

NECBA'S SPRING 2010 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 [Spring 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. Also, here is a [Poster Version](#) of the Top Ten list for use with in store displays. Finally, we have an Indiebound NECBA Fall Top Ten List Widget available. Just [click here](#) to check it out and get yours!



As Simple as It Seems by Sarah Weeks

**9780060846633, \$15.99
Harper Collins, June 2010**

Core audience: Ages 8-11

Notable: Takes big issues and makes them simple, shows that differences among people often are good things.

Review: Over the course of this lovely story, 11 year old Verbena Colter finds out that she is adopted and that her birth father is in jail for murder, finds out that her birth mother caused her to be born with fetal alcohol syndrome, loses her best friend to a rival and is cast adrift in a leaky boat with a multiallergic nine year old boy, who doesn't know she is only pretending to be a ghost. Those dramatic events may seem like the plot of any common juvenile pageturner, in Sarah Weeks competent hands this book is anything but.

Perfect for 8-11s (especially those with a less dramatic background) this is a story of learning who you are and where you fit in the world. It is also a story of learning to appreciate what you have. Since book buyers rarely come in to the store asking for a book that will gently teach these valuable lessons, you can also describe it by merely saying it is a book about friendship and growing up. With no current events, violence, or romance this is a book I can easily sell now and forever.

Reviewer: Kat Goddard, The Bookloft Rating: 9.0



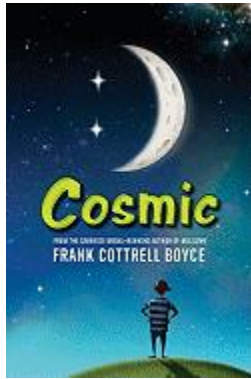
A Conspiracy of Kings by Megan Whalen Turner

**9780061870934, \$16.00
Greenwillow, March 2010**

**Core audience: Grade 8 and up, boys and girls
Notable: medieval style fiction, adventure, romance.**

Review: A Conspiracy of Kings by Megan Whalen Turner is the fourth book in her series about the fictional kingdoms of Eddis, Attolia and Sounis and about the wonderful characters that populate those territories. The Thief, The Queen of Attolia, and The King of Attolia are the first three books in the series. Each is complete in itself, but when one reads the books out of order, the continuity is lost and plot points from previous books are revealed. It would be my suggestion to read them in order. A Conspiracy of Kings focuses on the kingdom of Sounis. Sophos, the unwilling heir to the throne of Sounis, is more scholarly than combative. Due to much civil unrest in the kingdom, Sounis is kidnapped and his appearance temporarily altered after a severe beating. The original plan by his captors is to smuggle Sophos through the country in plain sight, and then to hide him with one of the rebelling barons. He is to be a pawn to be bartered when appropriate. An opportunity to escape from his captors materializes and Sophos joins the farm hands and hides within their world. The time spent within the laborers camp affords Sophos several opportunities to reflect and mature. When the growing escalation among the rebel groups threaten to kill his father and subject his country to a foreign power, Sophos must emerge from his anonymity and claim his title as king. Fans of writer Megan Whalen Turner will be delighted with A Conspiracy of Kings. It complements and completes the characters introduced in the earlier books. Filled with adventure, romance and complex characters, fans of medieval style fiction will spend many delightful hours lost in its pages.

Reviewer: Kathleen Totsie McGonagle Rating: 8.7



Cosmic by Frank Cottrell Boyce

9780061836831, \$16.99
Harper Collins, January 2010

Core audience: Middle grade girls and boys
Notable: for humor, family issues, lots of rocket science.

Review: Twelve year old Liam has stubble on his chin, is very tall and often mistaken for a grownup. This gets him into all sorts of funny situations and he certainly takes advantage of them! When he "wins" a chance to be part of a brand new, totally thrilling, for real, amusement park ride into outer space, he plays the adult charade to the hilt, taking along Florida, his gutsy young classmate, as his daughter. Besides being very funny, the story explores what it means to be a "Dad". All sorts of fathers accompany their "prizewinning" kids halfway around the world to the site of the launch. All of them are very gullible, competitive, and lacking in real father skills. Liam, the only "parent" allowed to accompany the kids, outshines them all as he uses his common sense and very useful computergame skills to bring the kids' rocket safely back to Earth. The ending comes rather fast (whew I was ready!) and seems a bit trumped up, but this suspenseful, charming and funny story is even better than Boyce's Millions and Framed.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop Rating: 8.75



Countdown by Deborah Wiles

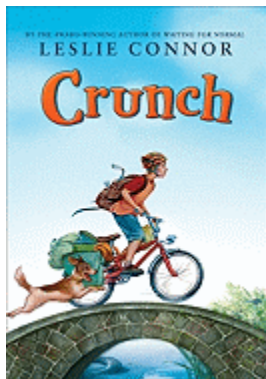
9780545106054, \$17.99
Scholastic, May 2010

Core audience: Ages 9-12
Notable: historical fiction 1960s, first in a trilogy of companion novels

Review: In this fantastic debut historical novel, 11 year old Franny is growing up in the early 1960s. Against a backdrop of the Cuban Missile Crisis, she deals with a mysteriously absent older sister, an uncle who is suffering from undiagnosed PTSD, and a changing dynamic in her circle of friends. I loved this book. Franny is a great character, and Wiles has set her in an incredibly interesting time period. The backdrop of the 1960s is present on every page, through colloquialisms ("Heavens to Murgatroyd!") and items

longforgotten (Franny sneaks into her sister's hope chest). The undercurrent of the Cuban Missile Crisis is present throughout; the kids practice "duckandcover" and watch President Kennedy on TV, while Franny sees her family become more and more openly worried about the political climate. What makes this book completely unique is the nonfiction component that Wiles integrates into the book. Between each chapter there are pages and pages of real images from the 1960s: photos of Kennedy and Khrushchev, propaganda art, real newspaper headlines and quotes, among many others. These serve to help the reader imagine life in the 1960s and see the same images the characters see. At the end of the book Wiles gives a brief overview of the Cuban Missile Crisis along with a kidfriendly bibliography. This will make a great companion piece to *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*. Since this is the first in a companion trilogy about the 1960s, I can see Wiles giving Christopher Paul Curtis a run for his money in his stranglehold on 1960s middlegrade historical fiction. I wouldn't be surprised one bit if *Countdown* took home an ALA Award of some sort next January.

Reviewer: Suzanna Hermans, Oblong Books & Music Rating: 9.1



Crunch by Leslie Connor

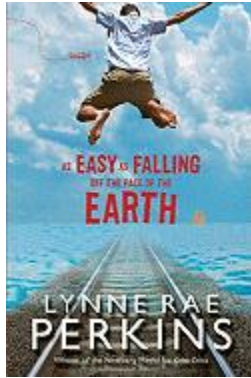
9780061692291, \$16.99
Katherine Tegen, April 2010

Core audience: Boys and girls ages 9-13
Notable: Characters, plot, humor, strong ending, family interaction, ingenuity, ethics.

Review:Not since *The Penderwicks* have I so happily abandoned other chores for the pure pleasure of reading a well written middle grade book to the end. Synopsis: 14yearold Dewey Marriss, second oldest of five siblings, is in charge of the family bike repair business while his parents take their annual "vacation." (Mom accompanies trucker dad on one of his hauls to Canada.) Lil, at 18, is in charge of the household; smart Vince, 12, is antisocial; and the 5yearold twins are sweet but dependent. It's a functioning family group, but a sudden fuel crisis keeps the parents away and makes the bike business boom. Dewey is determined to demonstrate that he's just as responsible and capable as Lil – but in ten days' time, demand overwhelms capacity, and Dewey has to face some limits. He also has to face a parts shortage, a crabby neighbor, Sprocket the billy goat, unreasonable customers, a dog that upchucks when it gets too excited, and a growing larceny problem for which there are multiple suspects. Readers may well want to move in with the Marriss family long before the satisfying ending, though they might just as easily come to see adventure and opportunity in

their own quotidian routines.

Reviewer: Carol Chittenden, Eight Cousins Rating:8.9



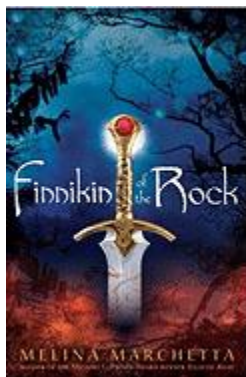
As Easy as Falling Off the Face of the Earth by Lynne Rae Perkins

9780061870903, \$16.99
Greenwillow Books, May 2010

Core audience: Teens, especially boys
Notable: for road trip humor with very quirky twists

Review: Ry, sixteen, is on his way to archaeological camp when he learns that the camp has closed. When the train stops, he jumps off to make cell phone call to his grandfather, who is newly arrived at Ry's house to dog sit. Parents have gone to Caribbean for sailing vacation. No cell coverage for Ry, train takes off, and he is marooned in the middle of nowhere. Ensuing chapters tell of Grandpa's fall into sinkhole which causes a sort of amnesia, then his linkup with a couple of dotty sisters, his parents' terrible mishaps on the islands, and black and white comic book pages show what is up with the two dogs who have run off. Ry manages to link up with Del who is a goodhearted modern day jack of all trades. They set off together to find the parents, starting with an old patchedup truck, then a rickety homemade airplane, and a sailboat. Misguided journey aside, this wacky tale includes happenings both funny and harrowing, but Perkins keeps it light in tone. Ry wants adventure and he gets it! Determination, very blind faith and bulldogged stubbornness bring the story to an improbable conclusion that will relieve readers hanging on for the ride of the year! Lots to think about and enjoy.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop Rating Rating: 8.6



Finnikin of the Rock by Melina Marchetta

9780763643614, \$18.99
Candlewick, February 2010

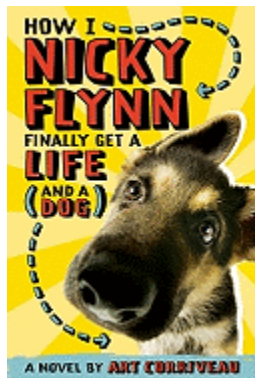
Core audience: girls and boys age 14+
Notable: Strong male and female leads, fantasy set in a medieval style world, violence.

Review: Finnikin's kingdom and its people were ravaged by traitors who

murdered the royal family and set in place a new king to rule. During the five days of terror that accompanied the coup, however, a powerful witch was burned at the stake, and her parting words were a curse upon the land that kept those who had left from returning and those who remained from leaving. Finnikin was among those exiled to foreign lands, and he has spent most of his teenage years traveling with his mentor, the King's First Man, trying to help his fellow exiles and find a glimmer of hope for the return of his homeland. When he is contacted by a messenger who tells him to retrieve a girl named Evanjalín from a cloister, a girl who has the gift of walking through the dreams of their scattered countrymen. She tells him that she knows the true heir to the throne still lives and that they must find him and return to their kingdom to take it back.

Evanjalín and Finnikin's world is brutal and the complexity of the characters in this book reflects that brutality. Good men and women commit murder; one character who tries to rape Evanjalín is later redeemed; the people who have been oppressed rise up and take bloody revenge on their oppressors. The murders, and especially rapes (though not written in great detail), are why I would recommend this for teens. Finnikin of the Rock is a riveting story that will appeal to readers who want excitement, mystery, and romance and don't mind the violence. I'd recommend it to fans of Graceling.

Reviewer: Sandy Scott, The Galaxy Bookshop Rating: 8.6



How I, Nicky Flynn, Finally Get a Life by by Art Corriveau

9780810982987, \$16.95
Abrams, May 2010

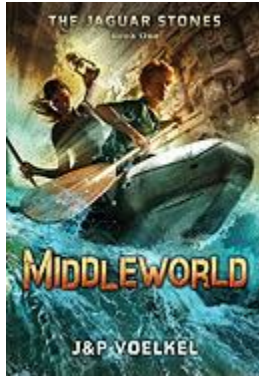
Core audience: Ages 9-12; classes studying disabilities
Notable: Characters, logic, guide dog knowledge, Boston knowledge, humor, family dynamics, tight plot, understanding physical disabilities

Review: Nicky, age 11 ³/₄, narrates with a hilariously nervous internal monologue about getting his bearings in a tough Boston neighborhood after his parents split and left their affluent suburban life. His mother is a little impulsive, and brings Reggie, a German shepherd home from the pound to their tiny Charlestown apartment. Nicky is appalled, but forced to care for Reggie, and discovers that Reggie is a trained guide dog. Gradually boy and dog bond. But Nicky's so busy suppressing his rage at his parents' breakup that he spins all kinds of white lies at school, at home, and around the community as he tries to figure out why Reggie is no longer an official guide dog. And Nicky's VERY good at dreaming up excuses on his feet, until the whole web comes apart, releasing Nicky's tensions, cleaning up a number of ragged relationships, and giving a fine dog a good home.

The author has integrated fascinating material about guide dogs and visual

disabilities, so the book would be a great teaching asset – but he’s also constructed it so tightly, with plenty of snappy dialogue, it’ll keep readers hooked on the story, and would make a terrific screenplay as well.

Reviewer: Carol Chittenden, Eight Cousins Rating: 8.6



Middleworld by J&P Voelkel

9781606840719, \$8.99

Egmont (Also a lengthier self published version in 2007), May 2010

Core audience: 8-12

Notable: For Mayan history and culture coming to life on many levels.

Review:A strong current will carry heavy debris downstream that would sink in more placid waters. Middleworld has an exuberance to it, a swift current which not only makes it a pleasure to read, but buoys its clunkier elements. The Voelkels plainly love Mayan culture, and their knowledge and passion for it makes this timely tale of the end of days in the Mayan Calendar, and the world's great peril, something to be cared about not out of the perfunctory need to save the world, but because the Voelkel's Mayan world is fun and engaging. Middleworld is narrated by 14 year old Max Murphy, the son of Mayan archeologists. Max leaves his Bostonian digs to seek his parents who, he finds upon landing in (mythical South American country) San Xavier, are lost in the Jungle. He teams up with a very funny, acerbic Mayan girl, Lola, and together with some allies square off against the long hand of the descendants of evil missionaries. Max and Lola are a great duo, and Max's lighthearted but self honest narration lends a good, comfortable feel to the story. We like the good guys, we loathe the bad guys, and we can't wait to find out about the Yellow Jaguar Stone in book two. And if Zia does turn out to be Lola's mother, and even if, after his Uncle gives up his lucrative smuggling side line to just concentrate on the family banana business, Uncle Ted's now disused multimillion dollar secret smuggling lair suddenly comes in handy in the future, well why shouldn't it? This truly is a book that can be handsold with impunity.

Reviewer: Kenny Brechner: DDG Booksellers Rating: 8.8



**The Tweenage Guide to NOT Being
UNPopular (Amelia Rules 5)
by Jimmy Gownley**

9781416986089, \$10.99
Atheneum, April 2010

Core audience: Ages 10-14; boys will love this if they can get past the girl MC on the cover, which of course they should, because girls are half the world and lead very interesting, entertaining, action packed lives

Notable: Layers of humor from mild bathroom jokes to 12 year old embarrassment to ruminations on string theory; child appeal, pitchperfect writing, great illustration.

Review: I think I might have a teeny crush on Jimmy Gownley. His Amelia graphic novels are so clever, smart, funny and true they reach right down past this 45yearold reviewer's self into her awkward tween heart and make her snort with laughter while reliving her own greatest hits of sixthgrade heartbreak and hijinks. Ahh, memories. Here, Amelia and her nerdy buddy posse are struggling with the ageold issue of popularity, and I love how Gownley hits it giving them a solid sense of themselves with just enough doubt (and yearning to be popular) to ring very true. The book starts with sarcastic, smartmouthedbutmostlygoodhearted Amelia and her friend, Rhonda with the lumpy hair, dressed in dorky spaceage costumes, running from an angry mob of classmates. They escape up a tree, and Amelia wants to explain how it happened but is just too mortified to talk about it yet. The story does unfold, along with subplots about cheerleaders, existential questioning (can the ageold advice "be true to yourself" be any good if "yourself" is a jerk?), and the uncomfortable reality of facing one's own worst behavior (ignoring the kids even nerdier than oneself, spouting off mean truths about people in a fit of impulsive anger, etc.). Fortunately, Amelia has a sympathetic young aunt and a solid, kind mom in addition to her goofball gang of friends, to help her figure it all out.

Amelia and her friends (both boys and girls) hover charmingly on that cusp of teen awareness and downright kiddish glee. They're as apt to throw snowballs and dress up as caped superheroes waging war on pop quizzes as they are to dissect the middleschool food chain with 21stcentury psychological savvy. Gownley salts and peppers his stories with tongueincheek homages to other cartoonists and literary influences, from Bloom County to Archie to Harriet the Spy. SLJ likens Amelia to Ramona, and I see that, but overall, I think of Amelia's gang o' buddies as a latterday Peanuts, the subversive, brilliant Peanuts comic strips Charles Schwarz was writing in the 60s and 70s.

This is one of the best graphic novel series out there for kids—and for adults with vivid, funny memories of childhood.

Reviewer:Elizabeth Bluemle, The Flying Pig Bookstore **Rating:** 8.6