

May the 4th Be With You!

Kids Explore Space Through Stories

by Denise Marchetti, Children's Librarian, Wyckoff Public Library

As Star Wars enthusiasts of all ages celebrate the science fiction classic this month, there are plenty of stellar choices for middle-grade readers who love space exploration novels. Many of these stories also explore themes of friendship, wanting to belong, trying to connect, and ultimately finding one's place in the universe.

There are lots of laughs and suspense in Stuart Gibbs' popular *Moon Base Alpha Trilogy*. Twelve-year-old Dashiell Gibson (aka Dash) is living on the moon with his parents, sister Violet, and other lunarnauts (aka Moonies). The adults have been chosen to live there for their areas of expertise such as geology and robotics. Dash's life is quite uneventful until people suddenly start to disappear, and rogue prisoners are on the loose. When Kira Howard, who is Dash's age, arrives, they set out to solve all these mysteries together.

Another hilarious space-themed series is Max Brallier's *Galactic Hot Dogs*, which currently offers three illustrated novels. Cosmoe, a thirteen-year-old orphan, goes on swashbuckling intergalactic adventures with his friends Humphree and (maybe evil) Princess Dagger, aboard the Neon Wiener, which is part spaceship, part food truck. When they set out to sell their galactic hot dogs, they are confronted by space pirates, monsters, and grumpy robots. Rachel Maguire and Nichole Kelley's illustrations add to the humor, fun, and fast-paced action.

Tony DiTerlizzi's *WondLa Trilogy* is a space-age adventure series about a twelve-year-old girl named Eva Nine, who is being raised underground by a robot named Muthr, in what feels like an alien world. She is forced to flee aboveground when this world is invaded by a strange monster, and so begins her journey in search of other humans. Her only clue is a scrap of cardboard with a picture of a girl, an adult, a robot, and the strange word, "WondLa." DiTerlizzi's illustrations are reminiscent of Star Wars, and interactive online maps are included, revealed through augmented reality pages.

There are six books in *George's Secret Key to the Universe*, a series by Lucy and Stephen Hawking, which follows the adventures of George Greenby, a kid who travels through the solar system with the help of Eric, a scientist neighbor, his daughter Annie, and a super-computer named Cosmos. They visit other planets, explore black holes and the origins of the universe, all while trying to evade an evil scientist. Garry Parsons' illustrations add lots of laughs, and some cool full-color scientific photos are included.

Voyage of the Dogs by Greg van Eekhout tells the story of a crew of four dogs who accompany their humans on a space mission to establish a new outpost on the other side of the galaxy. When the dogs wake up from hypersleep, they realize that not only has their spaceship Laika been damaged, but their humans have vanished. With intelligence and courage, they are determined to find their people and fulfill their mission.

In *Planet Earth Is Blue* by Nicole Panteleakos, Nova Vezina, a twelve-year-old orphan, who is non-verbal and autistic, loves astronomy and the space program. She and her older sister Bridget are counting down the days until they get to watch the launching of the space shuttle Challenger, but Bridget mysteriously disappears just as they are about to go to a new foster home. As liftoff approaches, Nova's new family and teachers begin to see her potential, and she is convinced that her sister will soon return.

Alex Petroski is a space-obsessed eleven-year-old in Jack Cheng's *See You in the Cosmos*. Alex is determined to launch his golden iPod into space just like Carl Sagan launched his Golden Record on the Voyager spacecraft. He records his journey traveling across states to a rocket convention with his dog Carl Sagan, named after his hero, to show aliens what life on earth is like. Some secrets are revealed along the way, such as the truth about his long-dead dad. He also finds that he has a much bigger family than he realized.

Pi in the Sky by Wendy Mass is the story of Annika, a girl from Earth, and Joss, the seventh son of the Supreme Overlord of the Universe. While his older brothers assist their father in ruling the cosmos, Joss has just one job, to deliver pies. Everything changes when Earth suddenly disappears, and Annika enters his world while looking through her father's telescope. They go on an amazing adventure together to bring Earth back, and they discover that the universe is a lot stranger than they ever imagined.

The setting for Jennifer L. Holm's *The Lion of Mars* is the planet Mars in the year 2091. Eleven-year-old Bell is the youngest kid in the American settlement, who loves cats and cakes. Life is fairly normal until the adults start coming down with a mysterious illness. It is up to Bell and the other kids to save them, but this means they have to disobey the number one rule on the planet, which is to never make contact with other colonies.

In *Sputnik's Guide to Life on Earth* by Frank Cottrell Boyce, Prez Mellows, whose grandfather is no longer able to take care of him, is sent to live with a foster family in another country. This is where he meets Sputnik, a strange kid who hears whatever Prez is thinking, looks like a dog to everyone but Prez, and can manipulate the laws of

space and time. It turns out that he is actually an alien who needs Prez's help to save Earth from destruction by coming up with ten reasons to save the planet. As Prez and Sputnik set out on their journey, they learn what makes the world truly remarkable.

For kids who enjoy graphic novels, *Star Wars: Jedi Academy* is a great choice, with nine books in the series. In the first three books by Jeffrey Brown, Roan Novachez has a dream of attending Pilot Academy, just like his older brother, father, and grandfather, but he is denied entrance, and instead is invited to join the Jedi Academy. The series begins with Roan's first year in the school. He learns to fence with a lightsaber and lift boulders with the Force, under the guidance of his teacher, Master Yoda. Jarrett J. Krosoczka writes the remaining books in the series, along with Amy Ignatow in the final three, which introduce Padawan siblings, Christina and Victor Starspeeder, and their adventures at Jedi Academy.

Ben Hatke's *Zita the Spacegirl Trilogy*, begins with Zita and her best friend Joseph witnessing a meteoroid crash to Earth. Inside is a device with a big, red button that Zita pushes, resulting in Joseph being suddenly abducted by evil aliens. Zita is courageous and determined to rescue him and bring him back to Earth, so she pushes the button again, and suddenly finds herself on a strange planet filled with humanoid chickens and neurotic robots.

There are currently three books in Dave Roman's *Astronaut Academy* series which tells the story of Hakata Soy, a former space hero and loner, who joins a futuristic school to study rocket science and anti-gravity gymnastics. Although he tries to maintain a low profile while attending classes, it's not easy when a robot doppelganger begins chasing him, and the most popular girl in school is out to get him.

Fans of the award-winning classic, *A Wrinkle In Time* by Madeleine L'engle, the first in the *Time Quintet* series may enjoy Hope Larson's graphic novel adaptation. While remaining true to the original story of siblings Meg and Charles Wallace Murry traveling through space and time to rescue their father from evil forces, Larson's illustrations bring the story to life visually, and will likely bring many new fans.

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