

THE GRANDPARENT EFFECT

STORIES FROM A QUIET REVOLUTION

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THE BEST PICTURE BOOKS ABOUT KIDS AND THEIR GRANDPARENTS

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Categories: Finds

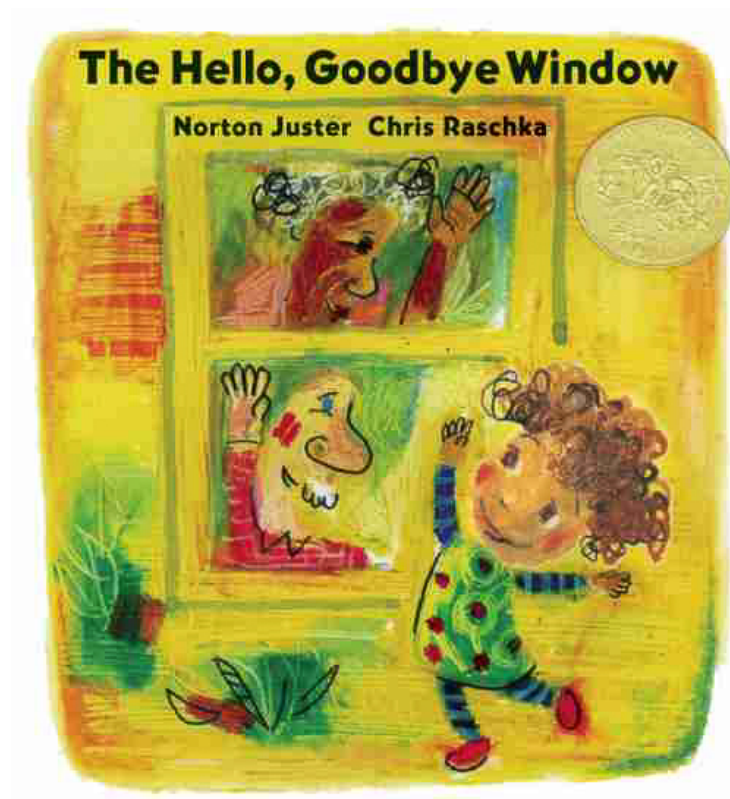
Tags: African Americans, Babies & toddlers, Family complexity, Grandparents & grandparenting, Grandparents as babysitters, Grandparents as mentors, Grandparents as teachers, Grandparents raising grandkids, Great-grandparents, Immigrants

I scoured the shelves of the New York Public Library for all the picture books I could find about children and their grandparents.

Here are my seven favorites.

These books aren't just stunningly written and illustrated. They also perceptively observe the complexities of the new American family.

The Hello, Goodbye Window



A little girl's visits with her grandparents revolve around their roomy kitchen, where they all cook, eat, color, and pretend to see dinosaurs out the window.

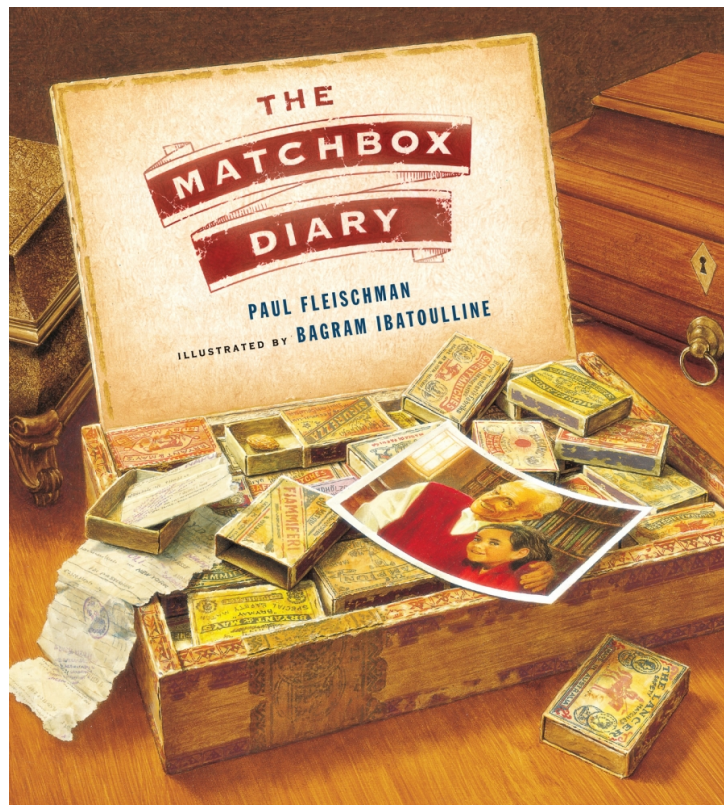
"Mommy and Daddy pick me up after work. I'm glad because I know we're going home, but it makes me sad too because I have to leave Nanna and Poppy. You can be happy and sad at the same time, you know. It just happens that way sometimes."

Nanna is black and Poppy is white, but the author doesn't make a big deal of that. The big deal is the attention they both lavish on their granddaughter.

The illustrations by Chris Raschka, who's also known for his wordless picture books, are as vivid and colorful as a child's imagination.

Written by Norton Juster • Illustrated by Chris Raschka • Michael Di Capua Books/Hyperion, 2005 • Caldecott medal • Good for babies, preschoolers & grade-schoolers

The Matchbox Diary



A century ago, when most Americans only lived into their 60s, great-grandparents were scarce.

Not anymore.

In this book, a kindergartener who lives out West visits her great-grandfather on the East Coast.

He shows her dozens of treasures that he stashed in matchboxes as a little boy, including an olive pit from his hometown in Italy, a hairpin he found when he and his family were on the boat to America, and a ticket to a baseball game in Philadelphia.

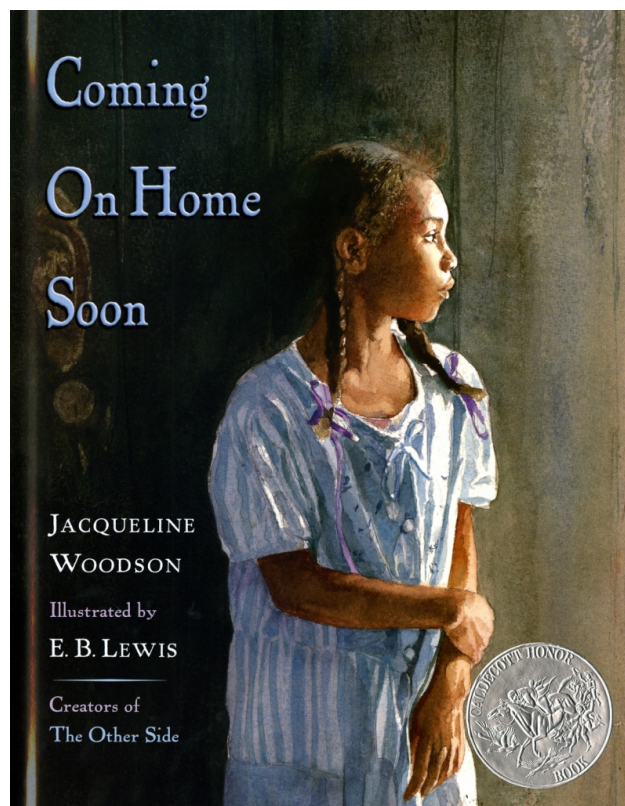
“That’s my favorite box,” the man tells his great-granddaughter. “My first baseball game. I didn’t understand it, why the men were running. But I was in heaven not to be working and to sit by my father.”

The last page of the book shows the girl returning home in an airplane. In her lap is the “diary” she’s just started: an empty candy box that, so far, holds a Lego piece and a stewardess’s pin.

The girl, her great-grandfather, and their treasures are illustrated with near-photographic precision in vintage hues.

Written by Paul Fleischman • Illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline • Candlewick Press, 2013 • Good for preschoolers & grade-schoolers

Coming On Home Soon



These days, when parents deploy abroad or travel for business, children often stay with their grandparents. That’s one of the reasons why this poignant book, which takes place during World War II, feels utterly contemporary.

“Mama’s hands are warm and soft.

When she put her Sunday dress into the satchel, I held my breath.

Tried hard not to cry.

Ada Ruth, she said. They're hiring colored women in Chicago since all the men are off fighting in the war.

Mama folded another dress and put it in the bag.

I'm gonna head on up there.

Then she pulled me close up to her, pressed her face against mine.

Make some money I can send on home to you."

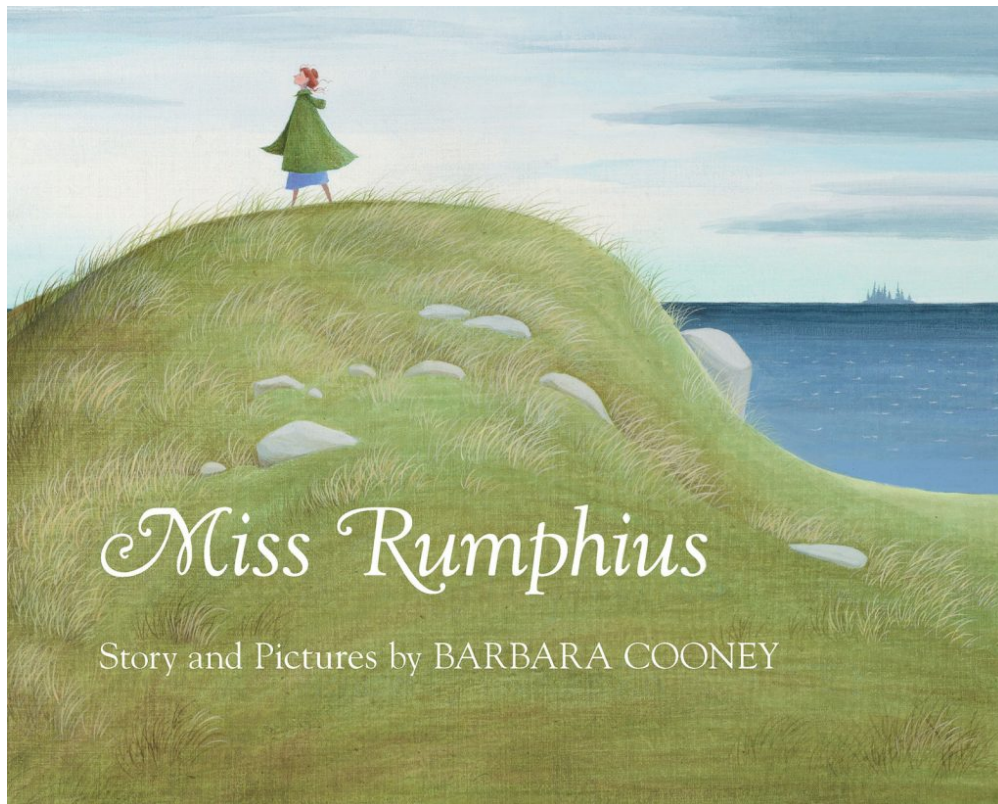
Ada Ruth is left in the care of her grandmother, who, compared to Mama, is stern and reserved. But over time, Ada Ruth and Grandma form a tender bond.

The wordless last page shows Mama trudging through the snow toward the house, footsteps away from a joyful reunion with them both.

Both the prose and the pictures are subtle and spare, heightening their emotional force.

Written by Jacqueline Woodson • Illustrated by E.B. Lewis • G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2004 • Caldecott honor book • Good for grade-schoolers

Miss Rumphius



In this mesmerizing blend of fiction and autobiography, Barbara Cooney celebrates the indelible impact of grandparents on their grandkids.

When Alice Rumphius was a little girl, she lived with her grandfather, an artist, by the sea, writes Cooney, who grew up in Brooklyn and Long Island but spent summers with her grandmother in Maine.

During the day, Alice's grandpa let her help him with his paintings. In the evening, he talked about his childhood in a faraway land.

Afterwards, Alice would say, "When I grow up, I too will go to faraway places, and when I grow old, I too will live beside the sea."

"That is all very well, little Alice," her grandpa told her one night, "but there is a third thing you must do."

"You must do something to make the world more beautiful."

Alice grew up, became a librarian, and traveled the globe. When she was ready, she settled in a house by the sea.

But how, she wondered, could she make the world more beautiful?

Finally, she got an idea.

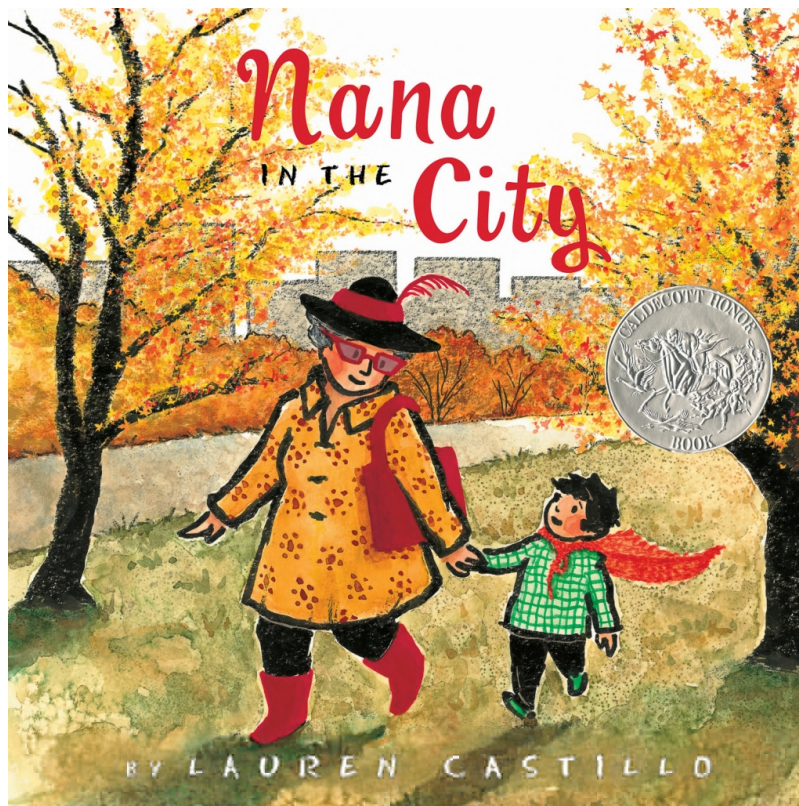
She ordered bushels and bushels of lupine seeds, and for months, she sowed them near and far. Some of her neighbors called her “That Crazy Old Lady,” but she persevered.

And the next spring, when the hills and meadows were a jamboree of color and her neighbors romped through them with glee, she knew she had done “the third, the most difficult thing of all.”

Cooney’s detailed illustrations evoke both the loneliness and the splendor of the coast of Maine.

Written and illustrated by Barbara Cooney • The Viking Press, 1982 • National Book Award • Good for preschoolers & grade-schoolers

Nana In the City



When a little boy from a small town spends the night at his grandmother’s apartment in New York City, he’s intimidated by the crowds, the noise, and the homeless people.

“I love my nana, but I don’t love the city,” he narrates. “The city is filled with scary things.”

So Nana, who wears bright red glasses and bright red boots, stays up late knitting a bright red cape to make her grandson feel like a superhero. The next day, he wears it out on the town.

Like many grandparents nowadays, Nana is urbane. She takes the boy to hear some street musicians and watch a break-dancer. She coaxes him to pet a pack of dogs being led by a dog-walker.

And when grandmother and grandson pass a food cart, she buys some hot pretzels and hands them to a homeless man.

“The city is busy, the city is loud, and it is the absolute perfect place for a nana to live,” the boy concludes. “And for me to visit!”

Written and illustrated by Lauren Castillo • Clarion Books, 2014 • Caldecott honor book • Good for babies & preschoolers

Lucky Pennies and Hot Chocolate

This story is told in the first person, and both the text and pictures will trick kids into thinking that the narrator is a boy who’s excited to see his grandfather.

“My favorite person in the world is coming for a visit,” the book begins. “I have a whole bunch of new knock-knock jokes for him.”

The narrator then describes all the fun things he and his “favorite person” will do together:

“I can’t wait to show him that huge hole they’ve dug down the street! I like to watch big machines moving the earth, doing their jobs.”

“I invented a new pancake recipe to try out. Super-scrumptious banana-raisin-marshmallow-surprise pancakes. I think he’ll like them.”

Only on the last page will kids realize that the narrator isn’t the boy—it’s his exuberant grandpa.

Age doesn’t define us, the author seems to be saying.

Love does.

Written by Carol Diggory Shields • Illustrated by Hiroe Nakata • Dutton Children’s Books, 2000 • Good for babies & preschoolers

BIGMAMA’S

For millions of kids, summertime means visits with grandparents. They’ll relate to this book, in which author and illustrator Donald Crews, who grew up in New Jersey, recalls his annual stays at his grandparents’ farm in Cottondale, Florida in the 1940s and 50s.

Every year when he and his family arrived, “Bigmama and Bigpapa were waiting for us on the porch. There were hugs and kisses and ‘Oh my, how you’ve grown!’ and ‘How tall you are ... is this you?’”

“Then off with our shoes and socks. We wouldn’t need them much in the next few weeks.”

Later, at dinnertime: “Everybody sitting around the table that filled the room—Bigmama, Bigpapa, Uncle Slank, our cousins from down the road, and all of us. We talked about what we did last year. We talked about what we were going to do this year. We talked so much we hardly had time to eat.”

“The night was jet black except for millions of stars. We could hardly sleep thinking about things to come.”

The last illustration, rendered in a more sophisticated style than its predecessors, shows a grown man lying in bed at sunset. An urban skyline is visible out the window.

“Some nights even now, I think that I might wake up in the morning and be at Bigmama’s with the whole summer ahead of me.”

Written and illustrated by Donald Crews • Greenwillow Books, 1991 • Good for preschoolers & grade-schoolers

(With thanks to the staff at [Bank Street Book Store](#) and to librarians Andrea Dolloff and Carrie Silberman for steering me toward these and other titles. I’d also like to thank my daughter, Madeline, for vetting dozens of books with me.)
