

NECBA'S FALL GALLEY REVIEW PROJECT TOP 10 LIST

First started in 1996 these lists are our bi-annual attempt to identify as many high-quality titles as possible from among the numerous new middle-grade and young-adult fiction books. NECBA booksellers read ARCs from as many publishers as possible, and review and rate as many of as we can using [The Chittenden Rating Scale](#). Here is a link to the full [Fall 2009 Galley Review Project](#). Previous seasons can be accessed [here](#). A [printable version](#) of this web page is also available. If you are interested in purchasing any of these titles simply click on the book cover and choose the "buy online from an independent bookstore" option. Last, but not least here is a [Poster Version](#) of the Top Ten list for use with in store displays.



Catching Fire by Suzanne Collins

9780439023498, \$17.99
Scholastic, July 2009

Core audience: Ages 12-UP

Notable: It would be shorter to list what isn't notable.

Review: It would be inaccurate to say that *Catching Fire*, the second book in the *Hunger Games* Trilogy, is a better book than its predecessor, for the heights to which it attains is only possible precisely because it is built so squarely on top of book one. Let us say rather that *Catching Fire*'s remarkable success is built upon the integrity of its continuity. Its complex characters are broadened and deepened. Their conflicts have been sharpened considerably, and the interplay of dramatic themes more fully realized. As the tide of rebellion rises the reader is both caught up in the current, and sharply aware of the need to struggle against it, to assess Katniss' decisions and to try and interpret the meaning of all the surrounding undercurrents as they begin to surface in spectacular and violent fashion. The stakes couldn't be higher nor could the reader feel more like a stakeholder in this pivotal tour de force.

Reviewer: Kenny Brechner, DDG Booksellers Rating: 9.97



Flash Burnout by L.K. Madigan

9780439023498, \$16.00
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, October 2009

Core audience: Boys and girls 14-16
Notable: Characters, plot, values, language, current culture, relationships, humor, including macabre humor, pacing, a touch of suspense, families, realistic ending.

Review: With more hooks for the reader than a strip of velcro, it's hard to believe this beautifully balanced work is a YA debut. Blake, age 15, is deep in the delights and puzzlements of first love with Shannon, and his smart, interesting photography classmate, Marissa, whose mother is a meth addict. Blake's mom is a hospital chaplain and social psychologist who reminds him periodically that actions have consequences; his father is a medical examiner whose grisly professional interests are fascinating to the older brother, Garrett. Garrett is a smart jock, leans on Blake in true big brother fashion – but comes through in a pinch. Blake's problems are ordinary (what to get Shannon for Christmas?) but genuine (why is Marissa absent from school?) and he relates them in the first person, with humor leavening his earnest concerns, including sex. One of the best YA fiction works of the last five years.

Reviewer: Carol Chittenden, Eight Cousins Rating: 9



Half Broke Horses by Jeanette Walls

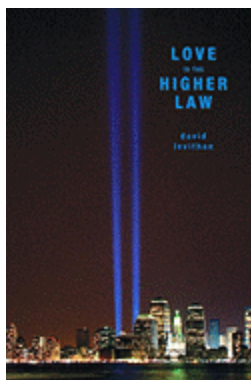
9781416586289, \$25.00
Simon & Schuster, October 2009

Core audience: Glass Castle readers, 14 and up teens
Notable: Back story (Glass Castle); courageous, inventive narrator, Depression-era survival, humor, emotional traction.

Review: Though not published as a young adult title, this fall release will be one of our picks of the year for teens, especially girls age 14, 15, 16. In short chapters, it relates the life of Lily Casey Smith, the author's Arizona grandmother. We see her strength emerge and harden as she grows from childhood in a feckless rural home, tries out city life in Chicago, and returns to Arizona ranching as drought and the Depression grip the country. Late in life, hardiness sometimes prevails over strength. The short chapters give the book a staccato pacing, providing dots to connect along Lily's toughening

arc.

Reviewer: Carol Chittenden, Eight Cousins Rating: 9



Love is the Higher Law by David Levithan

9780375834684, \$15.99

Knopf, August 2009

Core audience: Ages 12+

Notable: deals with the aftermath of 9/11

Review: I'm glad that it was David Levithan, a well-known YA writer, who decided to tackle this difficult subject. His name will help bring this remarkable book the attention it deserves. In this concise novel told from three first-person perspectives, David explores the events of 9/11 and the weeks that follow. If you are at all hesitant to read or handsell this book, just read David's author note in the front of the galley. Here's a piece of it: "If you take that hesitation about reading a 9/11 book and multiply it by a thousand, you'll probably get the trepidation an author feels about writing a 9/11 book..." He goes on to discuss why he wrote it: "...if you were just a child - like most of today's teens were - you might only remember the facts of it, not the feelings. That's why I wrote this book - it is, at heart, my small attempt to convey the heartbreak, surrealism, heroism, mourning, and music of that time." What David has created is a work of historical fiction (as 9/11 is a part of our history now) and done so in a respectful and beautiful way. There is no over-dramatization or exploitation (none of the characters lose loved ones), just a window into a time that teen readers only experienced as small children.

Reviewer: Suzanna Hermans, Oblong Books & Music Rating: 9



The Magicians by Lev Grossman

9780670020553, \$26.99

Viking, September 2009

Core audience: Ages 15-adult

Notable: Vivid world-building, memorable characters, page-turning pace.

Review: This is the book I was hoping *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*

would be. In other words, it's a sophisticated book about magic and magicians where something interesting (many somethings, in fact) actually happens. Excuse the snideness, but I drove through 22 unabridged CDs waiting for something, anything, to occur in *JS&MN*. Beyond a well-drawn faery netherworld half-inhabited by a captive woman in that book, nothing else stays in my memory. To me, that's telling. Happily, *The Magicians* not only creates atmosphere, but tension and plot and characters that ring true. Brooklyn teenager Quentin Coldwater is at odds with himself. He's uncertain about his post-high-school direction and plays third wheel with two cooler friends, on one of whom—Juliet—he's had a longstanding crush. A bizarre turn of events leads him to a college examination that results in an invitation to study at Brakebills Academy, a school of magic. Though Brakebills is no Hogwarts, its courses and requirements have as much internal logic and suspension-of-disbelief-ability (if that makes sense) as Potions, Charms, Herbology, etc. One of Grossman's major achievements in *The Magicians* is to make readers almost believe that magic is possible, though tedious and difficult both to study and to master.

Harry Potter comparisons are inevitable, given the subject matter, but *The Magicians* is not a charming romp suitable for younger readers. It's darker, more bitter and complex and melancholy, and the young adult characters (true young adults, not teens) drink and have sex (the latter mostly off-camera) and deal with the consequences of love and betrayal and loss. It's also romantic and real and absolutely un-put-down-able. Think of it as Donna Tartt's *Secret History* meets *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* and slaps them on the side of the head with a heavy dose of homage-à-Narnia.

The critics loved *The Magicians*, and after reading it, I understand why. Although the story resolves, I really, really want a volume two.

Reviewer: Elizabeth Bluemle, The Flying pig Bookstore Rating: 9.25

**GORDON
KORMAN**
THE NEW YORK TIMES
Bestselling Author

Pop
by Gordon Korman



9780061742286, \$16.99
Harper, August 2009

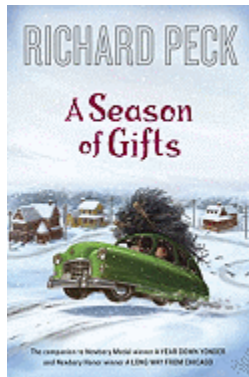
Core audience: Girls & boys age 12 & up
Notable: Alzheimer's disease, football, family loyalty issues

Review: Marcus Jordan loves football. He and his mother have just moved to a new home in a town where the school football team is coming off an 11-0 season with all their starters are back for the new season. Practicing his passes in the park he meets ex-NFL player Charlie Popovich and the two

begin an unlikely friendship based on grueling football drills and childish pranks. Before long Marcus realizes that Charlie doesn't just act like a teenager -- he thinks he still is one and that Marcus is his old friend Mac. Alzheimer's disease, possibly brought on by the multiple head injuries he suffered as a football player, has disrupted his memory. Charlie's family is protective of his reputation as the town's quirky celebrity. They don't want anyone to know about his condition. The story never mentions Charlie receiving treatment for the disease.

Korman has created a believable character in Charlie. The scenes of football practices and games should please football enthusiasts but the story is so powerful and interesting for other reasons that even football haters (like me) will be pulled in.

Reviewer: Kat Goddard , The Bookloft Rating: 9



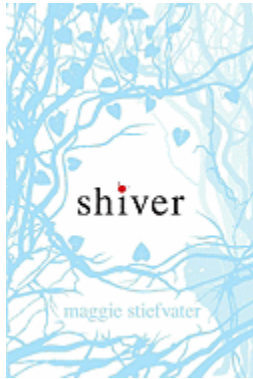
Season of Gifts
by Richard Peck

9780803730823, \$26.99
Dial, August 2009

Core audience: girls and boys age 10+
Notable: for humor, family values, fifties lifestyle.

Review: Grandma Dowdel lives! The very funny grandma of Year Down Yonder and Long Way From Chicago (Newbery winners) lives next door to newly arrived eleven- year- old Bob and his adorable younger sister Ruth Ann, and his trouble prone (spelled boy) teen sister, Phyllis and parents. Dad's a preacher with lots to do to get himself a congregation, but he does and becomes famous for his weddings and funerals. Bob is beset by bullies early on (until their leader becomes enamored of his sister!) and Grandma's outhouse comes into play (not so ha-ha this time). Every chapter has funny moments, mostly instigated by Grandma's eccentric will. The real meaning of Christmas is demonstrated by Grandma Dowdel (who doesn't believe in celebrating Christmas-there's inflation to consider!) and some surprises at the end. This is a delightful and charming book to read aloud.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop Rating: 9



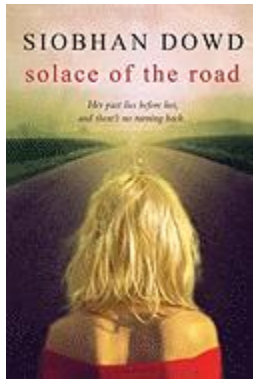
Shiver
by Maggie Stiefvater

9780545123266, \$17.99
Scholastic, August 2009

Core audience: 12 & up
Notable: werewolf romance with incredible Twilight fan potential

Review:Shiver is the closest a new book has come to quenching the thirst of a Twilight fanatic, and it does so without feeling copycat-ish. The story centers around Grace, a girl with a very special connection to the wolves that watch her from the woods outside her house. One night, one of these wolves shows up on her deck, only he's not a wolf anymore, he's a man. Grace and her wolf are soulmates (their romance fulfills the Bella-Jacob fantasy of Twilight fans) and I loved every minute of their story. This will be my go-to book for Twilight fans, both YA and adult. Most of my staff (and my mom) have read it, and they all loved it.

Reviewer: Suzanna Hermans, Oblong Books & Music Rating: 9



Solace of the Road
by Siobhan Dowd

9780375849718, \$17.99
Scholastic, August 2009

Core audience: 12 & up
Notable: language, positive experience in foster system, authenticity

Review:In this, the last book finished before her death, Dowd has created the character of Holly, a 14-year-old girl angry at everyone. The story is told in a shifting chronology that works to let us in on Holly's past as she works through her present. Holly is in foster care because her mother abandoned her so she is loathe to allow most people to get close to her. When she is placed in a home with a kind, childless couple who have problems of their own she runs away but not before shaping herself into a new persona -- Solace -- aided by a blond wig she steals from her foster mother's drawer.

Holly thinks that she will go to Ireland to find her lost mother so she begins cadging rides westward from London on trains, buses and eventually hitchhiking. She wears the wig when she needs to be Solace, an older, braver,

wilder version of herself. Her experiences lead her to the knowledge that her mother is not the answer to her problems.

The book deals with this in an unsentimental, authentic manner. Holly is witty in her disparagement. The adults are shadowy but sensible & sympathetic when they enter the tale. A solid story told in Dowd's seemingly effortlessly fresh language.

Reviewer: Kat Goddard, The Bookloft Rating: 9



When You Reach Me by Rebecca Stead

**9780385737425, \$15.99
Wendy Lamb Books, July 2009**

**Core audience: 9-14
Notable: historic New York City locale, friendship issues, just the right amount of magic**

Review: Oh, how I loved this book. Why did I love it? First, the choice to set it in 1979. By setting the book in the past, Stead has done away with the distractions of internet and cell phones, and allowed the characters to be the most important part of her story. Don't worry - the book certainly doesn't have a 70s feel, except for a few references to The \$20,000 Pyramid TV show and Bit-O-Honey candy. The second thing I loved about it was how she took a fairly simple story about friendship and growing up in NYC and turned it into magic. There's just the right amount of magic in this book. (I won't give away the secret in case you haven't read it.) It makes this book perfect for kids who don't like fantasy (because there's just a little hint of it) and perfect for kids who do love fantasy (because there's just enough of it that they'll get totally into it). The third reason I loved this book is it's constant references to Madeline L'Engle's A Wrinkle in Time. If a kid hasn't read it yet, reading this book will make him or her run out to pick it up. (Suzanna Hermans, Oblong Books & Music)

Review: Going to chime in on the WHEN YOU REACH ME love. Love.Love.Love. One of those great books where the author treats kids like they are intelligent, and patient enough to stick with the story and follow through the ideas even when they aren't super action page turning. (But it was a page-turning one-sitting book for me). You spend 3/4 of the book not quite knowing what's going on, but then it all clicks. And it talks about Einstein and common sense as habit of thought, and has these great concepts, but is still at the heart a story about a girl and her friends and her

mom. I hope everyone reads it because I think it will probably require a handsell, but is then a super easy handsell, especially to kids who liked A WRINKLE IN TIME, but if they haven't read AWIT, it's still great.

Reviewer: Katherine Ferguson, Bunch of Grapes Rating: 9

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