

## FEATURE

# Professor coordinates kids' reading project

By Kathleen Schwar  
Assistant Editor

PITTSFORD — Oh bother. A reporter asked Kenneth J. Weiss, Nazareth College's director of literacy education, to rank children's books when he'd rather just read them. More important, he'd rather get children to read them.

Of the hundreds of children's books lining his office shelves, Weiss was hard-pressed to play favorites. Instead, he is asking area children to pick their top books.

He's one of five people in the country coordinating a "Children's Choice" reading project through local schools this year and next. Eighty publishers are periodically providing 4,000 books to 2,000 area children in grades kindergarten through eight.

"It's unique in that kids have their voice in this," Weiss said. "Ultimately that's the goal of any good reading program. A lot of kids get turned off to reading because they're told what they must read, how they must read and what they must do with it."

He believes this is the first time the Rochester region has taken part in the Children's Choices project, which is in its 26th year. Pupils in West Irondequoit and Pittsford Central schools are participating this year, and Rochester city schools will be involved next year as well.

The project is sponsored by the International Reading Association and the Children's Book Council. They will tabulate the children's top 100 books and publish them in *The Reading Teacher*, a journal used by teachers, librarians and parents.

"Reading should be fun," Weiss insisted. "It should not be a terrible task. It should be something you love to do the rest of your life." He maintained that despite other distractions and attractions, most kids will read if given the opportunity.

"It takes a good teacher, a good role model," he said.

Also, Weiss noted, "There are more children's books published today than ever. They used to be the one-time stepchild of the publishing industry. They didn't have a long shelf life. Now they're

selling like crazy. You walk into Barnes & Noble, the children's section is like a third of the store. And that's great."

Weiss and his wife owned a children's bookstore in New Jersey during the 1980s. That experience propelled him to go into teaching. Today he's chairman of the Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts Committee. This group also publishes recommended lists of books for children in the *Journal of Children's Literature*.

The included books are wide-ranging: Last year's list included *Shakespeare Stealer*, a historical novel highlighted because of current interest in Shakespeare films; *The Drop in My Drink: The Story of Water on our Planet*, and *Moaning Bones: African-American Ghost Stories*.

Although Weiss hasn't seen votes yet for the year 2000 Children's Choices, he's betting for sure on the Harry Potter books, which also placed last year. The series is just plain fun, he said, not only for children but also adults who want to re-experience a child's life. He himself is awaiting the series' next release in June.

While they are still holding top spots on bestseller lists of *The New York Times* and others, the stories are of a child wizard also have drawn criticism from some parents who object to their dealing with witchcraft.

"I guess you can make a case to ban any book if you try," Weiss said. But, he added, "We have to think back to ourselves as kids. We didn't necessarily sit around reading Shakespeare and the classics.

"I become very nervous when parents and political groups start to talk about banning books," he continued. "You have the perfect right not to like something, but you have to tell me why. If you tell me you read a book and it thoroughly upset you, that's different. But if you never read the book, it's like spreading vicious gossip."

He said series books offer a comforting formula for children, one they eventually outgrow. He noted the Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, the Boxcar Children, Baby-Sitters Club, American Girl and Goosebumps as series that have such an appeal.

"Good parents, teachers as well, when seeing a child reading should not go,



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Emilio Zungia, left looks on as Paris Bullock reads with her mom, Mallory Johnson, in the Children's Room at the Rundell Central Library of Rochester and Monroe County Jan. 14. The children, from ABC Headstart, took a field trip to the library for a reading hour.

"Eeeyuuu, it's terrible." Rather they could note what interests the child and offer a "step-up," a similar book of better quality, he said.

Weiss sees a place for all kinds of books in today's world, including those dealing with disabilities, for example, and with children being raised by gay parents. Such books come on the heels of those that dealt with how a baby is born or adoption, he said.

Such books "need to be there, because

kids need to see kids like themselves, whatever the circumstances are," he said. Books like the 1947 favorite *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown can be very reassuring.

Plucking it from his shelves and beginning to read, he observed that such books can foster bonding between parent and child.

When should parents begin reading to their children? "When they're babies," he said. And, he added, "You never stop."

## Encouraging your child to read

The International Reading Association and Children's Book Council offer the following tips.

### For very young children,

- Set aside a regular time and place for books so that reading books becomes as natural as eating and sleeping.
- Browse through books to help the child become familiar with books and how they are handled.
- Read the story while the child points to the pictures. Adult and child can repeat interesting sounds, repetitive word patterns and distinctive word features.
- Have the child tell the story using the

illustrations, while the adult reinforces the telling. The two can predict outcomes, discuss how the characters feel, and relate events to their own experiences.

- Make regular trips to the library and attend storytelling sessions.
- Have children make responses to the books through drawings, clay, finger-paints or other materials.

### For beginning readers,

- Encourage children to browse through books and pretend to read the story.
- Read alternate pages, ask each other questions and discuss the story.
- Use computer programs to expand a child's interest in specific topics.
- Begin to compare and contrast video adaptations of children's books.

### For primary grades,

- Become aware of the interests of your children and books that extend life experiences.

• Encourage children to share books read in schools with parents and caregivers.

### For the independent reader:

- Challenge readers to compare and contrast books.
- Encourage children to develop an interest in a variety of genres such as biography, historical fiction and poetry.
- Encourage children to read books related to beginning career and vocational choices.
- Seek a balance between school book activities; home and school literature activities; and familiarity with newspapers, magazines and other media that address contemporary social, cultural and civic issues.

## Family Events

© FRI, JAN. 21 — Family workshop: for ages 2-5 with adult. Memorial Art Gallery, 500 University Ave., Rochester; led by Warren Mianecke, includes story and exploratory tour of gallery; 10:15-11:45 a.m.; \$6, \$18 family maximum; reservations required; 716/473-7720.

© SAT, JAN. 22 — Kids Bake-Off contest: Strong Museum, One Manhattan Sq., Rochester; sponsored by Wegmans and Pillsbury; 56 chefs ages 9-13 competing; also performances, strolling characters, tasty treats; 9 a.m.-5 p.m.; performance by The Dinner Dogs 11 a.m.-1 p.m.; \$6 adults, \$5 seniors, \$5 students, \$4 children 3-17, under 3 free; 716/263-2700.

© JAN. 22-FEB. 6 — Musical: "Mr. Popper's Penguins," The School of the Arts, 45 Prince St. at University Ave., Rochester; 2 p.m. Jan. 22, 23, 29, 30; Feb. 5, 6; 7 p.m. Jan. 29; \$8/9 children, students, seniors; \$10/11 adults; also pasta party Jan. 29, 4, 5:30 p.m.; \$5 children under 12, \$7 adults; reservations required; 716/271-7870.

© FRI, JAN. 28 — Enrollment lottery deadline: for 30-week preschool program for ages 3-5 at Rochester Museum & Science Center, 657 East Ave., Rochester; for informa-

tion call 716/271-4552, ext. 521.

© FRI, JAN. 28 — Family workshop: for ages 2-5 with adult. Memorial Art Gallery, 500 University Ave., Rochester; led by Paloma Nunez-Reguero; 10:15-11:45 a.m.; \$6, \$18 family maximum; reservations required; 716/473-7720.

© SAT, JAN. 29 — Concert: "Musical Elevenses," Kilbourn Hall, Eastman School of Music, 26 Gibbs St., Rochester; 11 a.m.; free.

© SUN, JAN. 30 — Sunday Funday: "In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall," exhibition tours, hands-on workshops with artist Javaka Steptoe; Memorial Art Gallery, Cutler Union, 500 University Ave., Rochester; 1-4 p.m.; free with gallery entry; 716/473-7720.

© FEB. 1-2 — "Curious George:" Clemens Center, 116 E. Gray St., Elmira; 10 a.m., 12:30 p.m. Feb. 1; 9:30 a.m., 12:30 p.m. Feb. 2; \$4; 607/733-5639, ext. 248.

© WED, FEB. 2 — Wednesdays for Tots: Groundhog Day with GW Whit; for preschoolers; Strong Museum, One Manhattan Sq., Rochester; 10 a.m.; for information and tickets call 716/263-2701, ext. 314.

© SAT, FEB. 5 — Family nature walk: frozen bogs; Letchworth State

Park, Castile; meet at Trailside Lodge; 10 a.m.-noon; one mile; 716/493-3625.

© SAT, FEB. 5 — Child's Play Touring Theatre: for ages 4 and up; "Do the Write Thing;" Nazareth College Arts Center, 4245 East Ave., Rochester; works written by children addressing problems in their personal and family lives; 11 a.m., 2 p.m.; \$8; 716/389-2170.

© FEB. 5-6 — Family exhibit: "Psychology: It's More Than You Think!"; Strong Museum, One Manhattan Sq., Rochester; Sat. 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sun. noon-5 p.m.; free with museum admission; 716/263-2700.

© TUE, FEB. 8 — Tuesdays for Tots: The Dinner Dogs; Strong Museum, One Manhattan Sq., Rochester; 10 a.m.; for information or tickets call 716/263-2701, ext. 314.

© THRU MAR. 20 — Obtain evaluation forms: for Ten Star All Star Basketball Camp to be held at Roberts Wesleyan College; 2301 Westside Dr., North Chili; invitation-only camp for boys and girls ages 7-19; college scholarships possible; call 704/372-8610 to obtain evaluation form.



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