment 52%; Story or book character 36%; Book cover 3%; No reason given 9%
<i>Where the Red Fern Grows</i> by Wilson Rawls	25	14.5	Teacher or class assignment 32%; Book cover 20%; Story or book character 12%; Movie 8%; Mother 4%; Title 4%; No reason given 20%
<i>James and the Giant Peach</i> by Ronald Dahl	21	12.2	Teacher or class assignment 48%; Story or book character 14%; Title 10%; Book cover 5%; No reason given 23%
<i>Dear Mr. Henshaw</i> by Beverly Cleary	12	7.0	Teacher or class assignment 58%; Story or book character 25%; No reason given 17%
<i>Number the Stars</i> by Lois Lowry	11	6.4	Teacher or class assignment 55%; Story or book character 27%; Present or availability 9%; No reason given 9%
<i>Jurassic Park</i> by Michael Crichton	10	5.8	Story or book character 40%; Movie 40%; Peer 10%; No reason given 10%
<i>Sarah, Plain and Tall</i> by Patricia MacLachlan	9	5.2	Teacher or class assignment 33%; Story or book character 22%; Movie 22%; No reason given 23%

\* Total of student participants in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade is 172.



The story or the character portrayed in a book was another major reason in determining how students chose certain books as their favorite. Both in the questionnaires and during interviews, students stated that they chose Where the Red Fern Grows, Black Beauty, Jurassic Park, or Charlotte's Web because they liked animal characters--dogs, horse, dinosaurs, or pig--which are portrayed in these books. Brian, a 13-year-old boy in Hatchet, appealed tremendously to

students as he learns to survive in the wilderness for 54 days after a plane crash. A horror or scary story as described in It by Stephen King was another reason for being a favorite book.

Movies were also found to be a very important reason. Many titles cited as favorite books are also contemporary blockbusters or children's classical motion pictures. Examples included Jurassic Park, It, Wizard of Oz, Black Beauty, Charlotte's Web, and The Secret

Table 3 Top Ten Favorite Books of the 7<sup>th</sup> Grade and Reasons of Choosing Them

Book title and author	Student		Reasons
	#	%	
<i>Where the Red Fern Grows</i> by Wilson Rawls	35	19.4	Teacher or class assignment 23%; Story or book character 23%; Peer 17%; Movie 14%; Author 3%; Present or availability 3%; Book cover 3%; Sister 3%; No reason given 11%
<i>Black Beauty</i> by Anna Sewell	19	10.6	Story or book character 58%; Teacher or class requirement 16%; Mother 5%; No reason given 21%
<i>Charlotte's Web</i> by E. B. White	19	10.6	Story or book character 37%; Movie 21%; Peer 11%; Teacher or class requirement 5%; Book cover 5%; No reason given 21%
<i>It</i> by Stephen King	19	10.6	Story or book character 37%; Movie 21%; Book cover 5%; Present or availability 5%; Mother 5%; No reason given 9%
<i>Hatchet</i> by Gary Paulsen	18	10.0	Teacher or class assignment 39%; Story or book character 28%; Peer 6%; Present or availability 6%; No reason given 21%
<i>The Secret Garden</i> by Frances Hodgson Burnett	16	8.9	Teacher or class assignment 25%; Story or book character 19%; Book cover 6%; Movie 6%; Peer 6%; Present or availability 6%; No reason given 32%
<i>The Wizard of Oz</i> by Frank Baum	13	7.2	Movie 38%; Story or book character 23%; Teacher or class requirement 8%; Mother 8%; Peer 8%; No reason given 15%
<i>Maniac Magee</i> by Jerry Spinelli	12	6.7	Teacher or class assignment 76%; Story or book character 8%; Book cover 8%; Peer 8%; No reason given 0%
<i>Jurassic Park</i> by Michael Crichton	10	5.6	Story or book character 70%; Movie 30%; No reason given 0%
<i>The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe</i> by C. S. Lewis	10	5.6	Teacher or class assignment 80%; Story or book character 10%; No reason given 10%

\* Total of student participants in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade is 180.



Garden. Almost all other favorite titles have also been made into a movie version. One reason that appeared over and over again in the questionnaires and during the interviews was "I saw the movie, then I read the book."

Students also relied on their friends, siblings, cousins, and classmates regarding their choice of books. Relatives such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents often gave books as presents. With

these books available in hands, students tended to read them and regarded them as favorites. Parents, especially the mother, were also an important source of favorite books. They usually recommended, purchased, or read books to their children.

Interestingly, the book cover was another reason given by students in their choice of favorite books. Eye-catching covers caught students' attention immediately. Students often commented

Table 4 Top Ten Favorite Books of the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade and Reasons of Choosing Them

Book title and author	Student		Reasons
	#	%	
<i>Where the Red Fern Grows</i> By Wilson Rawls	58	39.5	Teacher or class assignment 36%; Movie 24%; Peer 14%; Story or book character 12%; Book cover 3%; No reason given 11%
<i>The outsiders</i> By S. E. Hinton	29	19.7	Teacher or class assignment 55%; Story or book character 17%; Peer 14%; Book cover 13%; No reason given 0%
<i>Hatchet</i> by Gary Paulsen	27	18.4	Teacher or class assignment 48%; Story or book character 26%; Peer 11%; Movie 4%; Brother 4%; No reason given 7%
<i>Island of the Blue Dolphins</i> by Scott O'Dell	22	15.0	Teacher or class assignment 45%; Peer 23%; Story or book character 9%; Movie 9%; Book cover 5%; No reason given 9%
<i>The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe</i> by C. S. Lewis	13	8.8	Teacher or class assignment 62%; Story or book character 8%; Peer 8%; Brother 8%; No reason given 14%
<i>The Hobbit</i> by J. R. R. Tolkien	13	8.8	Teacher or class assignment 31%; Movie 23%; Peer 15%; Story or book character 8%; Book cover 8%; Father 8%; No reason given 7%
<i>Charlotte's Web</i> by E. B. White	12	8.2	Movie 50%; Peer 25%; Teacher or class requirement 17%; Book cover 8%; No reason given 0%
<i>Jurassic Park</i> by Michael Crichton	11	7.5	Movie 45%; Story or book character 45%; No reason given 10%
<i>Sarah, Plain and Tall</i> by Patricia MacLachlan	8	5.4	Teacher or class assignment 50%; Movie 38%; Story or book character 12%; No reason given 0%
<i>White Fang</i> by Jack London	8	5.4	Story or book character 50%; Movie 38%; Title 12%; No reason given 0%

\* Total of student participants in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade is 147.



"I like the book cover," "It looks cool," or "The cover looks like a good book." Thus, the book cover often served as a preliminary screening device. One example of an appealing book cover was that of Where the Red Fern Grows, which portrays a pre-teen boy holding a lantern and intensely searching in the darkness with his two pet dogs at his sides. Besides the front book cover, students also skimmed the publisher's note in the back cover to determine whether the book was worth reading or not.

Time after time in this research, students reported that their favorite books were those that their teachers had read to them. Where the Red Fern Grows was the top favorite book for the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> grades, and the whole school. Not surprisingly, one 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading teacher has read the book to her students every year and thus created an enormous interest among the student body. The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe was another book read often by teachers.

Inflection in the teacher's voice while reading was also a reason why a book became special to students. Many students reported during the interviews "My teacher read the book with so much feeling". Thus, students picked up teachers' passion for reading. When students sensed that a teacher was enjoying a book as he or she read, their enjoyment of the book became greater.

Books that teachers chose for reading aloud must hold special meaning for students, as mentioned by several students. The type of

community, urban versus rural, where students live, must be taken into consideration when teachers or media specialists select a book to read aloud in class or recommend for students. The rural setting of the school in this study, where students heard about hunting or actually participated in hunting, contributed to a great degree to the popularity of Where the Red Fern Grows.

Among the favorite books are six Newbery Award winners : Maniac Magee, Bridge to Terabithia, Island of Blue Dolphins, Sarah, Plain and Tall, Dear Mr. Henshaw, and Number the Stars. In addition, Hatchet won the Georgia Children's Book Award in 1990-1991. Therefore, it seems reasonable to state that teachers can determine to a great extent how familiar their students are with books of literary value for a particular age group.

Another finding of this study was that light romance and mystery were also popular among this age group, even though no title in this genre made the top ten favorites. Several girls chose only Baby Sitter Club series and Sweet Valley Twins series ⑫ while a number of boys and girls selected only R. L. Stine's Goosebump series or his Fear Street series ⑬ as their favorites in the questionnaires. The findings are consistent with what has been reported in the literature. ⑭ In The Power of Reading, Krashen ⑮ also advocated this type of light reading as conduit to more serious reading.

Surprisingly, media specialists were found to have much less influence than teachers on how students chose their reading material. Only





a small number of students reported that media specialists read or suggested books to them. It is understandable since teachers have more direct contact with students in classroom on daily basis, and naturally, students have more opportunities to seek teachers' advice regarding reading. Regardless, media specialists can certainly collaborate with teachers, and play a more active role in students' reading. Such collaboration has been a positive impact on students. A Colorado study ⑯ has shown that student achievement test scores increase when the school library media specialists join with teachers to exploit resources of the library media collection. Cooperation between reading teachers and media specialists is essential in acquiring good, interesting, and right books for children as well as fully utilizing media center resources.

## 5. Implications

Instructional attention to some general issues is clearly warranted. First, books listed on the questionnaires in this study cover a wide spectrum of topics on various reading levels, from classics to comics, from primary grade books to high school titles. Thus, media specialists must provide students with a variety of materials to suit students' needs, interests, and abilities. A good reading environment is essential, in particular, for this group of pre-driving students as they depend on the school media center for reading materials. The literature has also stressed the importance of providing reading materials on all levels and topics ⑰.

Second, most of the top ten favorite books identified in this study were those titles that had been assigned, recommended, read aloud in class by teachers. Thus, it seems logical to assume that a majority of children cannot choose a good book or right one on their own. Indeed, it takes many skills to become a good reader, and to be able to choose what to read is part of becoming a reader ⑱. As also claimed by Manning ⑲, it takes ingenuity to find the right book. Reading a book and enjoying it, as a favorite, will follow only after an appropriate book has been chosen. Many students need this initial assistance to lead them into actual reading. In light of this need, media specialists along with teachers must give students reading guidance in their search for a right book, on the basis of students' specific needs and interests. Media specialists must plan jointly with teachers to introduce good books to students, thus promote more use of books in the media center. Consequently, this kind of activity will result in students' greater amount of reading. As Lance, Welborn, & Hamilton-Pennell ⑳ stated, the amount of students' reading, in fact, is greatly influenced by their media center collection and staff.

Third, media specialists must collaborate with teachers in instruction and updating media center resources. Collaboration is absolutely necessary for students to fully utilize the media center and benefit from its resources. Take book order for an example. Media specialists can request input from teachers concerning students' high interest topics because books



about their personal interests can motivate students to read materials beyond their reading level ②). This has been confirmed in students' reading of It or Jurassic Park in this study. "Wish lists" of students may be given to media specialists for consideration in book orders. In return, media specialists share new arrivals or good books with teachers. Consequently, teachers are able to plan instruction, based on what is available and what is appealing to students. Only then can the collection of the school media center truly reflect students' interests and needs, and be utilized to a great extent.

## 6. Conclusion

The study found that the ten favorite books for the middle school were Where the Red Fern Grows, Hatchet, Charlotte's Web, Maniac Magee, Bridge to Terabithia, Island of the Blue Dolphins, Jurassic Park, The Outsiders, Black Beauty, and The Secret Garden. The results clearly indicated that reading teachers were the single most significant reason influencing middle school students in their choice of favorite books. A majority of these favorite books was required, recommended, or read aloud in class by reading teachers. Another important reason was the

story type or book characters. Books about animals, survival, or family relationships with main characters at the age of middle school students were well liked by the students. Movies, peers, book covers, siblings, and parents were also instrumental in students' selection of favorite books. These reasons, given by students in their choice of favorite books, must be taken into account when media specialists develop a library collection or plan activities for students' reading.

As we approach the 21st century, our children will face an even more complex society with a greater demand on literacy skills necessary to compete in a global economy ②). For media specialists and teachers who have great influence in children's reading, immediate attention must focus on providing a good reading environment in the media center or classroom, desirable to students. It is hoped that a print-rich media center, covering many topics of students' personal interests, will attract more students to use it more. It is also hoped that students' increased use of the media center will ease their way to locate a right book for them to enjoy. For a student to become an independent and lifelong reader, this is an essential step.

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