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Teaching Preschoolers about Anthropology

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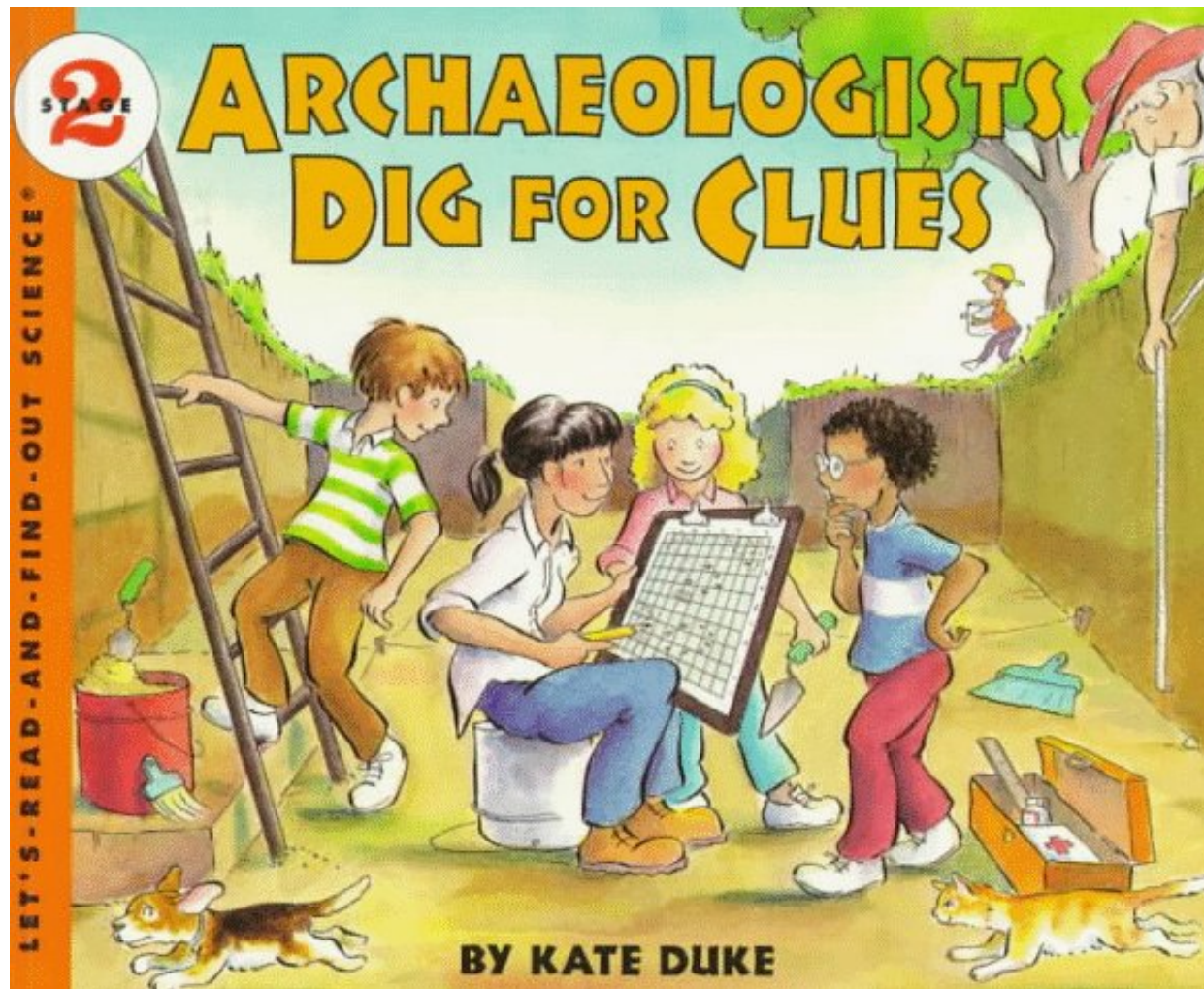
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Peer reviewed

THEN DIG

Peer-reviewed archaeology blogging



Teaching Preschoolers about Anthropology

After reading a few of [Matt Thompson](#)'s "Illustrated Man" posts over at [Savage Minds](#), I decided to search for children's books that go beyond the ubiquitous kiddie-adventure-with-moralistic-underpinnings storylines. Now, those books aren't all bad. My 2-year-old daughter and I both really like the [Adventures of Patrick Brown](#) book series, which is lushly illustrated in an almost graphic novel style and which employs a good level of vocabulary that doesn't talk down to kids whose language skills are increasing at an astounding pace. But my ultimate goal was to find books related to my life-long interests – archaeology and biological anthropology –

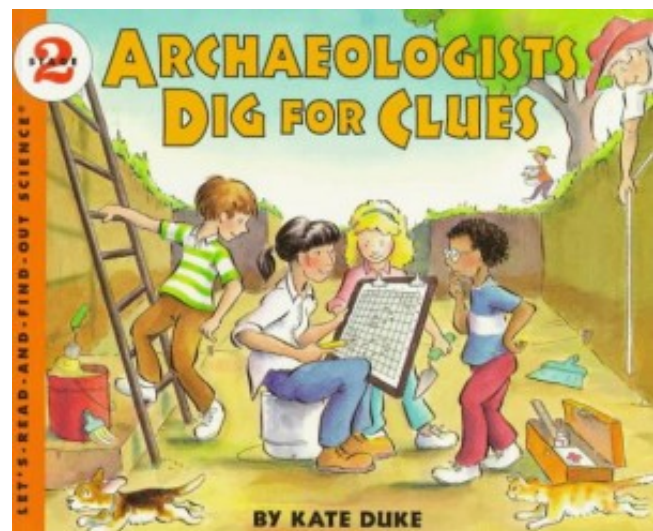
that I could share with my daughter. More importantly, I wanted to find books that won't make me pull my hair out when I inevitably have to read them over and over and over again.

I discovered, though, that it's surprisingly difficult to find books geared towards the preschooler set that aren't board books with too little dialogue (half of the words in *Fifteen Animals* are "Bob") or lightweight stories about everyday activities that reinforce old gender norms (I'm looking at you, *Berenstain Bears*). Most of the books that interested me and that tried to communicate a small part of what I do for a living seemed to be written for kids in late elementary school. Fortunately, I managed to stumble upon a couple books that captivate the attention of a squirmy toddler and her academically-inclined mother.

Archaeology

Amazon.com lists over 1,100 results for children's books about archaeology. It's pretty daunting, and I ended up getting some duds.

The best one by far – which I highly recommend – is *Archaeologists Dig for Clues* by Kate Duke. The format has some graphic novel qualities to it, with little dialogue bubbles in addition to the text and

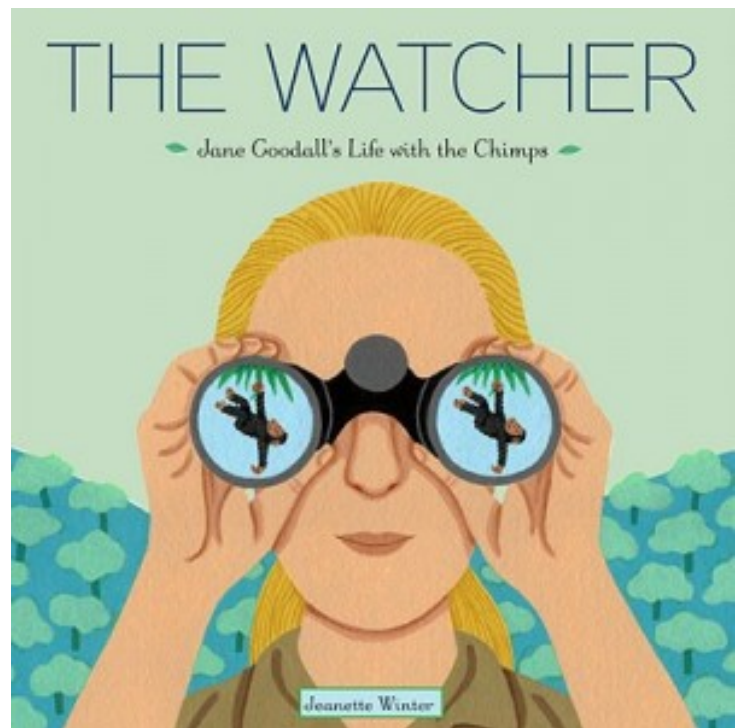


side-bar explanations, which cover everything from water screening to ceramic typology. The characters are quite diverse in their gender, age, and race. Although the story – a day in the life of a field archaeologist – condenses basically an entire field and lab season into one day, the portrayal of the field archaeologist, the explanations about the tasks she undertakes, and the demonstration of what specialists do at the lab are all quite good.

Biological Anthropology

A recent New York Times Sunday book review profiled two works about the life of Jane Goodall: *The Watcher and Me, Jane*. One of my friends sent a copy of each for my daughter's birthday. Jeanette Winter's *The Watcher* is definitely the better book – with more words and better vocabulary, the story introduces children to some basic concepts in primatology and anthropology. Winter's illustrations can be used to get children involved in watching too: Jane doesn't

immediately see the chimps, who are hiding in the trees, and it's fun to ask my daughter to point them out and count them. This book also deals with events like Goodall's bout of malaria and the progressive endangerment of chimpanzees because of poaching and deforestation, all while remaining approachable by kids. One of the things I dislike about Patrick McDonnell's *Me, Jane* (other than the title, which irrationally annoys me) is that he jumps from little Jane dreaming about chimps to Goodall in the field, skipping the trouble, hardships, and work she had to put



in to get from interested kid to adult researcher. Anthropology isn't as simple as digging a hole in your backyard or looking at an ape through a zoo window for a few minutes, and *The Watcher* manages to get this point across quite well. It's a surprisingly thorough (for a kids' book) story of Jane Goodall's life written in a way that challenges younger readers but at the same time doesn't talk down to them. I definitely recommend *The Watcher*, but I'd give *Me, Jane* a pass.

Another good place to look for anthropology books may be your local science or art museum. My colleagues at the Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma, for example, created an illustrated pamphlet for children that explains what bioarchaeologists do (and helped me learn the Italian version of various bioarchaeological terms). The cartoonish dead Romans are adorable, even though they're not a great match for the higher-level text that discusses such heady topics as palaeopathology. Unfortunately, you can't all rush out and buy this, but I suspect there are similar English-language pamphlets floating around somewhere. If not, well, I guess my next project will be writing a children's book on bioarchaeology! (Anyone want to illustrate it?)

