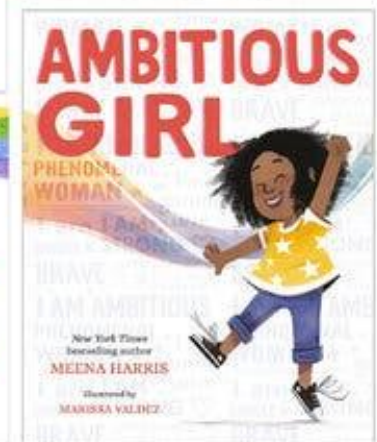
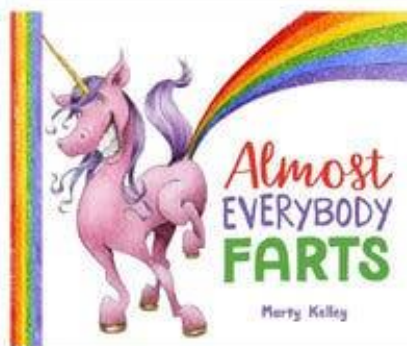
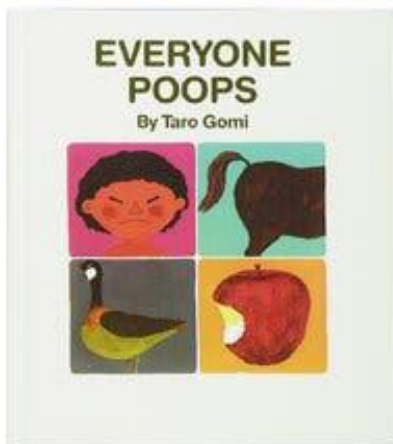
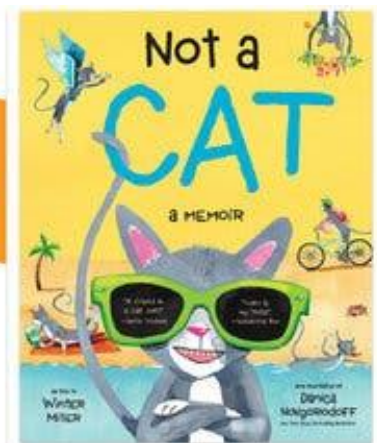
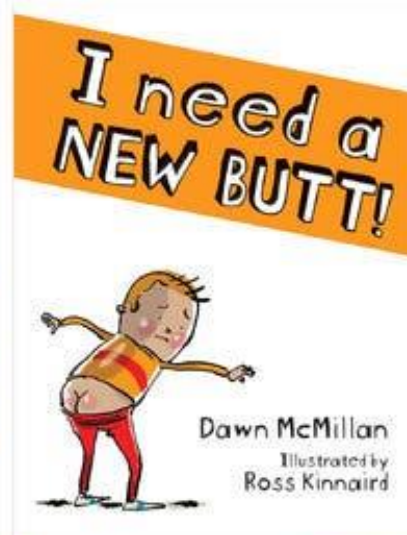


The New York Times

Well

Broken Butts and Questioning Cats: Bring On Subversive Books for Kids

Sometimes stories that delight children and make adults cringe are the best way to win over new readers.



Credit The New York Times



By [Tara Parker-Pope](#)

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Books about butts, farts, poop and burps are guaranteed to impress children. Books that urge children to question rules and authority, color on the walls, play with their food, explore their identity and forge their own path likewise delight them.

If this makes you cringe, well, that's the point. When it comes to children's books, the more subversive, the better.

"Children spend a great deal of their lives being educated, corrected and morally improved," said Dr. Perri Klass, professor of pediatrics at New York University and national medical director for the literacy organization [Reach Out and Read](#). "No wonder they are entertained by stories in which adults don't necessarily know best, or don't necessarily get their own way."

Subversive children's literature is in the news again for all the wrong reasons. An assistant principal at an elementary school in Mississippi [was fired after a Zoom reading of the book](#) "I Need a New Butt!" School librarians around the country [are reporting](#) that children's books, particularly those dealing with racism and L.G.B.T.Q. issues, are being removed from shelves. And the book "Antiracist Baby" by Ibram X. Kendi is now an Amazon best seller after being criticized during the Supreme Court confirmation hearings of Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson.

But all this hand wringing about the stories that children are reading misses the point, say child experts. Reading of any sort should be encouraged, and healthy child development hinges on helping children learn to challenge convention, set boundaries and relate to their peers.

"Reading books that include silly ideas or that include potty humor allow for a child to connect to their peers in a way that lets them be 'seen' by others who find those topics funny," said Pooja Sharma, a clinical psychologist in Berkeley, Calif. "It is developmentally appropriate for children to want to set their own rules as they move away from trusting adults as authority figures to looking toward their peers as the barometers of what is right and wrong."

Life lessons aren't required

Some of the most popular subversive children's books embrace forbidden topics. There's an entire genre of books about butts ("Don't Call Me Fuzzybutt!," "Battle of the Butts," "My Butt Is So Noisy!" and "Butts Are Everywhere," to name a few). Books about flatulence and poop are also popular ("Walter the Farting Dog," "Almost Everybody Farts," "The Gas We Pass," "What Color Is Unicorn Poop?" and "Gomer the Gassy Goat" are examples).

Boundary-pushing characters like Captain Underpants, Mustache Baby and Dog Man are big sellers. "Please, Baby, Please," written by Spike Lee and Tonya Lewis Lee and illustrated by Kadir Nelson, celebrates a child who dumps food on her head, draws on the walls and is generally disobedient.

Some parents and educators dislike these books because they say they encourage bad behavior and don't seem very educational. But Dr. Klass counters that when it comes to learning to read, the main goal should be to entertain children so they keep returning to books.

"Do they have to learn something?" she asked. "Do adults expect to learn lessons from the books they enjoy? Do adults want to read fiction about well-behaved people?"

"Entertainment is the life lesson in reading to kids," said Dr. Klass.

Challenging labels

Many subversive children's books challenge convention, labels and authority and celebrate individuality. "When Aidan Became a Brother," by Kyle Lukoff and illustrated by Kaylani Juanita, centers on a transgender boy. It has been removed from [some library shelves](#) for being inappropriate.

Meena Harris wrote the best-selling "Ambitious Girl," illustrated by Marissa Valdez, after her aunt, Vice President Kamala Harris, was described as "too ambitious." Ms. Harris said she wrote the book to turn the criticism into a compliment.

"The core message and idea behind 'Ambitious Girl' — that *you* tell people who you are, not the other way around — is one of defiance, subverting these deeply-ingrained ideas about what girls and women 'should' or 'shouldn't' be, and then flipping the script," Ms. Harris said in an email. "Reclaiming words that society hurls as insults, especially toward young women of color, is both powerful and empowering."

In a new book "Not a Cat," written by Winter Miller and illustrated by Danica Novgorodoff, the lead character is Gato, who certainly looks like a gray and white house cat. But Gato feels the word "cat" doesn't fully describe him. He swims like a duck, enjoys flowers like a bee, eats grass like a cow and rides the subway and wears sunglasses like a person. It's a fun, furry lesson in rejecting labels and exploring one's own identity.

"I do think my book is subversive, and delightedly so," said Ms. Miller, who is also a playwright and previously worked for The Times. "My hope is that parents look at Gato and his adorable subversion of expectations and realize this is just as true for people. We all want permission to explore our boundaries of self and the celebration of what we find. As adults we should nurture children to grow up as they are, not as we or anyone else wishes them to be."

Read at your own risk

But unfortunately for educators, supporting certain children's books can be risky. Toby Price, the assistant principal in Mississippi who was fired after reading "I Need a New Butt" to a class of second graders over Zoom, will be attending the second day of an appeal hearing on Monday, but he's not optimistic that the decision will be reversed. The book is about a little boy who notices a crack in his butt and thinks he needs a new one because it's broken.

Mr. Price was told that reading the book violated the school district's code of ethics, showed poor judgment and was unprofessional.

"Not every book has to teach a lesson," he said. "Sometimes it can be just for fun."

Mr. Price is worried about the precedent his firing sets. “Anybody could say, ‘I don’t like what you did in class today,’ and boom, you’re gone,” he said. “It scares me because sometimes to engage kids, it means opening up and being authentic and taking some risk. If something like this stands, teachers will stop taking those risks.”

[A GoFundMe campaign](#) has so far raised more than \$112,000 to defray the “mind-blowingly expensive” legal costs, said Mr. Price, who has three children, including two adult children with autism. He was also invited to take part in a commercial for Whisper Bidets, after the founder heard about his story. “I got to say the word ‘butt’ a lot without getting fired,” he said.

Mr. Price is also planning to write and illustrate his own children’s book called “The Almost True Adventures of Tytus the Monkey,” based on his experience raising children with autism. When something goes wrong in the house, such as finding paint on the wall, the family “would always blame it on the monkey,” he said.

Mr. Price said he had received job offers from other school districts but wants his old job back. “I’m trying hard to remind myself that I’m grateful people want to share the story,” he said. “I have three kids that I have to take care of. I will find a way.”