

NEW ENGLAND CHILDREN'S BOOKSELLING ADVISORY COUNCIL SPRING REVIEWS, 2008

This is our bi-annual attempt to identify as many high-quality titles as possible from among the numerous new January-June middle-grade and young-adult fiction books. The list was produced by soliciting reading copies from as many publishers as possible, sharing the contributed books among NECBA members, reading and reviewing and rating as many as possible.

From these titles a Top Ten list has been selected as a service to our general bookstore colleagues who are less familiar with the genre. The full text will be available on the NEIBA website, newenglandbooks.org.

As is ever the case, contributions are uneven, with some publishers supplying a very large fraction of the galleys, and a few reviewers supplying a very large fraction of the reviews. Such reviews are, by their nature, never soon enough or inclusive enough. Nevertheless, this list is bound to alert the reader to at least one or two — and probably more — excellent titles s/he might have missed.

The Chittenden Rating Scale, revised spring 2008

- 10** A desert island book for all time: Charlotte's Web, Frederick, Bridge to Terabithia.
- 9** One of the best of the season, and/or solid Newbery or Printz honor contender, whether I like it or not.
- 8** One of the best of the season, probably saleable in hardcover, can recommend with honest enthusiasm to customers, will have legs in paperback. Might be a solid Newbery or Printz honor contender, especially if kids were on the selection committee.
- 7** I will handsell it well in hardcover, but others might or might not.
- 6** An entertaining read of mixed quality. May some fine points. Probably can recommend in paperback if not hardcover; OR kids will go wild for it but the enduring literary quality is mixed.
- 5** Will probably have a small audience. Or, suitable for some school library situations, but unlikely to sell in hardcover as a child's choice or as a gift.
- 4** An honest but unsuccessful effort, probably an editor's hope that better things will follow. Or: unlikely to sell in hardcover as a child's choice or as a gift.
- 3** Not a book I would want on my store's shelves if I could help it.
- 2** A book I'd have a hard time embracing even if a friend's child wrote it.
- 1** Waste of a good tree.

TITLES REVIEWED

(xx's indicate multiple reviews of the same title.)

100 Days and 99 Nights, by Alan Madison

13th Reality, by James Dashner

42 Miles, by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, illus Elaine Clayton

The Adoration of Jenna Fox, by Mary E. Pearson xxx

Airman, by Eoin Colfer

Alive and Well in Prague, New York, by Daphne Grab

Allie Finkle's Rules for Girls, by Meg Cabot

Amulet Book 1: The Stonekeeper, by Kazu Kibuishi

Artichoke's Heart, by Suzanne Supplee

Bird Lake Moon, by Kevin Henkes xxx

The Boy Who Dared, by Susan Campbell Bartoletti

The Calder Game, by Blue Balliett xx

Chancey of the Maury River, by Gigi Amateau xx

Chicken Feathers, by Joy Cowley, illustrated by David Elliot

Child of Dandelions, by Shenaaz Nanji

Climbing the Stairs, by Padma Venkatraman

The Compound, by S.A. Bodeen

Daisy Dawson is On Her Way, by Steve Voake and Jessica Meserve

The Dead and the Gone, by Susan Beth Pfeffer xxx

Death by Bikini, by Linda Gerber xx

Debbie Harry Sings in French, by Meagan Brothers

Deep Down Popular, by Phoebe Stone xx

The Diamond of Drury Lane, by Julia Golding xx

Disreputable History of Frankie Landau Banks, by E. Lockhart

Dodger and Me, by Jordan Sonnenblick xx

Dragon Flight, by Jessica Day George

Dreamrider, by Barry Jonsberg

Generation Dead, by Daniel Waters xx

Gods of Manhattan, by Scott Mebus

Gone, by Michael Grant

Greetings From Nowhere, by Barbara O'Connor xx

Guinevere's Gift, by Nancy McKenzie

The Gypsy Crown, by Kate Forsyth

Honeybee: Poems and Short Prose, by Naomi Shihab Nye

The House of Djinn, by Suzanne Fisher Staples

How I Saved My Father's Life (And Ruined Everything Else), by Ann Hood

How to Build A House, by Dana Reinhardt xxx

Humming of Numbers, by Joni Sensel

Ink Exchange, by Melissa Marr
The Joys of Love, by Madeleine L'Engle

Julian Rodriguez Episode One: Trash Crisis on Earth, by Alexander Stadler

Kaline Klattermaster, by Haven Kimmel

Keeping Score, by Linda Sue Park

Lock and Key, by Sarah Dessen

The London Eye Mystery, by Siobhan Dowd

Looks, by Madeleine George xxx

Love Me Tender, by Audrey Couloubis xx

Madapple, by Christina Meldrum

The Magic Half, Annie Barrows

The Magic Thief, by Sarah Prineas

The Missing, Book 1: Found, by Margaret Peterson Haddix xxx

The Missing Girl, by Norma Fox Mazer

My Dad's a Birdman, by David Almond xx

My Most Excellent Year: A Novel of Love, Mary Poppins & Fenway Park, by Steve Kluger xxx

The Mysterious Benedict Society and the Perilous Journey, by Trenton Lee Stewart

Mystery of the Third Lucretia, by Susan Runholt

Newes from the Dead, by Mary Hooper
Nim at Sea, by Wendy Orr

Nurk: The Strange, Surprising Adventures of a (Somewhat) Brave Shrew, by Ursula Vernon xx

On Rough Seas, by Nancy L. Hull

Once Upon a Time in the North, by Philip Pullman

One Small Step, by P. B. Kerr

The Opposite of Invisible, by Liz Gallagher

Ottoline and the Yellow Cat, by Chris Riddell xx

Pandora Gets Jealous, by Carolyn Hennesy

Path to Punishment, by Jeanette E. Alsheimer & Patricia Friedle

The Patron Saint of Butterflies, by Cecilia Galante

Peeled, by Joan Bauer xx

The Penderwicks on Gardam Street, by Jeanne Birdsall

Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Battle of the Labyrinth, by Rick Riordan

Pirates of the Retail Wasteland, by Adam Selzer

The Postcard, by Tony Abbott

Princess Ben, Catherine Gilbert Murdock

The Red Necklace, by Sally Gardner

Rose By Any Other Name, by Maureen McCarthy

Runemarks, by Joanne Harris xxx

Sebastian Darke: Prince of Fools, by Philip Caveney xx

Secrets of the Cirque Medrano, by Elaine Scott

Seekers, by Erin Hunter

The Seer of Shadows, by Avi

The Sherlock Files #1: The 100-Year-Old Secret, by Tracy Barrett

Simon Bloom, The Gravity Keeper, by Michael Reisman

Sir Lancelot the Great (Knights' Tales I), by Gerald Morris, illus Aaron Renier

Stink and the Great Guinea Pig Express, by

Six Innings: A Game in the Life, by James Preller

Suddenly Supernatural, by Elizabeth Cody Kimmel

Suite Scarlett, by Maureen Johnson xx

Sunrise over Fallujah, by Walter Dean Myers xxxxx

Swan Kingdom, by Zoe Marriott

Take Me There, by Susane Colson

Three Little Words, by Ashley Rhodes-Courter xx

Trouble, by Gary Schmidt

The Trouble Begins at 8: A Life of Mark Twain in the Wild, Wild West, by Sid Fleischman

The Trouble with Rules, by Leslie Bulion

The Truth About My Bat Mitzvah, by Nora Raleigh Baskin

Tunnels, by Roderick Gordon and Brian Williams xx

Uncle Pirate, by Douglas Rees, illus Tony Auth

The Underneath, by Kathi Appelt xx

Waiting for Normal, by Leslie Connor xx

Wake, by Lisa Mcmann

The Willoughbys, by Lois Lowry

REVIEWERS

Gretchen Baker-Smith

Baker Books (N. Dartmouth, MA)

Janet Bibeau

Storybook Cove

Joanne Bibeau

Storybook Cove

Elizabeth Bluemle

The Flying Pig Bookstore (Shelburne, VT)

Kenny Brechner

Devaney, Doak & Garrett (DDG)
Booksellers (Farmington, ME)

Rondi Brower

Blackwood & Brouwer Booksellers, Ltd.
(Kinderhook, NY)

Sue Carita

The Toadstool Bookshop (Milford, NH)

Carol Chittenden

Eight Cousins & BookStream (Falmouth, MA)

Heather Doss, Bookazine (Bayonne, NJ)

Nancy Felton, Broadside Bookshop
(Northampton, MA)

Kat Goddard, The BookLoft
(Great Barrington, MA)

Josie Leavitt

The Flying Pig Bookstore (Shelburne, VT)

Joyce Miller, Baker Books (N. Dartmouth, MA)

Alison Morris

Wellesley Booksmith (Wellesley, MA)

Mimi Powell

Baker Books (N. Dartmouth, MA)

Karlene Rearick

The Alphabet Garden (Cheshire, CT)

Beth Reynolds

Norwich Bookstore (Norwich, VT)

Ellen Richmond

Children's Book Cellar (Waterville, ME)

Lorna Ruby

Wellesley Booksmith (Wellesley, MA)

JP Schittina, The Flying Pig Bookstore
(Shelburne, VT)

Bina Williams

Bridgeport Public Library (Bridgeport, CT)

REVIEWS

100 Days and 99 Nights, by Alan Madison

978-0316113540 \$14.99 Little, Brown, May 2008

Core audience: Good question. Book says 8-12, but main character appears to be about 7. Maybe best as a read-aloud for grades 2-4??

Notable aspects: Addresses a very important issue, military families with someone at war. Great sibling relationship.

Review: The publisher's description is as good as any: "Dad says because of the army he stood shoulder to shoulder with polar bears and watched the sun rise over the frozen fields of Alaska, which sounds really exciting. And because of the Army he slept in

sludge, shoulder to shoulder with snakes and watched the sun set over the swamps of Alabama -- which does not."

In a timely, but not politically charged way, author Alan Madison looks at the way a family copes with having a parent away on a 100 day, 99 night military tour of duty through the eyes of the very loveable Esmerelda (Esme) Swishback McCarthur. Esme wants to be good while her dad is away. In fact, she feels like it's her duty to be good. But being good can be hard, especially if you have a little brother like Ike. By following Esme's story, as she awaits her father's return, readers will see how heroism can translate to every member of a family."

The quote is Esme at her best - describing the Army and her life as a military dependent. In this I would say she has the edge over Piper Reed, Kimberly Willis Holt's navy brat (Holt, 8/07), although both girls are believable and appealing. The writing is not as good, however. Esme uses a lot of compound verbs, which rapidly becomes annoying. "Play-wrestle", "squeeze-close", "sweet-convince", "slow-rising". I also think she's too young. I'm not saying our 7 year olds shouldn't understand more about the war and the people who are fighting it for us, but I'm not sure that's a good place to start. Esme has a large collection of stuffed animals, which she alphabetizes, and each chapter starts with a description of an animal and who gave it to her. If the illustrations are good (not seen by me) this will serve to make it cute, but will further limit its appeal for older children. There's also a scene where the teacher paraphrases Dick Cheney in a way that I found jarring. Although it's clear from the discussion of heat and sand that her father must be in Iraq or Afghanistan, neither country is mentioned by name. Still, everyone should read the section where Esme's class learns about what children did on the "home front" during WWII and they discuss what they can do on the home front during this war.

So - important, but uneven.

Rondi Brower, Blackwood & Brouwer Booksellers, Kinderhook, NY Rating: 5.5

13th Reality, by James Dashner

978-1590388815 \$17.95 Shadow Mountain, March 2008

Core audience: Ages 9-12; Young fans who want more after The Boy Wizard

Notable aspects: Original and fresh. Contains puzzles, clues, detailed characters. Strong Father Son relationship

Review: In Dashner's latest fantasy novel, young Atticus "Tick" Higginbottom has been sent a letter as to how he can help save the world. He must solve several puzzles and clues to discover who is behind it all and why. I love the puzzle aspect of this book and spent some time with paper and pencil trying to figure some of them out for myself. The characters are so detailed and described, everything here seems fully imagined. Master George and Mistress Jane are the people who have put Tick and the rest of the world in danger, from the author's descriptions and well turned phrases, they seem to be especially vivid in my mind. But it is Rutger and Mothball who seemed most endearing, just the kind of creatures you'd like to have as friends.

Dashner has taken our world and fashioned a premise-- that this is only one of several realities. He's given us a likeable hero, who often asks his father for help. (Imagine that: A. actually having a parent, and B. being on such good terms with him that you could ask him for help.)

Sure, this fantasy stuff has gotten somewhat old and stale, but I found myself totally enjoying this one. I kept waiting for some slip up, which would be reason enough to scoff at the whole tired genre and put the book down. But amazingly enough it didn't happen. This certainly isn't the kind of book to revolutionize the whole children's book industry, but it was funny and enjoyable. It made me want to climb inside and meet these characters for myself-- and that's my definition of a good book.

Reviewer: Beth Reynolds, The Norwich Bookstore, VT

Rating: 8

42 Miles, by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, illus. by Elaine Clayton

978-0618618675 \$16.00 Clarion: Houghton Mifflin, April 2008

Core audience: Girls ages 9-13.

Notable aspects: Language, emotional resonance, characters, maturation

Review: What *Love That Dog* did for boys, *42 Miles* offers to girls. In compact verse we meet JoEllen, who says (p. 76 of 80, "My favorite poems / hold a wooden spoon of words / and whisper: / Taste." JoEllen splits her time between her mother's tidy apartment in Cincinnati, (where she's known as Ellen), and her father's chaotic farmhouse 42 miles out in the country, (where he calls her Joey). She loves them both, but the divide bothers her so much she's dreading a school assignment to write an autobiography. Procrastinating by exploring the farmhouse attic, she comes across photos of her parents together, and with her as a baby, "holding the proof that they shared / love / and not just regrets, / I realize / they don't see in me / the mirror image of their mistakes -- / or even what they hated in each other -- / but the best that / each of them had to offer." With the arrival of her thirteenth birthday, she decides to make some changes, to be JoEllen, to invite city pals to the country, take some of her farm accomplishments in to town, and live as one person, indivisible. The galley shows collage art that's under revision. My own eye hopes the revisions make them a shade smoother and more artful, because what's presently visible strikes me as a quick hack rather than a cleverly primitive style.

Reviewer: Carol B. Chittenden, Eight Cousins and BookStream

Rating: 8.5

The Adoration of Jenna Fox, by Mary E. Pearson

978-0805076684 \$16.95 Henry Holt, April 2008

Core audience: Ages 14 & up

Notable aspects: Thoughtful, topical, examination of the intersection between science and the notion of a soul; the meaning of humanity. Parent/child relationship explored as it is experienced by both sides.

Review: Fifteen year-old Jenna Fox has just awoken from what she has been told is a year-long coma. She remembers nothing of the accident that caused her injuries. Slowly, as she recovers, her memories seem to regenerate but with an undercurrent of strangeness. Although her parents try to keep her from finding out, they have used illegal medical procedures during her recovery. Jenna's father is a scientist researching 'Bio Gel', a substance that is "Artificially oxygenated and loaded with neurochips. Neurochips are smaller than human cells and communicate with each other pretty much the same way neurons do, but faster."

Jenna has essentially been reconstituted from bio-engineered tissue while her brain has been stored in a database for later uploading. Given this description one might think the story is no more than a 'bionic girl' story, but it bends into a much more sensitive bio-ethics cautionary tale. The innate need of a loving parent to do anything to save their child versus the child's need for control and individuation are struggles confronted here.

This is generally well-told but it did require some commitment to stay with the story when at first it seemed like a trite amnesia victim saga. I particularly liked that the story is given a good balance between all the stakeholders in this debate; the state, the scientific, medical and economic communities, as well as the needs/wants of the parent and the individual.

Reviewer: Kathy Goddard, [The BookLoft](#)

Rating: 8

[Additional review of *The Adoration of Jenna Fox*:](#)

Core audience: Ages 12+ (though publisher marketing says 14+); both boys and girls

Notable aspects: Thought-provoking, timely premise; great science fiction for readers who "don't like science fiction"; beautifully written. A book of ideas firmly rooted in plot.

Review: Esteemed YA author Pearson (*A Room on Lorelei Street*) explores issues of what constitutes identity and how humans pursue biotech possibilities and responsibilities in her newest novel, *The Adoration of Jenna Fox*. Jenna, 17, wakes up a year and a half after an accident to find a healed body but a mind with no memories. No personal memories, that is. She feels zero connection to her parents and grandmother, though old home movies clearly show a happy girl, close to her family. While Jenna has to work to retrieve some simple words -- hot, apple -- she can recite whole passages of Thoreau by heart, and has flashes of memories from her earliest infancy and childhood that no normal person should be able to recall. Who is she, and what are her parents hiding from her? As Jenna pieces together the secrets of her life, she encounters other individuals at odds with themselves, struggling to figure out what elements of their minds, bodies, and even souls, constitute a true identity. Though the premise is serious, the book hums along lightly; Jenna has a wry, sharp sense of humor, and her insights and relationships progress in a manner that feels satisfying. There's some beautiful writing here, too.

The jacket recommends an audience aged 14+, but there's nothing more alarming within than a couple of kisses, and smart twelve- and thirteen-year-olds who liked Peter Dickinson's *Eva* and Nancy Werlin's *The Double Helix* (not to mention MT Anderson's older-aimed *Feed*) should find plenty to chew on here.

Reviewer: Elizabeth Bluemle, [The Flying Pig Bookstore](#)

Rating: 8.5

Additional review of The Adoration of Jenna Fox:

***I loved this one; Great eye catching cover & an interesting discussion topic about what makes us human.

Reviewer: Heather Doss, Bookazine

Rating: 8.5

Airman, by Eoin Colfer

978-1423107507 \$17.99 Hyperion, January 2008

Core audience: mostly boys 10 -14, or anyone fascinated by early aeronautics. It's a little violent for younger children, also, at 400 pages, a little long. Neither female role is exciting.

Notable aspects: Lovely use of early aeronautical science and history, incorporated beautifully into the story.

Review: In the 1890s Conor and his family live on the sovereign Saltee Islands, just off the Irish coast. All the people live on Great Saltee. Little Saltee is home to the diamond mines and the jail that supplies the prisoners to do the mining. "Good King Nick" is in charge, Conor's Dad is Captain of the guard and a good friend of the king. Conor spends his time with Princess Isabella, who rather annoyingly threatens to have him hanged at regular intervals. Both children are tutored by a Frenchman who wants to build a flying machine and is an expert on balloons and gliders. He's also a spy for the King. Conor happens upon the scene when the bad guy is murdering both the king and the Frenchman and winds up in jail on Little Saltee at the ripe old age of 15. Needless to say, he eventually gets revenge, and the girl, and, in a slightly odd twist on happily ever after, a college education. And of course, he gets to fly.

It's a rollicking adventure story and will be enjoyed by many, especially those who don't mind if their characters come straight from central casting. Fine upstanding good guys, over the top bad guys, even a blind piano player spy!

Biggest quibble - the beginning. I see why Colfer wants his hero born in a balloon, but it's too ridiculous. Can't quite see your average boy needing a birth story, can't quite see your average girl buying the concept of a nearly painless, bloodless birth. It wouldn't matter so much, except he went to a great deal of trouble to make the rest of the story - gliding, flying - believable and historically accurate.

True confession (should I say this at the beginning?): I didn't actually "read" this; I listened to the unabridged audio excellently read by John Keating (Listening Library, 9780739359747, \$44.00).

Reviewer: Rondi Brower, Blackwood & Brower Booksellers

Rating: 6.5

Alive and Well in Prague, New York, by Daphne Grab

9780061256707 \$16.99 HarperCollins, June 2008

Core audience: Ages 12 & up

Notable aspects: plot includes parent with Parkinson's disease/terminal illness; moving from big city to small town

Review: Matisse has just moved to a small rural town in upstate New York after living in New York City. At first she really resents the change; she misses her old high school and friends. The reason for the move is that her father has Parkinson's disease and the parents are hoping that small town life will be easier. One thing Matisse doesn't miss is the pitying looks from people who know about her father's condition, so in this new town she is keeping it a secret. She begins to adjust to the setting, including the wildlife (she almost gets attacked by a goose), and she makes some new friends. Meanwhile, her mother pretends everything is okay on the surface, and her father becomes withdrawn and cranky whenever the PD causes him difficulty with what used to be normal everyday tasks. When she gets on the wrong side of the queen bee popular girl, a rumor begins to circulate that her father is addicted to drugs. Her new friends help her find the courage to stand up to the bullying. She also finds the strength to confront her family so they can begin to acknowledge, accept, and cope with her father's terminal illness. In the end, Matisse realizes that hayrides actually are as much fun as some of the city attractions she misses, especially if you happen to be with a boy you like.

Reviewer: Karlene Rearick, *The Alphabet Garden*

Rating: 8

Allie Finkle's Rules for Girls, by Meg Cabot

978-0545039475 \$15.99 Scholastic, March 2008

Core audience: Tween girls, ages 7-10

Notable aspects: Commercial appeal, plausible characters, common situations, utterly harmless

Review: Allie's parents reveal that they've bought a new house and Allie, utterly self centered, sets out to foil their plans. However, her best friend isn't treating her well (perhaps justifiably!); the new school looks like it has possibilities; the new bedroom all her own looks pretty good once it's painted; and maybe, just maybe, she'll be able to clinch the bargain for a kitten.

Reviewer: Carol Chittenden, *BookStream and Eight Cousins*

Rating: 7

Amulet Book 1: The Stonekeeper, by Kazu Kibuishi

978-0439846806 / \$9.99 pb Scholastic, January 2008

Core audience: 8 and up

Notable aspects: graphic novel, fantasy, action, suspense

Review: Sure to be a BIG hit with young graphic novel lovers, this is a suspenseful, action-packed ride featuring terrific full-color art by the very talented Kazu Kibuishi. Kids will be clamoring to get their hands on the series' next installment.

Reviewer: Alison Morris, Wellesley Booksmith

Rating: 8

Artichoke's Heart, by Suzanne Supplee

9780525479024 \$16.99 Dutton, June, 2008

Core audience: 14-18 year old girls

Notable aspects: A superabundance of notable aspects, though eating disorders is the most important.

Review: If *Artichoke's Heart* were a pizza it would certainly be a supreme. Apart from its central theme of overcoming an eating disorder, the book deals with family strife, sudden economic uncertainty, teen alcoholism, deep rooted family tension, cancer, peer pressure, cliques, and relationship issues. The book is narrated by Rosemary Goode, a high school student who is likable, hardworking, and bright, but who struggles with obesity and a flatulence disorder resulting from a liquid weight loss product called Pounds - Away. Rosemary also struggles with her Aunt Mary, a relentless, interfering person whose constant provision of weight loss books and verbal advice push Rosemary into the arms of Boyle's Law, every reaction having an equal and opposite counter reaction. The story evolves over the course of a year, in which Rosemary finds the impetus to lose weight for her own reasons, finds love in the arms of a good egg named Kyle, and finds hope and strength for the tackling of all the other difficulties listed above. *Artichoke's Heart* is firmly in the right place, as it were, and Supplee provides some genuinely insightful underpinnings to Rosemary's narrative, but the story is burdened by its issue saturation. Another difficulty is that the narrative voice slips into an adult voice periodically. For example Rosemary reflects that she doesn't want to come across as a character in a John Water film, rather than reflecting that she didn't want to come across as that girl in Hairspray. In the final analysis, as most of us have discovered at some point, when it comes to spices, toppings, and sub plots, less really is more.

Kenny Brechner, DDG Booksellers

Rating: 6

Bird Lake Moon, by Kevin Henkes

9780061470769 \$15.99 Greenwillow (Harper), May 2008

Core audience: Age 10-13, especially those in changing families

Notable aspects: Atmosphere, non-specific melancholy, believable characters

Review: Had I read this as a novella in *The New Yorker*, I'd have sighed and thought, "What a thoughtful picture of an unsettled summer, so tenderly drawn. That Kevin Henkes has such clear recollections of the ways adult perceptions and decisions affect kids." But it wasn't *The New Yorker*; it was a galley directed to 10-14-year-olds, and I can't recommend it to them wholeheartedly.

A brief digression: WHAT'S WITH THE PLUPERFECT, EH???? If a story can't be told with a minimum of the past perfect tense, I find myself wanting to whisper in the editor's ear to please whisper in the author's ear that the story needs to be reorganized. Is there any possible way to say "she went" instead of "she had gone"? The pluperfect is a dandy tense, just as the passive voice is a perfectly fine invention. But overuse is like too much perfume, or too many jalapenos or a surplus of grommets on a handbag. It diverts from the point. The pluperfect serves as a mirror: it doesn't tell us directly, but reflects off the surface of the narrative, delivering backstory indirectly. For adult readers, where the atmosphere may be the real story, that might work. But for young readers I feel it distracts, fuzzes the focus, and slows down the narrative unnecessarily. End of digression.

Much of *Bird Lake Moon* is told as though remembered much later. Mitch and Spencer give their impressions, mostly in the pluperfect, in alternating chapters: Mitch is upset by his parents' divorce, and decides to act out some of his feelings by "haunting" the cabin next door. Spencer, staying in the cabin next door, is part of a family distressed by the drowning of a 4-year-old sibling, many years earlier, in Bird Lake. Just as a friendship is starting to develop between the two boys, both of them move away. Period. No exchange of phone numbers, school names, e-mail addresses, anything. So much more could happen, there are excellent characters and emotional conflicts all set up, ready to spring. And they don't. Reading the book is like expecting one more stair and then stumbling when it's not there.

Reviewer: Carol Chittenden, [Eight Cousins](#) and [BookStream](#) **Rating:** 6

[Additional review of *Bird Lake Moon*:](#)

Core audience: Grades 5-7 (despite book blurb stating Gr. 5-9)

Notable aspects: Issues of death, divorce, friendship

Review: Mitch and his Mom have come to grandparents' cottage at Bird Lake when Mitch's Dad moves out of their home. Mitch has fantasies of moving into the empty cottage next door with his Mom. He spends much time there beneath the porch, just sitting. One day, Spencer, his little sister and parents arrive at this cottage. It had been the site of the drowning of a then four-year-old son whom the two siblings do not remember. Mom owns the cottage and they have come to see if they can enjoy being there once again. Eventually the boys meet and become friends, but not before Mitch has done a few things in anger that make Spencer feel his dead brother is a real presence there. A major point to the story is how the simplest things can be interpreted differently. This is a powerful concept for kids at that age. The boys and their feelings are very realistic. This is a great book for discussion at the fifth and sixth grade level where so many youngsters face issues dealing with perception and reality.

At the end of the book, Mitch and his Mom have found an apartment of their own back home. We hope that Spencer's family keep their cottage, but Mom still has a problem with memories there. They depart hastily. Since Mitch is off apt. hunting with Mom, Grandma gives Spencer the phone number and address at the cottage so the boys can keep in touch. Spencer and Dad do come back to look into needed repairs and Spencer looks forward to surprising Mitch. Oh, and Spencer's seven-year-old little sister is a sweetie. (Neat little sisters seem to be in vogue right now!) Despite the use of the past

perfect tense (why?), this will be a good hand- sell now for kids facing adversity, but should sell really well in paperback, especially for classrooms and book groups.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop, Milford, NH **Rating:** 7.5

Additional rating of Bird Lake Moon:

***A bit more muddled than *Olive's Ocean*.

Reviewer: Heather Doss, Bookazine **Rating:** 6.5

The Boy Who Dared, by Susan Campbell Bartoletti

978-04396801334 \$16.99 Scholastic, February 2008

Core audience: 12-16 year olds

Review: A suspenseful tale, based on real events, gives high school and middle school readers an accurate look at the social and psychological manipulation visited upon German society by the Reich. The author's notes and excellent photographs are a valuable addition. It provides a look at a real hero in a time when we use that term too easily.

Reviewer: Joyce Miller, Baker Books **Rating:** 9

The Calder Game, by Blue Balliett

9780439852074 \$17.99 Scholastic Press, April '08

Core audience: Gr. 4-7 boys and girls

Notable aspects: Ideas, character, suspense

Review: Balliett (of *Chasing Vermeer* and *The Wright 3*) is back -with the sculpture of Alexander Calder in her sights! This time the scene is mostly a small English town near Oxford, where Calder visits with his Dad, goes missing, and Petra and Tommy are flown over to help as only they can! Once again, mathphobes will see numbers in an entirely new way. The sculptures of Calder provide links to all sorts of reader-creativity. In fact, Petra and Tommy find a new sort of balance to their relationship as they consider the types of balance in Calder's work. Art is seen as a dynamic force that can change a community. Pentaminoes can be "life-savers"! Illustrations by Brett Helquist contain puzzles to be decoded. This is a delightful mystery guaranteed to open new doors for young readers!

Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop, Milford, NH **Rating:** 8

Additional review of The Calder Game:

Review: Readers who like mysteries, mazes, codes, and adventure are in for a treat. Set in England, this story follows three amateur sleuths trying to solve the mystery behind the sudden disappearance of a priceless piece of art sculpture. A fast-paced read.

JP Schittina, The Flying Pig Bookstore **Rating:** 8

Chancey of the Maury River, by Gigi Amateau

978-0763634391 \$15.99 Candlewick Press, May 2008

Core audience: 14+, anyone into horses

Notable aspects: Insight into relationships between humans and horses

Review: Chancey is an albino horse, a disappointment for his first owner. When her farm is sold he is left in back pasture for months to fend for himself. This part is very sad as his physical condition deteriorates considerably. When he is next taken in as a therapy horse at a riding school, he is able to fulfill the destiny promised at his birth when a firestar raced across the sky. His dam had promised a life of wisdom and beauty and counseled him to seek understanding of all things. At the riding school, Chancey realizes his potential. Even as a cancer-caused blindness advances, he finds joy in his beloved mountains, Maury River, and the unconditional love of the unfortunate children there.

Young readers will enjoy reading about Chancey from his own point-of-view. Some may enjoy the rather melancholy tone of the narrative. I thought the language used was rather stilted for younger readers. For example, when thinking of his first owner Chancey says, "I pondered as I had never done before...why we had grown into such adversaries over my life." Words like abhorrent and divestiture are rather sophisticated for the average 10-14 year-old suggested on the cover. Good story, but for older equestrians.

Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop, Milford, NH

Rating: 7

Additional review of Chancey of the Maury River:

Core audience: Girls 9-14 (especially the horsey set)

Review: A wonderful, contemporary horse story which is notable for being written from the horse's point of view. Chancey's voice is a bit formal, as if he is a venerable old man. The story is a sensitive treatment of the power of love. Think *Chosen by a Horse* for children.

Chancey is an aging, ailing horse whose owner has liquidated her riding school. Left abandoned for a time, a scrawny and ill Chancey is finally taken in at another riding academy. There a young girl, Claire, helps Chancey recover and Chancey's love helps heal Claire's spirit. Their immediate, intense bond comes from mutual need. Together they ride the trails and rings of the Maury River Stables, until a frightening accident makes it obvious that Chancey can no longer be a show horse. Tumors are taking his eyesight. Still, Claire and her mother keep and care for Chancey. Surgeries slow the cancer but the disease is unstoppable. Despite his failing vision, Chancey can still serve as a therapy horse; Clair and her mother become assistants in the ring. Finally, completely blind, Chancey is retelling the story of his life. Clair is in college, but her mother visits him often. Reflective and content, he concludes that he has had a truly blessed life.

Ellen Richmond Children's Book Cellar

Rating: 8

Chicken Feathers, by Joy Cowley, illus. by David Elliot

978-0399247910 \$15.99 Philomel/Penguin, May 2008

Core audience: Ages 7-11, boys and girls

Notable aspects: Sweet-natured humor, animals, plot, characters, loyalty, family ties, strong ending.

Review: Josh, a gentle 10-year-old, has an old pet chicken, Semolina, who talks – but only to him, and with a pretty sharp tongue at that. Josh's mother is away in the hospital, kept in bed for the duration of a difficult pregnancy. His father the egg farmer doesn't believe for a minute that Semolina talks; nor does his grandmother, a stern and peppery woman. Not even the pretty neighbor girl Annalee believes what Josh says about Semolina, and Semolina herself is not about to trust any "biggie" besides Josh with spoken intelligence regarding the fox. So Josh is in some conflict between Semolina's vain, demanding instructions, missing his mother, concern about the new baby, wanting to please his father, trying not to annoy his grandmother, care for the flocks, and certain flutterings when Annalee comes over to help sort eggs. That all this and more comes right in only 149 pages, including charming pencil illustrations, is the feat of a true storyteller.

Reviewer: Carol B. Chittenden, *Eight Cousins* and *BookStream* **Rating: 9**

Child of Dandelions, by Shenaaz Nanji

978-1932425932 \$17.95 Front Street, March 2008

Core audience: Ages 12-16; readers of historical fiction like *The Diary of Anne Frank* and Julia Alvarez's *Before We Were Free*; fans of Suzanne Fisher Staples and Susan Fletcher. More girls than boys, perhaps.

Notable aspects: Powerful story based on historical events; beautiful writing; richly drawn African setting; window into a world most of us know little about; strong family and friendship subplots

Review: The cataloging-in-publication data on the copyright page of *Child of Dandelions* succinctly summarizes the main story: "In Uganda in 1972, fifteen-year-old Sabine and her family, wealthy citizens of Indian descent, try to preserve their normal life during the ninety days allowed by President Idi Amin for all foreign Indians to leave the country, while soldiers and others terrorize them and people disappear."

What the CIP data can't convey is how the political is made so personal in this absorbing novel through evocative writing and a fiercely loving, lovable narrator. The cheerful Sabine and her family at first react to Idi Amin's dictum with denial, then growing dismay and horror at the treatment of Indians--even Ugandan-born natives (like themselves)--by government soldiers. Sabine's world is overturned in successive steps. Before long, even her best friend, Zena, an African teen who has always been Sabine's "twin coffee bean," begins to pull away under the pressure. Their disintegrating friendship is believable and well handled. In a few short months, Sabine changes from a lively, carefree girl, young for her fifteen years, to a courageous young woman facing losses and violence she had never imagined, as well as confronting her own prejudices and entering the murky adult land of complex problems with no easy answers.

A couple of plot elements stretch credulity, but who knows? The story is based on the author's own history and that of friends and acquaintances; perhaps there is a historical basis for them. Either way, this is a minor quibble. While the subject is serious and the story powerful, Nanji's writing is also filled with the colors, sounds, scents, and scenes of Ugandan life. The metaphors and similes are rooted in Africa's mango- and matoke-laden land, adding texture and unexpected delights. *Child of Dandelions* is also buoyed up by Sabine's irrepressible spirit and humor.

Reviewer: Elizabeth Bluemle, [The Flying Pig Bookstore](#)

Rating: 8

Climbing the Stairs, by Padma Venkatraman

978-0399247460 \$16.99 Putnam, May 2008

Core audience: Ages 10 & up

Notable aspects: historical and cultural detail, characterization

Review: This story takes place in British-occupied India during World War II and deals with the restricted role of women as well as the peaceful resistance to British rule of Gandhi and his followers. Fifteen-year-old Vidya comes from an open-minded family with a physician father who understands her desire for learning and has a much more progressive view regarding the education of women. After her father gets badly beaten while defending a woman at a peaceful demonstration gone wrong, Vidya and her mother, brother and brain-damaged father, by tradition, are forced to live with her father's extended family who follow very strict, social customs. Vidya finds refuge by "climbing the stairs" to the library and through the expression of her convictions to her grandfather, convinces him to let her study in the library and eventually to continue her education. She and her pacifist family must also deal with the Indians' role in the war, especially when her brother decides to enlist in the British army.

Janet Bibeau, [Storybook Cove](#)

Rating: 8

The Compound, by S.A. Bodeen

978-0312370152 \$xxxx Macmillan, May 2008

Core audience: 14-18 year old thriller fans.

Notable aspects: Survivalism, human cloning, contemplated eating of cloned family members, dysfunctional family drama.

Review: Though "The Compound" refers to a nuclear fallout shelter, it may, due to some fairly controversial plot elements, end up being treated more like those nuclear waste trucks that aren't allowed to drive through populous areas. The Compound in the book was created by Max Yananakakis, multi-billionaire, owner of the biggest software and hardware computer conglomerate in the world.

The story opens with most of the Yanakakis family barely making it into The Compound, having been roused out of bed by Max on the heels of a Nuclear attack. Inside The Compound are the book's narrator, nine year old Eli, his six year old sister Therese, his

eleven year old sister Lexie, and his parents. Outside the compound are Eli's twin brother Eddy, and his beloved Grandmother, the only person on the planet capable of standing up to Dad (Max). It will occur to most readers early on that Dad faked the nuclear attack and in fact planned to spend some quality time with his family, fifteen years to be precise, in *The Compound*. This is in fact the case.

After a brief prologue, the story opens in year six, Eli now being a fifteen year old narrator, closed off from every element of life except exercise, unwilling to be touched either physically or mentally. The Compound is therefore a metaphor for Eli's condition. Eli's journey to escape the compound is therefore paralleled by his exodus from his mental prison. The story follows the gradual unveiling and unraveling of his father's schemes. These include having duped his wife into believing that one of her sons was dead, duping the whole family into living in an elaborate fallout shelter, the breeding of human clones of themselves, called the Supplements, as an emergency food source, enlisting the teenage Lexie as a potential clone womb host after Mom can't hold up anymore, and generally, being a controlling, insane maniac with unlimited resources, rather than a decent, caring parent. Max' s thinking turns out to have been based on a plan to develop the Compound as a saleable prototype, a hope to perfect human cloning for medical/monetary purposes, as a meaningful response to Eli's once expressed wish that his father wasn't always away from the family on business trips, as a means to make his kids not be spoiled, but to strive and survive, and to develop character.

The Compound has two distinct components, the mad-scientist-father element, and the development and interplay of the other family members. As a thriller, *The Compound* relies too heavily on the shock value of plot elements which aren't really logical. Breeding clones of yourself to eat isn't a resource effective idea, though it does allow for lots of shock and moral angst about what one would or wouldn't do to survive, particular since The Supplements kind of become part of the family. The family interplay itself is set up as a dysfunctional family with a dangerous father, a mother who fails to protect the children, and the kids who emotionally cannibalize themselves to cope with those two primary elements. The mother rises up at the end and is redeemed in the book, something that doesn't happen in life very often, but offers emotional satisfaction in a fictional setting. The interplay between the siblings is the most true to life, and by far the most engaging. Bodeen softens the father's lunacy by revealing that he had been unknowingly consuming tainted bread flour with a psychotropic mold. He also assures his family at the end that he wouldn't really have eaten The Supplements. This still leaves him a few yards short of a parenting trophy, but still, nice to know. Perhaps the most disturbing scene in the book occurs after the father finally admits his machinations. The mother slaps him hard and then Eli beats him up viciously. Not a pleasant moment.

A catalog of *The Compound's* plot elements will make many schools, libraries, and parents more than a trifle uneasy. Teens will mostly enjoy the book though. There is something decidedly teenage in the book's emotional intensity and logical inconsistencies played out for dramatic effect.

Kenny Brechner, DDG Booksellers

Rating 6

Daisy Dawson is On Her Way, by Steve Voake and Jessica Meserve

9780763637408 \$14.99 Candlewick Press, April 2008

Core audience: Ages 5-8; girls who love their characters sweet and spunky

Notable aspects: Fabulous, yet simple illustrations. Proof that imagination can be powerful. Animals really do make the best friends,

Review: From the beginning page of Daisy's open arms and gleeful face to the closing scene of contentment as Daisy's arms are enveloping her friend, Boom—Voake's book is an utter delight. I am a huge fan and supporter of the beginning chapter book. Simple text and lots of well-placed illustrations—this book has both. Meserve's spare sketches have thick bold lines and they are a huge part of the story's appeal. In its inception, Voake took the idea of his daughters talking to animals and expanded upon it. What child hasn't wished to have an animal reply to particularly painful and poignant questions? In times of need an animal (real or stuffed) can always be counted on for comfort. But what if you could understand their language? Daisy makes friends with a horse, a dog, a squirrel and an ant among other creatures. (Whenever the ant speaks the font on the page becomes very small just another reason this book is so charming.) Together they help Daisy save her friend Boom from the pound. Which makes for some white knuckle scenes until at last Boom is safe again. Cute as a button and sweet as a sugar, *Daisy Dawson* is a fabulous addition to a growing genre. Be prepared, girls will inhale it and then quickly ask for another.

Reviewer: Beth Reynolds, The Norwich Bookstore

Rating: 8.5

The Dead and the Gone, by Susan Beth Pfeffer

978-0152063115 \$17.00 Harcourt, June 2008

Core audience: Ages 11-14, both boys and girls

Notable aspects: Believable environmental catastrophe, survival, family loyalty, friendship

Review: This sequel to *Life as We Knew It* is a different set of characters in the same situation: an asteroid has hit the moon, drastically shifting earth's natural phenomena and climate. *Life as We Knew It* was set in suburban Pennsylvania; *The Dead and the Gone* is a Puerto Rican American family in Manhattan. Specifically, it's 17-year-old Alex and his sisters, 14-year-old Brianna and 12-year-old Julie. Bri is devout, Julie's a pest, and Alex is a bright student and dutiful son hoping for a scholarship to Georgetown. Survival – barely – is all they can manage, and their story is a gripping one. The only thing that may trip up some readers is Alex's deep faith in the Catholic Church and Catholic values. However, this element is almost fully logical within the context, and there is a certain amount of skeptical probing before all the rats, bodies, starvation and freezing are done. It seems a little disingenuous that Alex experiences no sexual urges or questionings of any kind, but he doesn't have enough food to have that kind of energy, either.

Reviewer: Carol B. Chittenden, Eight Cousins and BookStream **Rating:** 8.5

[Additional review of *The Dead and the Gone*:](#)

Core audience: Ages 12+; should appeal equally to boys and girls

Notable aspects: Compelling story, well-drawn setting, thought-provoking premise, issues of survival, religious faith, and family

Review: The author's 2006 novel, *Life as We Knew It*, was published to critical and popular acclaim, and continues to be one of YA's easiest handsells. It tells the story of a teenage girl and her family struggling to survive in rural Pennsylvania in the wake of a terrible worldwide natural disaster. Fans have been eager to get their hands on *The Dead and the Gone*, a companion novel set in New York City during the same time period. Here, the protagonist is Alex, a seventeen-year-old Catholic boy of Puerto Rican descent whose family is realistically close-knit and loving. When disaster strikes (the moon has been knocked closer to the earth by an asteroid, occasioning earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, and volcanoes), Alex's father is at a funeral in PR, his mother is working at a Queens, NY, hospital, and his older brother is a Marine on duty across the country. In their absence, Alex is left to care for his two younger sisters as food supplies dwindle, electricity is a rare commodity, and the city around them begins to unravel into chaos and darkness. As Alex's concerns shrink to the most immediate needs, his world similarly closes in to include only his closest family members, himself, and a few schoolmates.

The selfishness demanded by the need for survival is clear, and Alex finds himself doing things he never would have thought himself capable of before this terrible time. Yet some people are still able to show generosity and kindness, and while Alex saves his generosity mainly for his sisters, he finds a measure of grace in those around him. Definitely darker than *Life as We Knew It*, *The Dead and the Gone* still succeeds in portraying the fascinating, step-by-step unraveling of the trappings of modern American life and the impact of that unraveling on the survivors.

Reviewer: Elizabeth Bluemle, [The Flying Pig Bookstore](#)

Rating: 8.5

Additional rating of [The Dead and the Gone](#):

Fantastic! Same timeframe & event as LIFE AS WE KNEW IT but grittier as it should be since its set in NYC. (I hit my rep up for the galley before he even knew it was coming out)

Reviewer: Heather Doss, [Bookazine](#)

Rating: 8.5

Death by Bikini, by Linda Gerber

978-0142411179 \$6.99 Sleuth (Penguin), May 2008

Core audience: Ages 12-14 girls who like slightly implausible, but fun to read, fast-paced mysteries.

Notable aspects: Interesting tropical setting, strong girl character and a decent romantic thread that's very innocent.

Review: A slight book, but a good beach read. This paper back original is actually an exciting read. You must surrender yourself to two things right away: possibly one of the silliest titles this season and a plot that really makes no sense even after you're done. But

none of that mattered. I zipped through the book enjoying the ride and found myself looking up when the sequel comes out. A perfect book for kids looking for well written escapist fare. The main character is believable and her world (working at her dad's exclusive tropical hide-away resort) was very interesting. The romantic angle is done with a light touch and strikes the right notes of attraction without any content to worry about.

Reviewer: Josie Leavitt, The Flying Pig Bookstore

Rating: 6

Additional review of Death by Bikini:

Just adding 2 cents: A fun mystery; glad it was released in paperback. A good summer read with a very misleading title.

Reviewer: Janet Bibeau, Storybook Cove

Rating: 7

Debbie Harry Sings in French, by Meagan Brothers

978-0805080803 / \$16.95 Henry Holt, May 2008

Core audience: 15-18 year olds.

Notable aspects: Sensitive treatment of transvestism*, lots of 70's and 80's punk music references.

Review: In much the same way that we assume shelter dogs want to be taken home, we assume that galleys want to be read. In a stack of galleys then, there's a lot to be said for having a great title. *Debbie Harry Sings in French* has one of those. Unlike *Lauren the Puppy Fairy*, however, it is not a book that has been born with a silver spoon in its mouth. It will have to work to find its audience.

The book follows its teenage narrator Johnny. Johnny's father, a sad, removed figure, falls asleep at the wheel and dies in a car accident, taking a few senior citizens and a bus driver with him. Johnny's mother can't cope and Johnny, always a quiet outsider, turns to goth culture and alcohol. After blacking out at a club he is sent off to live with his uncle in South Carolina, taking with him a fair amount of emotional baggage and a passion for punk rock, Debbie Harry in particular. In South Carolina Johnny is inaccurately pegged as gay and becomes the subject of taunting and abuse at the hands of popular jerk Brian. He also meets Brian's ex, Maria, a girl whose had as hard a time as he has. It develops that Johnny feels a connection to Debbie Harry beyond the music, he wants to be her, wear her clothes, and take advice from her in his dreams.

Maria, with a sensitivity to Brian which stretches a little beyond the probable, understands his transvestite impulses, understands his sense of being beautiful, his attraction to her, and his emotional turmoil. She buys him a Debbie Harry dress, encourages and supports him to enter a Drag Queen contest, which he wins, and makes love to him afterwards. Along the way Johnny stays clean, his Uncle Sam turns out to be a good guy, and his father turns out to have been a glam rocker, who knew! Towards the end Brian beats Johnny up to within an inch of his life. Johnny is only saved by one of Brian's cronies, Ben, who turns out to know right from wrong. *Debbie Harry Sings in French* is an easy read and a good book. Johnny is a likable and authentic narrator.

The stark depiction of drugs, alcohol, and high school counter culture will speak to teen readers who can imagine themselves in Johnny's world. In terms of the transvestism theme, the book follows its core precept, that if you can be comfortable with yourself, and a decent person at the same time, things will trend upwards. For example, when he breaks the news of his cross dressing to his mother Johnny tries to calm her down by telling her that "'things could be worse.' 'How?' 'I could be a thug who goes around beating the crap out of transvestites!'" Needless to say, if this book gets any significant attention it's sure to be of a very, very controversial nature. Still, any book that gives a plug to *Siouxie And The Banshees* must have some real place, even a rather proscribed one, in the universe.

*Yes, obviously this book will give all but truly liberal adults hives.

Reviewer: Kenny Brechner, DDG Booksellers

Rating: 8

Deep Down Popular, by Phoebe Stone

978-0439802451 / \$16.99 Arthur Levine/Scholastic, February 2008

Core audience: 10-13 year old girls, anyone who takes an interest in sausages

Notable aspects: Well-developed Grandfather character, sausage festival

Review: This third novel by Vermont author Phoebe Stone is seeking a broader audience than her well-regarded prior works, and is a pretty good bet for finding it. The book is set in rural Virginia. The Cabanash County Elementary school, by way of example, is only a two-room schoolhouse. *Deep Down Popular* follows the friendship which develops between the most popular boy in school and the least popular girl in school. The story is narrated by the girl in question, Jessie Lou, who has had a crush on Conrad for more than two years. When Conrad develops a hip problem, requiring a brace, Jessie Lou observes Conrad's popularity deflating accordingly. His condition, and the proximity of their houses, throw the two together. Jessie Lou's unpopularity is largely self inflicted, and her basic integrity, and decency are appealing. The book has genuine warmth and depth, but is somewhat held up by an overly predictable main plot line, and a first person dialectic which is often awkward. The side plots dealing with Jessie Lou's Grandfather, the impending arrival of a new mall, and a picturesquely described sausage festival, are actually more fluid and engaging than the central story. Jessie's angst about Conrad's hip healing, and his 'yes I still want to be friends and take you to the dance even though I have my popularity back' response are emotionally satisfying, despite having been visible from a considerable distance. Certainly this is a book one can recommend as being a good read, with good values, to its core audience. One feels however, that it could have been even better had it not been quite so concerned with being *Deep Down Popular* itself.

Reviewer: Kenny Brechner, DDG Booksellers

Rating: 7.5

Additional review of Deep Down Popular:

Core audience: Upper elementary boys and girls

Notable aspects: Language, characterization, friendship issues

Review: Conrad used to be the most popular person in his class. Then at the beginning of sixth grade medical issues caused him to wear a leg brace and all of a sudden his athletic prowess disappears along with his popularity. He is almost invisible to everyone but Jessie Lou who has had a serious crush on him for years.

Because she lives near him the teacher assigns Jessie to help him get home after school. They begin hanging out to work on school projects together. It is refreshing and charming that in their small Virginia town situation an endearing young fourth-grader also begins to hang around with them. Together this fun threesome makes all sorts of discoveries about their environs, spurred on by school assignments. (Very small town--they all have the same teacher.) Several scenes are charmingly memorable, made especially so by the lyrical language that describes them in Jessie's "down home" voice. There is the "big box store" problem, a wonderful grandfather (the only father figure) pooh-poohing much about modern life, the idea that writing poems can be a real catharsis, and the wonderful idea that knowing who you are, where you're going and what you want to do might be more important than the perceived idea of popularity (with all its fickleness). This would be a fun and meaningful classroom read and easy hand-sell in paper. I think it's the author's best novel so far.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop, Milford, NH

Rating: 8

The Diamond of Drury Lane, by Julia Golding

978-1596433519 \$12.50 Roaring Brook Press, June 2008

Core audience: Tweens who love melodrama, adventure and suspense, theater fans, history fans

Notable aspects: Lively heroine, evil villains, intriguing mysteries

Review: Meet Cat Royal--orphan, actor's friend, theater owner's ward, and spunky heroine. When Cat overhears a discussion about a Diamond hidden at the Drury Lane Theater, she is determined to find out where it is and what it means. Add Pedro, a brilliant young violinist and former slave, who joins the troupe and quickly becomes her dear friend. Pour in two rival gangs of boys who are vying for Cat's favor and, in learning there is a missing "treasure", are willing to resort to nothing less than sheer thuggery and brutality against anyone who gets in their way. Sprinkle in curious "gentle folks" in the form of Lady Elizabeth who genuinely adores new friend Cat and her brother Lord Francis who loves to dress down so he can prow around the seamier parts of London. Blend in the political world of 18th century Britain where dissident points of view are actively being squelched. Mix in a mysterious prompter named Jonathan, various lords, rascalions, and loveable characters, many of whom are not what they may appear to be. Stir it all up and serve in a large page turning novel filled with delightful adventure, rich characters, and surprising plot twists. Told in Cat's own voice, the reader can just hear the audience gasping, the villains hissing "Nya-ah-ahhh," flying fists, and the damsel in distress sighing...wait, this damsel does not take being in distress sitting down!

Julia Golding includes a list of Principal Characters, a Map of London which repeats at each "Act," a Prologue, and an Epilogue. This book, the first of a quartet, won the 2006 Smarties Prize "across the pond."

Bina Williams, Bridgeport Public Library

Rating: 9

Additional review of [The Diamond of Drury Lane](#):

Core audience: ages 10-14, guys and girls, history buffs

Notable aspects: This is a hefty, well-written mystery involving a colorful assortment of characters. There's plenty of action-adventure and a tidy plot.

Review: Cat Royal is a spirited young orphan who lives at the Theater Royal in Drury Lane. This is her story, told in her own voice; she apologizes for its lack of refinement. What the reader gets is a rollicking, action filled mystery in 18th century London, with Cat and the theater at its heart. There's a treasure hidden in the theater. Cat has promised Mr. Sheridan, her savior and the owner of the theater, to help protect it. She is surrounded by a motley crew of friends and foes. Pedro, a former slave and new performer at the theater, may or may not be trustworthy; but he helps her out of, and into, several predicaments. The new prompter at the theater, Cat realizes, is not what he seems to be. Young aristocrats, Lady Elizabeth and Lord Francis find Cat and her world fascinating and are themselves swept into the adventure. Rival street gangs add menace and grit to the mix. A villainous attack at the theater, an attempt to steal the treasure, brings the story to its peak. From there the mystery roars to a satisfying conclusion making me wish that this Cat had nine lives, not just the four we've been promised.

Ellen Richmond, Children's Book Cellar

Rating: 9

The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau Banks, by E. Lockhart
978-0786838189 \$16.99 Hyperion, March 2008

Core audience: Ages 12 & up, girls especially

Notable aspects: Strong female character

Review: After discovering a secret club still exists at her school, Frankie decides to find out more about it. Even though her father was a member of the club when he was a boy, he won't tell her anything about the club. During a boozy dinner party he does let it slip that there was once a written history of the club but that it has been lost for decades. That the club still exists as a boys-only society motivates Frankie to not only find the history but to undermine and then overtake the club. Famous for annual pranks, the club members soon finds themselves following instructions for the most elaborate prank ever. What the club members don't know or suspect is who is behind the instructions. The writing about the double-crossing, elaborate, ingenious pranks Frankie invents is well paced. The ending is not too pat or predictable. Any girl who has ever felt left out of boys-only fun will love this story. Boys will want to read it too if for nothing else but learning how girls think and feel.

Reviewer: Kathy Goddard, The BookLoft

Rating: 8.5

Additional rating of [The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau Banks](#):

I concur with Kat's review and would give the book an 8.

Reviewer: Kari Patch, Harvard Book Store

Rating: 8

Dodger and Me, by Jordan Sonnenblick

978-0312377939 \$16.95 Macmillan, May 2008

Core audience: ages: 8-12

Notable aspects: Funny! Baseball theme

Review: Willie Ryan is unpopular. Not so unpopular that he doesn't have any friends, it's just that of the two friends he does have, one moved away and the other is a girl that sort of stalks him. Oh, and he is really bad at baseball too. Really bad at baseball on a team that is in first place in the championships, needs to win at least one of the last two games to finish the season as champions, losing one of those games 3-2 and up at bat in the last inning with two outs and runners on second & third. His nickname isn't Lucky.

Walking home after the game he stoops to fish a fast-food bag out of a beautiful little stream he passes, he is understandably terrified when the bag starts to wriggle in his hand. After dropping the bag and watching transfixed as a furry blue arm sprouts out of the bag followed by the rest of what looked like a furry, blue, chimpanzee, he is introduced to Dodger. The rest of the story is a wonderful retelling of any tale with three wishes and a genie-type creature ("The preferred term is bottled American") to grant them. Very funny!

Kat Goddard, The BookLoft

Rating: 8

Additional rating of [Dodger and Me](#):

I have been a fan of Sonnenblick's teen novels and enjoy his male protagonists. This venture into the age 8-12 arena was fun, but reminded me a lot of the early reader *Little Genie* series.

Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop, Milford, NH

Rating: 7.5

Dragon Flight, by Jessica Day George

978-1599901107 \$16.95 Bloomsbury, May 2008

Core audience: Girls, 10-14

Notable aspects: An exciting plot with solid characters. Strong and resourceful young women. Great dragons! A sequel as enjoyable as the original.

Review: In this sequel to *Dragon Slippers*, Creel, heroine of the Dragon War, and her friend Marta are successful seamstresses, running their own shop. The king and queen of dragons, believed to have died at the end of the war, are in hiding, recuperating. Only Creel, Marta, and Prince Luka know Shardas and Velika survived their plunge into the Boiling Sea. Summoned by the king of Feravel as resident dragon expert, Creel learns that Citatie, a kingdom to the south, is massing an army of warriors mounted on dragons with which it intends to conquer Feravel. She, Marta, and Tobin (Marta's fiancé) fly south with three friendly dragons to join Prince Luka, already hiding in the hills of Citatie, and to assess the situation. It looks dire. There are hundreds of dragons in Citatie, each enslaved by an enchanted collar. With just several dozen friendly dragons in Feravel, the

country will be destroyed easily. By offering to sew new robes for the king of Citatie, Creel and Marta boldly infiltrate his castle and discover a malevolent, pure white dragon that controls him.

When Shardas learns of this dragon, though he hasn't recovered from his injuries, he flies to Citatie to confront it. Velika comes too, arriving just as the white dragon dies. There is still an army of soldiers on dragons that must be stopped though. The battle is ferocious, but the Feravelians and their dragon allies prevail, once they discover an audacious way to remove the collars from enemy dragons. Despite the dragons' help in saving his kingdom, King Caxel still fears them and banishes all dragons from Feravel. Creel is heartbroken that her friends have been driven away and worries when she doesn't hear from Shardas. He finally returns to ask all the human kingdoms to give dragons sovereignty over the Far Isles for perpetuity. The bleak outer ring of the Far Isles, Shardas later confides to Creel, conceals a paradise where dragons can live happily and well. The humans will continue to believe that the Far Isles are inhospitable and the dragons will be safe there.

Reviewer: Ellen Richmond, Children's Book Cellar

Rating: 8

Dreamrider, by Barry Jonsberg

978-0375844577 \$15.99 Knopf, February 2008

Core audience: Ages 14 and up

Notable aspects: Explores both the physical and psychological trauma of bullying, realistic portrayal of adolescent mental illness

Review: Michael Termy is the victim of bullying at school and abuse at home. The well-meaning adults in his life are unable to reach him. To deal with the lack of control and anguish of daily life under these terms he creates the ability to live lucidly within his dreams. One definition of mental illness includes the inability to discern between reality and dream life. Michael survives his reality only because of the control he has in his dreams. In his dreams he is all-powerful, curing the sick, killing the cruel, and getting the girl. It quickly becomes clear that the more confused Michael becomes the less clear we are about his reality.

Reviewer: Kat Goddard, The BookLoft

Rating: 8

Generation Dead, by Daniel Waters

978-01432109211 \$16.99 Hyperion, May 2008

Core audience: Older teen fans of horror

Notable aspects: Integrates social issues into horror genre

Review: This book combines a high school story of popular and unpopular, bullies and bullied, love requited and not, with a horror story that has a social message. Some teens who have died are coming back to life, or a sort of life. Called zombies by those who hate/fear them and living impaired or differently biotic by the politically correct, they are the ultimate different kids in school and the other students and adults react in a

variety of more or less predictable ways. The main character in Phoebe, a Goth who's never been popular and who finds herself intrigued by one of the differently biotic students. Her friend Adam is a football player and has to deal with another jock, Pete, who is extremely hostile and threatening to the new students and those who befriend them. The book does a good job of portraying the many characters and their feelings as well as the reality of being different. There is a fair amount of violence as Pete and his followers begin to act on their hostile feelings.

Reviewer: Nancy Felton, Broadside Bookshop

Rating: 7.5

Additional rating of Generation Dead:

Full of sarcasm, which means teens will love it.

Reviewer: Heather Doss, Bookazine

Rating: 7.5

Gods of Manhattan, by Scott Mebus

978-0525479550 \$17.99 Dutton, April 2008

Core audience: 12+, both girls and guys

Notable aspects: An intriguing plot, utilizing an interesting twist on parallel worlds. History. Some humor: Dorothy Parker as Goddess of Wit and John Jacob Astor as God of Excess, for example. Well-developed suspense. Well-drawn characters.

Review: In this first book of a new series, Rory Hennessy lives with his younger sister, Bridget, and his mother in contemporary Manhattan. He has been having disturbing dreams; and, after a magician hired to entertain at Bridget's birthday party asks him some unsettling questions, he begins having visions when he's awake, too.

According to Rex, the magician, Rory is a Light who can see the truth, the existence of Mannahatta, a shadow version of Manhattan. There the Gods of Manhattan (shades of historic figures who had been notable during their lives) continue to live and fight among themselves. Centuries ago the Munsees (Native Americans) were trapped in Central Park by the guile of the Gods. Their imprisonment is causing an instability that threatens both Manhattan and Mannahatta. Rory is the only one who can help Rex free the Munsees. They must collect four items which Rory, as the last Light, will be able to use to unlock the Trap. The hunt for the keys is, of course, perilous. A group of crusading teens in Mannahatta align themselves with Rory, but there is an enemy in their midst. Rex's motives become suspect. Bridget is nearly killed. A sequence of events has been set in motion which may mean the end of both cities.

At the end of the book, Peter Stuyesant, who has been uninvolved in the politics of Mannahatta for over two centuries, steps forward to join the "good guys". Mayor Alexander Hamilton and his fellow conspirators are displeased, but cannot keep him off the Council of Twelve that rules the city. Dorothy Parker, Walt Whitman, and their friends outvote the Mayor's allies. The battle lines have been drawn for book two.

Ellen Richmond, Children's Book Cellar

Rating: 9

Gone, by Michael Grant

9780061448768 \$17.99 Harper, April 2008

Core audience: Video game hounds ages 13-15

Notable aspects: Length, cruelty, ceaseless gimmickry

Review: The intriguing opening – all humans over their 14th birthdays simply disappear – sets up a *Lord-of-the-Flies* scenario: all the power is in the hands of children. The chapters where characters are discovering this abrupt change, are very intriguing. They lead into chapters where the lines of authority develop, and that's fascinating. But along about page 100 the author begins to jettison the interesting limitations he had chosen, and starts changing the rules as he pleases: one child can heal any wound or injury. Another has the power to beam furious hate that can amputate limbs. A third can teleport. Quite a few have hands that can destroy at a distance. (The bullies' solution: encase their hands in concrete blocks.) Dozens more mutations, among both humans and animals, pop up as convenient. It's all very cinematic, with snarling beasts trying to get at the babies, smashed buildings, telekinesis, and a smooch. The war between the bullies and the decents is muddied to a quagmire, and the last 250 pages of the book were, for this reader, a burden carried only by duty. The ending is wide open for a sequel, but I'd rather serve in Iraq than read it.

Sexuality and tentative romance are present but fairly minor in the galley version. I understand that the book has now been modified to make the children's upper age limit 15 rather than 14. Doing so would introduce or else deny intense sexuality as yet another major force in the already-tangled plot.

Even more than many galleys today, this one struck me as a pitch for a movie with lots of special effects and no enduring content. There's surely a market for that, as George Orwell noted, but I'd rather not act as its agent.

Reviewer: Carol B. Chittenden, [Eight Cousins](#) and [BookStream](#)

Rating: 3

Greetings From Nowhere, by Barbara O'Connor

978-0374399375 \$16.00 Frances Foster Books/ FSG, March 2008

Core audience: Boys and girls 10-13

Notable aspects: Sensitivity to issues, characters

Review: The Sleepy-Time Motel is a run-down fifties-style motel in the Great Smoky Mountains. Since the Interstate was built not many people come through there. Since she was widowed Aggie, the owner, hasn't had the heart to keep up the place. When she places an ad to sell, Willow and her Dad decide to visit. He wants to buy the place. Willow's Mom has gone off and Dad is looking for a new start. Willow just wants her Mom. Meanwhile, Loretta, (who is seeking any part of her "old Mom") and her foster family decide to visit the mountains and arrive there at about the same time. Kirby and his irritable (and irritating) mom, on their way to a special school for troubled kids, find themselves arriving too when their car fails just down the road. The kids become acquainted by way of Loretta's good-natured chatter and Aggie's wise and understanding "grandmotherly" welcome. Loretta and Willow's dads help with repairs of

the place, Kirby earns a new feeling of worth, and Loretta finds a better sense of self. Willow and her dad invite Aggie to stay and help with the Motel, thus providing Willow with some much-needed mothering. The newly renamed Mountainview Inn gets a busload of tourists and is on its way to being profitable once more. Lives have been made a little brighter, too, by way of simple acts of kindness and innocent faith in humanity. We just wish Kirby's mom could have been changed a bit before she set off for home, leaving him at that nearby school, but the ending is more realistic this way. This is a charming story and would be a good read-aloud for upper elementary age discussion.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop (Milford)

Rating: 8

Additional review of Greetings from Nowhere:

Core audience: Ages 10-12

Notable aspects: Characterization

Review: Since her husband passed away, Aggie struggles to run the Sleepy Time Motel which is no longer a tourist attraction. After Aggie puts the hotel up for sale, she unexpectedly, through a series of coincidences, has several different guests who all impact each other's lives in unexpected and wonderful ways. A fun story with hopeful "endings" for each character.

Reviewer: Janet Bibeau, Storybook Cove

Rating: 7.5

Guinevere's Gift, by Nancy McKenzie

978-0375843467 \$15.99 Knopf, February 2008

Core audience: Girls, ages 10-13

Notable aspects: A pleasant story and a plucky heroine

Review: Orphaned, Guinevere's life is far from that of a princess whose birth was heralded with the prophecy that she was destined to marry a great king and to be the noblest lady in the land. Instead she is the ward of her uncle and aunt, the king and queen of Gwynedd. Her mother's sister, Queen Alyse, is intent on raising her own daughter, Elaine, to be a queen. Guinevere is being raised less lavishly. The prophecy ignored, she is given what she needs, but is not nurtured. Free-spirited, Gwen is happiest when she is riding, away from the castle and her aunt. Queen Alyse is regent while the king is away fighting for the young king, Arthur. She sends Marcus, one of the king's guard, to investigate recurring thefts from the king's herds; he warns her about a young earl from a nearby property.

Though the king will return soon, the queen invites Sir Darric to the castle. Elaine assumes he has come to court her, though Guinevere instantly dislikes and mistrusts him. Sir Darric is indeed a villain. Obviously underestimating the queen, he intends to grab the crown before the king's return. He kidnaps Elaine and Guinevere, thinking the queen will exchange the kingdom for her daughter's life. The queen will not surrender, instead barricading herself in the meeting hall where her forces have some chance of avoiding capture. Guinevere succeeds in escaping and flees to the forest where she

rallies the Old Ones, an ancient tribe sworn to protect her because of the prophecy. Her forces reach the castle in time to join the villagers and defeat Sir Darric's men. By the time King Pellinore arrives home, the kingdom is safe. Guinevere, having rescued Elaine, finally enjoys her aunt's favor. Her uncle gives her a horse, a filly from King Arthur's own stables, for her thirteenth birthday. A pleasant read, *Guinevere's Gift* is fun, but unremarkable.

Reviewer: Ellen Richmond, Children's Book Cellar

Rating: 6

The Gypsy Crown, by Kate Forsyth

978-1423104940 \$16.99 Hyperion, June 2008

Core audience: Upper elementary & middle school, especially girls who enjoy history and magic

Notable aspects: Good combination of adventure, history and a touch of magic.

Review: This historical novel is set in England under Oliver Cromwell. Emilia and her cousin Luka are Gypsies. They live with their extended family and travel around England with their dancing bear and Luka's monkey. Times have never been easy for the Rom but under the Puritans, who have banned music, dance and fortunetelling, things are really rough. When the family decides to go to a fair to perform and make some extra money, they are arrested and put in jail, awaiting the traveling magistrate who will likely sentence them all to hang. Emilia and Luka manage to escape and the rest of the book is an account of their adventures as they seek out the other Rom families in England. They are asking for help in rescuing their family and are looking for the magic charms which each family has, in the hope that when all the charms are united, the magic will be strong enough to save those in jail. The story has many familiar elements of a quest: the evil Coldham who is determined to capture the two children, the help from unexpected quarters, the near-captures and escapes. The characters are engaging, especially the feisty Emilia, the magic just right, the history interesting and the adventure exciting.

Reviewer: Nancy Felton, Broadside Bookshop

Rating: 7

Honeybee: Poems and Short Prose, by Naomi Shihab Nye

978-0060853907 \$16.99 HarperCollins: Greenwillow, March 2008

Core audience: Poetry devotees, ages 13+

Notable aspects: Thought-provoking subject matter; integral sense of humanity and global cultural awareness; expansiveness of vision

Review: The cover art of *Honeybee*, painted by Chris Raschka in upbeat yellows, oranges, reds, blues and blacks, might lead a reader to believe that this is a cheery set of poems, perhaps intended for a middle-grade audience. This is unfortunate, because I love Naomi Shihab Nye's poetry, and suspect that this collection is being marketed to the wrong crowd. It's not really a young person's book; in fact, I wonder how many readers under the age of sixteen or seventeen will relate to the pieces within. Unlike *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, which also delved into issues of culture and politics, personal

histories and small beauties, the pieces in Honeybee often strike a particularly adult tone of bemusement, frustration, doubt, and a melancholy hopelessness that seems new to me in Nye's work. While always worth reading, many of these poems also have less obvious linguistic beauty than we're used to; her trademark deceptively simple language is sometimes simply expressive, the poems casually musing rather than carefully leading us to some kind of revelation or denouement. However, there are transcendent moments in the book -- including a very funny and classroom-worthy piece on Nye as a teenager mistaking someone's house for a museum. In addition, many of the poems and short pieces are beautiful, funny, and/or touching; all are insightful. The final piece, "Gate 4-A," is vintage Nye, and offers what I realized I was hoping for all along: a moment of crosscultural discomfort that ends up building bonds between strangers and creating a brilliant, laughing, openhearted picnic of tolerance — and shared cookies. Please do read and recommend this book, but to college students and adults, who are its likeliest fans.

Reviewer: Elizabeth Bluemle, [The Flying Pig Bookstore](#)

Rating: 8.5

The House of Djinn, by Suzanne Fisher Staples

978-0374399368 \$16.95 Frances Foster Books / FSG, April 2008

Core audience: Ages 12+; best for readers of prior books in series, *Shabanu* and *Haveli*

Notable aspects: Interesting Pakistani setting; thoughtful treatment of the collision of long-held traditions and culture with more modern, western ways of thinking

Review: The first two novels in Staples' Pakistani series -- the power Newbery Honor book, *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind*, and *Haveli* -- follow the mixed fate of a young nomadic Pakistani girl whose high spirits and strong will clash with her tribe's mandates for the behavior of proper women. Through tragedy and disaster, *Shabanu* holds tightly to her sense of self even as she makes sacrifices to save her family.

Here we find *Shabanu* in hiding, ten years after a vengeful man killed her husband (recounted in *Haveli*) and tried to destroy her. Convinced that this man is still dangerous, *Shabanu* -- who faked her own death and staged a false burial -- has left her daughter to be raised in the family of her dear friend and secret love, Omar. Although we see much of *Shabanu*, it is really the daughter, *Mumtaz* (aka *Muti*), whose story unfolds in this novel. *Muti* does not know that her mother is still alive. She is treated poorly by most of the women in her adoptive family, but is close to Omar and *Baba* (the head of the family and the tribal leader), and to her boy cousin *Jameel*, a Pakistani-American teen from California who comes to visit every year and is *Muti*'s loyal confidant and pen pal. *Muti* and *Jameel* -- both newly in love with verboten, non-Pakistani partners -- are headed for trouble as they must face family expectations that upend everything they have wanted for their own lives.

Although the marketing materials indicate that *The House of Djinn* stands alone, readers unfamiliar with the characters, events, and relationships in the previous books will find this one somewhat confusing. Even the many references to past plot points aren't quite enough to explain and bolster the characters' motivations and fears; one needs the history, especially since some of the events require a rather strong suspension of

disbelief without everyone's stories freshly in mind. Still, *The House of Djinn* is a welcome addition to a wonderful series; just give kids the other two first.

Elizabeth Bluemle, The Flying Pig Bookstore

Rating: 7

How I Saved My Father's Life (And Ruined Everything Else),

by Ann Hood 978-0439928199 \$16.99 Scholastic, March 2008

Core audience: Preteen girls

Notable aspects: authentic dialogue in testy mother/daughter relationship, realistic picture of the compromises that have to occur when parents divorce

Review: I truly enjoyed this book, and I think that young readers will, too. In the aftermath of her parents' divorce, twelve-year-old Madeline Vandermeer lives with her mother and timid younger brother in an old Victorian home in Providence, a fixer-upper that never made it. Her father, who became a celebrity for a short time, following his escape from an avalanche, lives with his attractive and sophisticated new wife and new baby in an elegant apartment in New York. Madeline is sure that her mother is the cause of the fractured family. If only her mother had been less boring and more concerned with her appearance, this divorce would not have occurred. Or so Madeline thinks. When not downing her mother, Madeline is concerned with her own possible elevation into sainthood. When she heard that her father had been involved in the avalanche, Madeline rushed to a church and prayed ceaselessly for a day. Returning home, she heard that he had been saved and immediately took credit for the "miracle".

While both families are on a trip to Italy, (coincidentally) Madeline visits her father and learns from her new stepmother that Madeline's father had already been rescued before the news of the avalanche reached home and incidentally reveals that she and Madeline's father had been an item before the celebrity appearances. Farewell to sainthood and unrealistic expectations. Dad falls from the pedestal, especially when he tells Madeline that he'll be living in Italy for a few years so that his children (another is on the way) can benefit from life in another culture. "Children" clearly doesn't include Madeline and her brother. Madeline's view of her mother takes a big upturn as Madeline begins to appreciate the big picture and what the divorce has meant to her mother. There are a couple of good subplots. Madeline becomes involved with a big, chaotic, Catholic family which for a time has a lot more appeal than her more cerebral Unitarian upbringing, and the younger brother, rather than being overwhelmed by visiting a foreign country, comes into his own and becomes a more confident child.

Reviewer: Betsey Detwiler, Buttonwood Books and Toys

Rating: 8

How to Build A House, by Dana Reinhardt

978-0375844539 \$15.99 Random House, May 2008

Core audience: Ages: 12 & up

Notable aspects: Interesting premise of teens volunteering, authentic characters & language

Review: Yes, this is a book about how to build a house, but it is also a story about families. Harper Evans is a teenager who just has to get away from her family – at least for a few weeks. She signs up to help build a house for a family in rural Tennessee. A capricious tornado has leveled a good part of the town of Bailey. Harper & the other teens who have volunteered for the job, spend six weeks learning how to build a house from the ground up, while at the same time learning how to repair, rebuild remodel or re-imagine their ideas of family.

The author says it best when she writes: “Sometimes we have to go far away to better understand what is closest to us.”

Reviewer: Kathy Goddard, [The BookLoft](#)

Rating: 8

Additional review of [How to Build a House](#):

Core audience: Definitely girls, definitely 13 and up

Review: Harper is furious and grief-stricken about her family’s breakup. She both misses and hates her adored step-sister, whom she caught making out with Harper’s almost-boyfriend. The trip to help rebuild a destroyed home is an attempt to escape the pain, as told in alternating chapters set “Here” and “Home.” Not surprisingly, the trip blossoms into reflection, understanding, and healing, along with a beautiful summer love. The characters are never crude, but they are sexually active, with tenderness, humor, and sensitivity. Reinhardt has an exceptionally light, sure touch for moving her characters and her readers.

Reviewer: Carol B. Chittenden, [BookStream](#) and [Eight Cousins](#)

Rating: 9

Additional review of [How to Build a House](#):

Core audience: Teen girls, ages 14+

Notable aspects: Relationship issues with family and friends

Review: Reinhardt's best yet! Harper is angry and bitter over a family break-up and loss of best friend. Very eco-conscious, she signs up for a summer helping to build a house in Tennessee for a family displaced by tornadoes after hurricane Katrina. Living in a motel with eleven other teens she finds new friendships, a healing summer love and a new sense of self. Building a house isn't altogether different from building a life. It's a good story with an appealing voice and just maybe it will interest other teens in wanting to help the ongoing rebuilding effort.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, [The Toadstool Bookshop \(Milford\)](#)

Rating: 9

The Humming of Numbers, by Joni Sensel

978-0805083279 \$16.95 Henry Holt, June 2008

Core audience: Ages 12+ Should appeal to both girls and boys. A bit of romance for girls, but boys should like the Vikings and the fighting.

Notable aspects: Historical setting and action

Review: *The Humming of Numbers* is a serviceable novel, but not one that will linger in the reader's mind. Thinly drawn characters create no emotional impact. The plot is spare. The historical setting, an accurate portrayal of life in a 10th century fiefdom, is the story's largest strength.

Two teenagers are thrown together in a 10th-century Celtic abbey. A novice, Aiden is soon to take his final vows. Stronger than his calling to God, though, is his desire to paint illuminated manuscripts. He also has a unique gift; he hears the vibrations of energy given off by all living things, the "humming of numbers". Aiden experiences the world as numbers, the significance of them only obliquely explained as the story progresses. A young woman, Lana, has been brought to work at the abbey as punishment for selling false relics to gullible pilgrims. To Aiden's fascination, she resonates "11"; he's never felt a person above a "10." Lana is a witch whose magic is her affinity with trees. When Vikings attack, easily defeating the local villagers and the monks, Lana uses her magic to save herself and Aiden. Using their unique gifts, Aiden and Lana help the surviving villagers attack and rout the celebrating (i.e., drunken) Norsemen. Of course, by now, the teens are in love and Aiden realizes that he can never be a monk. The head scribe of the abbey suggests that a lay scribe, though not allowed to copy God's words, might be allowed to decorate the pages on which they are written.

Reviewer: Ellen Richmond, Children's Book Cellar

Rating: 5

Ink Exchange, by Melissa Marr

9780061214684 \$16.99 HarperTeen, April 2008

Core audience: Teen girls, fantasy fans, fans of *Wicked Lovely*

Notable aspects: Sexual assault and recovery, urban fantasy

Review: For those who read *Wicked Lovely*, *Ink Exchange* is not the same kind of book. It has the same setting and recurring characters, but the feel and tone are vastly different. Where *WL* followed Ash through her trouble with the Summer Court, *Ink Exchange* takes us in to the heart of the Dark Court of the faery. At the heart of the book is Leslie, who has been sexually assaulted by her brother's friends before the opening of the story. We meet her as she is selecting a tattoo in an attempt to reclaim her body for herself. Things don't really get better for Leslie along the way. She selects a design for her tattoo that links her to the King of the Dark Court, Irial. Irial uses his blood to forge connections with mortals, who he can then feed off of emotionally. So Leslie becomes an emotional surrogate for the Dark Court, an automaton in the guise of her former self, bound emotionally, physically and sexually to Irial. She eventually manages to come to herself long enough to get away and disfigure her tattoo, thus severing her link.

This book is much darker than *WL* and focuses much more on actual issues in the real world. Much of the emphasis is on Leslie and her struggle to reclaim her body and her life. (There is a bit of a romance between Leslie and Niall (Keenan, the Summer King's, right-hand man) that never really comes to fruition and may have been left open for further angst in upcoming novels.) Mostly, she is on her own going from a bad situation to a worse situation. There are interesting points raised about body image and personal choice, but they don't really get discussed as fully as they might. The end of the novel shifts the focus to Irial after Leslie has managed to free herself. We see none of her

renewed struggle to regain a normal life. She is referred to offhandedly, as if her trauma is done as soon as she becomes free. The rush of the ending is similar to that of *WL*, but leaves more open-ended questions than *WL* did. This book is very likely to get review attention, if only because *WL* was so prominent and books for teenagers that have sex in them invariably and up ruffling someone's feathers. This book takes a serious subject and deals with it in a way that is accessible and likely to encourage discussion. More discussion about serious issues is a very good thing.

Reviewer: Kari Patch, Harvard Book Store

Rating: 7

The Joys of Love, by Madeleine L'Engle

978-0374338701 \$16.95 Farrar Straus Giroux, May 2008

Core audience: Madeleine L'Engle fans, stage hounds, romance novel lovers, YA but mostly clean enough for tweens

Notable aspects: Madeleine L'Engle's voice, back stage life, lost manuscript from the 40's, coming of age

Review: In classic L'Engle style (of the non-fantasy sort), a self-doubting heroine faces the challenges of growing up, unearthing out family secrets, and dealing with heart break. Elizabeth Jerrold, recently graduated from Smith College, is delighted to be part of a summer stock theater at the New Jersey shore. Her friends include fellow apprentices Jane, John Peter and Ben who is infatuated with Elizabeth. Meanwhile, Elizabeth is smitten by the theater director, Kurt Canitz. He is the classic older man (he's about 30!) who is really infatuated with himself as reflected through the adoration of the young ingenue. Elizabeth is also trying to piece together who she really is--her father died recently as did the mother she barely remembered. Her mother, a theater legend, had left her husband and young daughter years earlier to follow her dreams. Aunt Harriet who practically raised Elizabeth never approved of her mother or of the theater for that matter. She has reluctantly allowed Elizabeth to be an apprentice and threatens to cut off her funds and force her to come home. As Elizabeth stands up for herself by defying her overpowering aunt and faces the facts about the caddish director, she also learns more about her mother from unexpected sources. The backstage life of a summer stock theater intermingles with those hot summer days of walking on boardwalks and taking swims at the beach. An charming introduction by L'Engle's granddaughters tells that the semi-autobiographical story was one that "Gran" lovingly let them read over and over again. The book avoids feeling completely dated and ultimately it is a fun final gift from a prolific and beloved author.

Reviewer: Bina Williams, Bridgeport Public Library

Rating: 8

Julian Rodriguez Episode One: Trash Crisis on Earth, by Alexander Stadler

978-0439919661 \$15.99 Scholastic, May 2008

Core audience: Ages 7-10; readers of Capt. Underpants

Notable aspects: Illustrations, layout

Review: This book is at the margin of our task, but will be presented to reluctant readers rather than picture book readers. It's another whiny kid, this time one who's ostensibly reporting to his interplanetary command center, which is shocked and appalled that he's being asked to take out the trash.

Reviewer: Carol B. Chittenden, Eight Cousins and BookStream

Rating: 3

Kaline Klattermaster, by Haven Kimmel

978-0689874024 \$15.99 Simon & Schuster, February 2008

Core audience: Well now, that's a good question

Notable aspects: Language, child psychology, humor

Review: Haven Kimmel is a significant voice in contemporary American adult fiction, so when the galley of her children's book arrived, I could hardly wait to open it. But then I did and the lumbering silliness of names annoyed me terribly. "Hoppadopalous Court", "Mr. Osiris Putnaminski", "Mrs. Jalopoly" – maybe they work in oral storytelling, but on paper they're clumsy and intrusive. I had to look away for awhile before continuing. That oxygen helped, and the rest was delightful – to me. What child will enjoy it? Hard to say. Kaline is a third grade boy, so about 8 years old, but he seems more like a 5, 6, or 7-year-old. The book is about his confusions and misunderstandings, but will a child astute enough to follow them find them interesting? Kaline's misapprehension of words and phrases carries charm by the bucket: "Star Spankled Banger", "chaos and pangemonia", "stop this pizaster", "abducted by extra-terrestriums", and "a dream that the giant Whoppy Jawed Hoodlums of his third-grade classroom..." Emotionally he's just as confused, trying to follow the rules about strangers, unable to accept a kindly neighbor's welcome. He sees that his father is gone, worries about breaking his father's rules, and doesn't notice his mother's happy adjustment to her freedom. The only way I can see this book being truly appreciated is as a read-aloud between parent and smart, sensitive child. How's the market shaping up in that department?

Reviewer: Carol B. Chittenden, Eight Cousins and BookStream

Rating: 7

Keeping Score, by Linda Sue Park

978-0618927999 \$16.00 Clarion Books/Houghton Mifflin, March 2008

Core audience: Older elementary school girls who like baseball

Notable aspects: Engaging characters, historical information and baseball

Review: Maggie loves baseball and she is a devoted fan of the Brooklyn Dodgers. She spends time listening to the games at the local firehouse where her father used to work before an injury sent him to a desk job. There she meets Jim, a new firefighter, and becomes friends, even though he is a Giants fan. When Jim is sent to Korea, she follows the war with the same intensity as she follows baseball. And when Jim comes home with what we now would call post traumatic stress syndrome, she tries to help him in the same way she tries to help the Dodgers win. This is a lovely book about friendship, baseball, the horrors of war and the difficulty of coming to terms with our inability to control events and help others, no matter how hard we try (although the

ending is more hopeful than this sounds). Because there is a great deal of detail in the baseball descriptions, I'm not sure that kids who aren't already hooked on the game will stick with it. But for those girls who do love baseball (and I was such a one, rooting for the Dodgers in the mid-50s), this book will fit the bill.

Reviewer: Nancy Felton, Broadside Bookshop

Rating: 7.5

Lock and Key, by Sarah Dessen

978-0670788835 \$18.99 Viking (Penguin), April '08

Core audience: teen girls

Notable aspects: Family, friendship and self-esteem issues, interesting characters

Review: Sarah Dessen always manages to get the teen girl voice spot-on! Her characters face real issues of substance and there are always supportive adults willing to help once the teen opens up to them. This story involves an alcoholic mother who goes off leaving fifteen-year-old Ruby alone in a rented house believing that her older sister, who left to go to college years before, has abandoned them both. Sister and entrepreneur husband, Jamie, find Ruby and she moves into their gorgeous new home and they enroll her in a good private day school nearby. There are a couple of bad visits to old druggie friends, but Ruby learns to like her new life and family. She becomes a good student. Some quirky friends at her new mall job enrich her new life and help her see that it's important to allow oneself to be open to new possibilities and not be afraid of them. Throughout the story are subtle metaphors for change and adaptation. The hunky boy next door is wonderfully supportive and readers will love him and root for him when he faces his own abusive dad. Brother-in-law Jamie is truly endearing for the many ways he shows understanding and patience. Readers will love this story for many reasons. It's one of Dessen's best.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop (Milford)

Rating: 9

The London Eye Mystery, by Siobhan Dowd

978-0375549763 \$15.99 David Fickling Book (Random House), February 2008

Core audience: Mystery lovers, ages 9 - 12

Notable aspects: Good depiction of high-functioning Aspergers, wonderful sibling relationship, superb mystery

Review: "Ted and Kat watched their cousin Salim board the London Eye. But after half an hour it landed and everyone trooped off-except Salim. Where could he have gone? How on earth could he have disappeared into thin air? Ted and his older sister, Kat, become sleuthing partners, since the police are having no luck. Despite their prickly relationship, they overcome their differences to follow a trail of clues across London in a desperate bid to find their cousin. And ultimately it comes down to Ted, whose brain works in its own very unique way, to find the key to the mystery." (Plot summary from Ingram publisher marketing on ipage).

Biggest problem about this book - me. I had no idea the London Eye was a real thing, so I approached this book in a totally different way than I would have if I had known. I began by expecting something that might be science fiction or fantasy, not a straight mystery. It turns out the Eye is very real - one of the largest Ferris wheels in the world. It is 8+ years old, and one of England's most popular tourist attractions, so I guess I should have heard of it by now. Maybe I've just become used to expecting "fantastic" things in London! So - maybe a photograph for the paperback cover?

Best thing about this book - plot. The mystery is great, and after the book gets going, it's very hard to put down. It's the first book I've stayed up to finish in years. Dowd ratchets up the suspense without making it too scary for the target audience. There is one actual dead person, but only the Dad sees him in the morgue, and he is a stranger to the main characters.

Big quibble - slow beginning. I would omit the entire first chapter.

Little quibbles - Aunt Gloria, Salim's Mom, is described early on as a "hurricane - she leaves a trail of devastation in her wake" (Ted wants to be a meteorologist and the book is overflowing with weather, both actual and metaphoric) but it's never really clear to me how she got this reputation. Also, Ted is described as having a syndrome, but it's never called Aspergers. Not sure why. He is in a special school. He has one teacher and no friends outside his immediate family. He takes things literally but has learned that this isn't always correct. He can't read facial expressions, except for the ones he's been trained to recognize. In general, Ted's Aspergers is very well done and it is called "high functioning" so he is capable of much and his behavior is believable. Lastly, a little too much meteorology. Some of it you need to show Ted's obsession, but not every reference.

Reviewer: Rondi Brower, Blackwood & Brouwer Booksellers **Rating: 7.5**

Looks, by Madeleine George

978-0670061679 \$16.99 Viking, June 2008

Core audience: 7th through 12th graders who read and or think

Notable aspects: Exceptional from stem to stern. Compelling treatment of eating disorders.

Review: At the beginning of *Looks*, the narrator instructs us to "Hover above Valley Regional High. Watch the crowd of kids as it streams into the school like water being sucked into a storm drain." Onward we are urged past "the smoothie of backpacks and t-shirts and freckled shoulders...Wince at the noise, the crashing surf of screeching, laughing, yelling." Onward still until we are directed to "Look at her. Nobody else is, but you look at her. Look at Meghan Ball." How apropos this direction is as we hover above the flock of galleys which stream towards publication "like water being sucked into a storm drain." And, although its author Madeline George might not be so forward as to suggest it, it is also entirely apropos to direct ourselves to look at *Looks*, for it is a truly unusual and exceptional book, worthy of bearing the scrutiny of as many pairs of eyes as might be pointed in its direction.

Looks is ostensibly about two high school girls, each with an eating disorder, one with near morbid obesity and one tending toward anorexia. Their slowly converging lives allow George to explore the concept of vision and visibility in an incisive and original manner. In essence George presents invisibility much like gambling, one can't win if one needs to. In this sense needing to be invisible dooms one to stark visibility, however many clever strategies, and trips to the nurses office, are devised to escape unwanted attention. George, a playwright by background, is a marvelous stylist and *Looks* is simply a pleasure to read. Her characterization of interpersonal relations takes no prisoners, and has a clarity of detail, opinionation and perspective rarely seen. It also provides a fascinating treatment of plagiarism, and the nature of theft and possession in terms of the mind. In the end the book suggests that the only means to become invisible to the unwanted tyranny of hostile looks, is to be truly seen. By becoming visible to each other the two girls cease to be visible to their virulent high school environment. This is a compelling, insightful, challenging, and beautiful book. Like a terrier, it can't be praised too highly.

Reviewer: Kenny Brechner, DDG Booksellers

Rating: 9.5

Additional review of Looks:

Review: Although others have written high praise for this book, I feel I need to honestly add my voice to the mix here and share that though I appreciate the character depictions, that I really really disliked this one and will not be an enthusiastic handseller of it to teens. I didn't like the characters (which is really rare for me to not find something to root for!), and reading this book was a real chore. I would never tell my junior high and early high school youth group members (I've done youth ministry for almost 20 years) that I thought they should read it -- unless they were doing a group discussion of it while reading it. That said, I can very much see this becoming a school book, and an adult book group title.

Reviewer: Gretchen Baker-Smith, Baker Books

Additional review of Looks:

Looks is a captivating commentary on high school society, where social standing can change in an instant. Told from the points of view of two teenage girls with more in common than anyone could believe, it is the emotional story of obese Meghan and anorexic Aimee's determined friendship and retribution against a common enemy. Author Madeleine George uses her background as a playwright to incorporate expressive metaphors that bring the scenes to life. From the description of Meghan's solitude ("It's like dying and coming back to life, being a fat girl who loses her only friend") to Aimee's response to betrayal ("she feels herself pressed into its angle, suddenly deaf, all the breath squeezed out of her—stunned"), it reads like a professional performance set upon any Broadway stage. An insightful debut about how we view others in response to how we ourselves are treated. I would highly recommend *Looks* for fans of Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* and Ellen Hopkins's *Impulse*.

Reviewer: Heather Doss, Children's Book Buyer, Bookazine

Rating: 9.5

Love Me Tender, by Audrey Coulombis

978-0375838392 \$16.99 Random House, April 2008

Core audience: Girls ages 12-15

Notable aspects: Humor, characters, family ties and conflicts

Review: Elvira, age 13, probably would have been named Elvis had she been born a boy. Her father, a landscaper, was an Elvis impersonator, and has just revived that interest. He has taken off for a contest in Vegas, leaving Elvira with her pregnant mother and perpetually annoying little sister Kerrie, age 10. The girls' squabbles are not unique in the family. In fact their mother Mal is all but estranged from her own mother and sister. Only a deathbed plea brings Mal to pack up the children, drive 24 hours, and move in for an extended visit among these candidly disapproving relatives. The author reveals their conflicts and fears with warmth and humor, allowing the reader to chuckle at each character's foibles, but still love them and cheer for their steps toward reconciliation – including the father's return.

Reviewer: Carol B. Chittenden, *Eight Cousins* and *BookStream*

Rating: 9

Additional review of Love Me Tender:

Core audience: Girls 12-15

Notable aspects: Character, family issues, sensitivity to feelings

Audrey Coulombis is a master when it comes to writing about disconnected and irritable people faced with a major problem that brings them together and brings out the best in them all. Here, a long road trip to visit "the grandmother" Elvira never knew culminates in a new lease on life for everyone involved. Elvira is tired of taking care of her little sister all the time. Father, an Elvis impersonator/landscaper has gone off in a huff to a Las Vegas Elvis contest that he hopes will bring him fresh work. Unhappy Mom is pregnant and milking her discomfort. We wish she would show some strength and pull together her faltering household. Then her estranged sister leaves a phone message asking her to come and see their ailing mom. The road trip gives Elvira and her mom a chance to talk more than they have in a long time. We feel a loosening of pent up feelings. The grandmother/mom is better off than Mom or her sister and before the visit is over, everyone has begun to sort out old feelings of resentment and anger. "The grandmother" takes on a new and joyful role, the middle-aged siblings grow up a great deal- that includes Elvis/Dad, and Elvira and her little sister have forged a new relationship. This is yet another book in which the little eight-year-old appears wiser and more sympathetic than anyone else. (THAT'S a discussion point right there!) There is a lot to mull over in this well-written and highly engaging story. The happy ending does seem to come quickly and very smoothly, but gee, it's a good one!

Reviewer: Sue Carita, *The Toadstool Bookshop (Milford)*

Rating: 8.5

Madapple, by Christina Meldrum

978-0375851766 \$16.99 Knopf, May, 2008

Core audience: Ages 14 & up

Notable aspects: Interesting exploration of the use of edible & medicinal flora.

Madapple is one of those books that even as you are reading it you are unsure whether it is amazing and revelatory or misguided and pointless. As the story begins, teenaged Aslaug and Maren, her mother, are foraging for plants in a forest near their home. We soon discover that Maren is ill and that some of the plants they seek are to ease her discomfort. One of those plants is jimsonweed or madapple; toxic in excess but narcotic if used more judiciously. We also learn that Aslaug has been kept isolated from the world apart from their tiny household. Maren has never allowed Aslaug to go to school or to a doctor or to know anything about any of their relatives. There is an underlying sense that Aslaug's birth was in some way mysterious and possibly divine.

When Aslaug finds Maren dead on the morning after their foraging expedition (There are hints that the death was caused by an intentional overdose of the jimsonweed.) she proceeds to prepare the body and dig a grave. When their one near neighbor sees this activity he calls the police who then start the process of investigating the death and assigning Aslaug a social worker. From there Aslaug finds her mother's sister, a preacher, and her cousins living in a nearby town. She goes to live with them in their church/home. The preacher and her daughter also use/abuse medicinal plants. Aslaug is an involuntary subject of this use. She becomes pregnant by her male cousin, Rune, in an incident she remembers only as a dream. From this follows the notion that her pregnancy is an immaculate conception.

The story is told in chapters that alternate between testimony in a courtroom and the scenes from Aslaug's life. The language used is unfailingly calm and soothing even when describing horrific events. The information about plants is interesting, if true. In the final analysis, I'm still not sure if this is a successful book, but what I can say with complete assurance is that it is not a book likely to either appeal to or be understood by any representative teenager. Since even reviewing the book in any sort of brevity has been nearly impossible, I can't imagine what I'd say to a parent or teen to convince them to read this!

Reviewer: Kat Goddard, [The BookLoft](#)

Rating: 7

The Magic Half, by Annie Barrows

978-1599901329 \$15.95 Bloomsbury, January 2008

Core audience: Girls 8-12

Notable aspects: Use of magic and time travel, twins, sibling interaction

Review: Miri is a middle child. Even worse, Miri is the lone single child in the middle of two sets of twins. Her family has just moved to a new house, and she's feeling lonely and overlooked. One afternoon (after a fight with her older brother which ends with her hitting him in the head with a shovel and being banished to her room) she finds a lens from a pair of glasses taped to the wall. When she tries looking through it, Miri finds herself in the same room of her new house but in a different year. Molly is an orphan in 1935 living with her extended family and praying (to the fairies) for a way out. Suddenly Miri appears. What follows is a somewhat convoluted tale of magic and time that ends with Molly in the present as Miri's twin. I wanted to like this book more than I did. There

was a difference in tone in places that was a bit jarring. The magical interactions that allow Miri to get back and forth are initially treated a bit whimsically and "magically" (if that makes sense). The tone of the sections in the past are darker and more violent (Molly's older cousin Horst is a physical threat with overtones of possible other creepiness). The book tries to be both light and magical while also addressing some very dark themes. The differences in tone left the whole thing a bit muddled and somewhat unsettling at times.

Reviewer: Kari Patch, Harvard Book Store

Rating: 5.5

The Magic Thief, by Sarah Prineas

978-0061375873 \$16.99 Harpercollins, June 2008

Core audience: 10-14-year-old fantasy readers

Notable aspects: Strong character development

Review: In the 1934 version of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, the Prince of Wales tells Sir Percy that "Percy, you're brainless, spineless, and useless, but you do know clothes." To which Percy replies, "Gads sir, that is something." What Percy brought to the Prince's sleeves, "a certain something, so that when the Prince takes his snuff twill be a swallows flight," Sarah Prineas brings to 10 -14 year old fantasy in *The Magic Thief*. Though the plot and narrative structure are unremarkable, Prineas excels at character definition. *The Magic Thief* has a somewhat Dickensian setting. There is the Twilight in which commoners live. Across the river lies the Sunrise, where the well to do live. The Magisters, or magic wielders, live on a chain of islands in the river. There is, in fact, something particularly engaging and well developed in the story's principal character and young narrator, Conn.

Conn is a young thief in the Twilight. After attempting to steal the Locus Magicalicus (stone wand) of a passing magician, Conn earns the Wizard Nevery's notice. Touching the stone should have killed him. Something is draining the city's magic, and Nevery, a returned exile, is called upon to get to the bottom of it. *The Magic Thief* has all the intertwined characters that you'd expect. Conn turns out to be The Underlord's nephew, his friend Rowan at the Magister's school turns out to be the Duchess' niece, and so forth. Nevery's hired muscle, Benet, is gruff and harsh to Conn at the beginning but becomes gruffly fond of him at the end. The turncoat magister helping the underworld has a haughty apprentice who tries to pick on Conn, but turns out to be a good egg in the end. The magic itself is nothing new, the embero (animagus) spell turns a person into the animal whose nature they resemble. Not a lot to speak of in the originality line. Yet the story is well told, and there is something very convincing in Conn's assertive, direct personality. The reader becomes truly attached to him. Nevery, also, is quite well drawn and likable. This is a book that grows on the reader, and should be very satisfying to young fantasy fans.

Reviewer: Kenny Brechner, DDG Booksellers

Rating: 7.5

The Missing, Book 1: Found, by Margaret Peterson Haddix

978-1416954170 \$15.99 Simon & Schuster, April 2008

Core audience: Ages 9-12

Notable aspects: Unusual premise, suspense, action, plausible plot, satisfying but open ending

Review: A Prologue explains that one night an unscheduled plane appeared at a large airport's gate area. When the novice attendant went to find out why nobody was coming out of the jetway, she discovered that the plane contained thirty-six babies, and nobody else at all. The rest of the story takes place thirteen years earlier when main character Jonah is, we quickly see, one of those babies, now a young teen. Mysterious events start to creep out Jonah, his pesky 12-year-old sister Katherine, and their new friend Chip. Things move from strange to stranger to very, very strange, right to the last sentence, but don't spoil the fun by peeking. I found *Found* much more satisfying than Haddix's *Among* series, but I still hope for better character development and more compact expression of internal monologues.

Reviewer: Carol B. Chittenden, *Eight Cousins* and *BookStream*

Rating: 8.0

Another review of [The Missing Book 1: Found](#):

Core audience: Ages 9-12

Notable aspects: Science fiction, survival, adventure, adoption, time travel, high interest for reluctant readers.

Plot: A plane appears out of nowhere at an airport. As airline personnel investigate, they find 36 babies - no pilot and no adults. Thirteen years later, Jonah and a number of other 13 year old children, all adopted, start receiving mysterious notes which tell them that they are among the missing and that someone will be coming to get them. When the adoptive families are gathered together at an adoption seminar, the children are taken away from their parents and the secrets of their past begin to be revealed.

Review: A solid choice for reluctant readers and children who like science fiction. Should sell all right in hardcover, but especially well in paperback. Strong boy and girl characters; issues related to different ways families handle adoption. This is the first in a series and the ending, which is really the beginning of the next book, will leave young readers looking for the next installment.

Reviewer: Vicky Uminowicz, *Titcomb's Bookshop*

Rating: 7

Another rating of [The Missing, Book 1: Found](#)

***will appeal to the fans of her *Shadow Children* series

Reviewer: Heather Doss, *Bookazine*

Rating: 7

The Missing Girl, by Norma Fox Mazer

978-0066237763 \$16.99 HarperCollins, February 2008

Core audience: Ages 12 and up

Notable aspects: Interesting family dynamics, excellent pacing, strong female characters

Review: The five Herbert sisters walk to school together most mornings, sometimes squabbling, often giggling but always oblivious to the nondescript man watching them. Each of the sisters has a voice in this story, told in chapters that alternate between the five girls and the man. When the long foretold abduction of one of the girls finally occurs, the true strength of this disparate group shines. Child sexual abuse has become an overused plot feature in books for young adults and although Mazer handles it as well as most, I don't see this as adding much to the oeuvre.

Reviewer: Kat Goddard, [The BookLoft](#)

Rating: 7

My Dad's a Birdman, by David Almond

978-0763636678 \$15.99 Candlewick Press, April 2008

Core audience: Gr. 3+, boys and girls

Notable aspects: Family issues, language

Review: With similarities to the Icarus/Dedalus myth, I kept expecting a tragic happening, especially since Almond's previous novels for older kids are things to mull over. This one surprised me! It's a charming tale of depressed father and earnest, loving young daughter looking after him in a very motherly way. (There is no mother in the picture.)

Dumpling-looking (and making) Auntie Doreen comes to visit just as the day arrives for the Great Human Bird Competition. Father has been making gorgeous wings for this event for ages and is ready to fly! Polly Dunbar's colorful and humorous illustrations give the story freshness and humor. It becomes a very amusing tale of faith in oneself, having dreams, and looking forward.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, [The Toadstool Bookshop, Milford, NH](#)

Rating: 8.5

Additional review of [My Dad's a Birdman](#):

Core audience: Ages 7-10 younger for reading aloud. Kids who have devoured all of the other early chapter books that they could get their "wings" on.

Notable aspects: Proof that imagination can help heal most anything, strong Father Daughter relationship. British language and humor.

Review: I'll admit that I picked this up because of the cover. I find Polly Dunbar's illustrations so charming and I was intrigued to see how her work would meld with Almond's text – as I normally find him to be somewhat dark. Yes, there is loss and sorrow here, but more time is spent on how to cope with it, even if it means living out a dream or a fantasy. In Dad's case, he wants to fly and convinces his daughter, Lizzie to join him in the Human Bird Competition. This beginning chapter book was originally created as a play and what a sight it must be with everyone coming out on stage in their flying contraptions and gizmos. Father and Daughter are listed on their registration forms as using Wings and Faith. And though they don't win, we applaud them for trying.

For a moment at the beginning of the book I found myself questioning the sanity of a father who wears wings, eats worms, and must be cared for by his daughter. As well, some of the British phrases might be a bit unfamiliar to some young readers and may even seem grammatically incorrect. But once I put aside any preconceived notions and read it as I imagine a child would, I found myself delighted. This would make a great bedtime read aloud, something a little different for those families who find themselves in a reading rut.

Reviewer: Beth Reynolds, The Norwich Bookstore

Rating: 7

Additional rating for My Dad's a Birdman:

I loved this one too and would give it an 8!

Reviewer: Alison Morris, Wellesley Booksmith

Rating: 8

My Most Excellent Year: A Novel of Love, Mary Poppins & Fenway Park, by Steve Kluger

978-0803732278 \$16.99 March, 2008

Core audience: Ages: 14 & up (stated but younger kids would be OK as far as the content)

Notable aspects: Wholesome, interesting, smart, characters. Baseball references – esp. Red Sox.

Review: Assigned to keep a journal & told that many people address their journal entries to someone, three friends document a year – A Most Excellent Year. 'TC' writes to his deceased mother, Ale' writes to Jackie Kennedy but Augie Kwan can't make up his mind between Liza Minelli & her mother, Judy Garland – he goes back and forth! This cast of characters are involved in – between them – the school musical, mentoring a six-year-old deaf foster-child (who is waiting for Mary Poppins to come adopt him), petitioning the government to add a baseball field to the plan to honor the Japanese who were interred at Manzanar during WWII, as well as the normal panoply of teenage experiences like crushes, getting along with parents, teachers & surviving the year as friends. I especially liked the glimpses of the parents & teachers involved with the three main characters. It was nice to find adults portrayed as sensible, funny, slightly (but not appallingly) flawed, aware & living a good life.

Reviewer: Kathy Goddard, The BookLoft

Rating: 8

Additional ratings of My Most Excellent Year:

Please add my score of 8 to the most excellent review of Kat Goddard. I liked it, too.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop, Milford, NH

Rating: 8

Review: I must chime in also with an 8 for *My Most Excellent Year*. I really enjoyed this book, being a Red Sox fan I laughed out loud when TC rattles off the slew of Red Sox inspired family names. TC may be another main character with a dead Mom but the book is full of wonderful, loving family relationships (the son, the Dad, the Aunts, the

friend who becomes part of the family)- these are definitely characters I would enjoy hearing more from.

Reviewer: Lorna Ruby, The Wellesley Booksmith

Rating: 8

The Mysterious Benedict Society and the Perilous Journey, by Trenton Lee Stewart

978-0316057806 \$16.99 Little Brown and Company, May 2008

Core audience: Ages 10 & up

Notable aspects: Fantasy, characters, fanciful plot

Review: As an 11 year old customer who read The Mysterious Benedict Society upon reading this sequel said -- "it's soooooooo good!" Stewart further develops each character based on the changes in their lives during the year since they first met Mr. Benedict. As in the first book, portions of the story are told from each of the character's perspective. In addition to being privy to Sticky's, Reynie's and Kate's thoughts and feelings, we learn much more about Constance. The plot once again has creative twists and unexpected turns and developments. While some issues are resolved, many remain open for the next adventure which hopefully will happen soon.

Reviewer: Joanne Bibeau, Storybook Cove

Rating: 8

Mystery of the Third Lucretia, by Susan Runholt

978-0670062522 \$16.99 Viking Penguin, April 2008

Core audience: Girls 11-14

Notable aspects: Plot, art appreciation

Review: Kari and her girlfriend, Lucas, keep running into a mysterious man they call "Gallery Guy" whenever they are in an art museum - first in Minneapolis, then London's National Gallery and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam! He is always copying from a displayed Rembrandt "Lucretia" painting! He seems to snarl "go away" a lot too and wears disguises. Since Karri's single Mom travels a lot for her job writing magazine articles, she invites Lucas to go on trips with her and Kari during vacation weeks. It doesn't quite give her the peace of mind she envisions as the two savvy girls keep putting together facts they've read about stolen and forged paintings and get into a spot of trouble here and there. The suspense doesn't let up. Foreshadowing at the ends of most chapters keeps the pages turning. These two modern sleuths, dutiful to Mom, but very gutsy, are forces to be reckoned with. Readers will wonder what they get into next! Fans of all these wonderful new art-centered mysteries will savor this one.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop (Milford)

Rating: 7.5

News from the Dead, by Mary Hooper

978-1596433557 \$15.95 Roaring Brook, May 2008

Core audience: Primarily girls, 13+ Especially those who like history or gothic/creepy stories.

Notable aspects: For being based on a true story, it gives an accurate slice of life in mid-17th-century England. Anne's story may also make young women think some about "women's rights" in a historical perspective. A gripping, well written story.

Review: In 1650, a young maidservant, Anne Green, was hanged for infanticide. Miraculously, she survived the hanging and lived another fifteen years. The story is well documented in historical record. In *Newes from the Dead*, Mary Hooper chose to tell this riveting story from Anne's perspective. Awakening unable to move, speak or even open her eyes, Anne remembered being hanged but she had no idea where she was now. Had she been buried alive? Was she truly dead? As she lay there, remembering the seduction and betrayal that had led to her execution, a group of young medical students gathered close to the table to observe a dissection. An almost imperceptible flutter of the corpse's eyelids shocked one of the students. Could she be alive? She was totally unresponsive until a feather was used to tickle her throat, eliciting a reflexive cough. Still, she did not wake. The body was bled and slowly warmed. Finally, Anne awoke; her survival a medical miracle that ensured the fame of her doctors. Many believed that her resurrection was proof of her innocence. Still, she collected enough money, by appearing with her coffin at fairs and in taverns, to buy herself a pardon. Fully recovered, she married, and had three children, before dying again in 1665. It's a fascinating story, well written and hard to put down.

Reviewer: Ellen Richmond, Children's Book Cellar

Rating: 8

Nim at Sea, by Wendy Orr

978-0440422327 \$12.99 Knopf, April 2008

Core audience: Ages 7-10, especially girls. (sequel to *Nim's Island*)

Notable aspects: Animal sympathies, internal consistency, smooth integration of contemporary culture.

Review: Blandly amusing to an adult, *Nim at Sea* will be plenty adventurous for children who are willing to imagine themselves as island dwellers who talk and play with pet sea lions and foil wicked poachers. No matter how dastardly the villains' mien, manners and motives, though, Nim always has *deus ex marina* on her side. How can she fail to win? I did like the use of e-mail to move along some parts of the plot, however.

Reviewer: Carol B. Chittenden, *Eight Cousins* and *BookStream*

Rating: 6.5

Nurk: The Strange, Surprising Adventures of a (Somewhat)

Brave Shrew, by Ursula Vernon 978-0152063757 \$15.00 Harcourt, June 2008

Core audience: Boys and girls 8-12

Notable aspects: Humor, adventure, characters, language

Review: If Bilbo Baggins were a shrew, (well, a highly fictionalized shrew*) he'd probably be Nurk, with his mixed feelings toward adventure. But he's the grandson of

the swashbuckling long-lost Surka, whose diary entries fill him with pride and a drop of courage. Off he goes in a converted snail shell – the Snailboat – with a suitable supply of clean socks, cheese sandwiches, great anxiety, and a vague mission to return a letter. The quest is on. Well, anybody could put that together, but in the first two pages alone I highlighted seven different phrases that delighted my mind and ear. Ursula Vernon's writing is such a charming balance of probable emotions in improbable circumstances that one wants to turn the page to follow the path of twinkling alliteration, amusing mental calculus in the face of the Grizzlemole, pithy aphorisms from Surka's diary, and a hundred other flashes of fun. How will purple nail polish will help Nurk rescue the kidnapped prince? Are all those clean socks just extra baggage? And how (a nod to Phillip Pullman?) can dragonflies work together?

*See Jane Junge and Robert S. Hoffmann (1981), Key to the long-tailed shrews of the U.S. and Canada, Occ. Pap. Mus. Nat. Hist., U. Kansas, No. 94, 1-48, illustrated by yours truly.

Reviewer: Carol B. Chittenden, Eight Cousins and BookStream

Rating: 8.5

Additional review of Nurk:

Review: I'm piggybacking on Carol for this one and I agree almost totally. The story is nothing special, but it's told so well it doesn't matter. I am a real sucker for correct use of the subjunctive (possibly the only grammar rule I know). To core audience I would add a few years on the lower end for reading aloud. I think my son would really have enjoyed this, right around age 6, just after our first chapter book - My Father's Dragon. The one downside is the illustrations, with which I was unimpressed.

Rondi Brower, Blackwood & Brouwer

Rating: 8

On Rough Seas, by Nancy L. Hull

978-0618897438 \$16.00 Clarion Books, April 2008

Core audience: Boys ages 10-14

Notable aspects: WWII in England, rescue at Dunkirk, father-son conflict resulting in physical violence, boy following his own dreams for a career choice

Plot: On Rough Seas is a coming of age story of 14 year old Alec Curtis from Dover, England during WWII. Alec's father, who runs an inn in the town, is strongly opposed to Alec's desire to go to sea. As Alec does everything he can to pursue his dream, the evidence of war comes closer and closer to home. 4 special soldiers are billeted at the inn. He meets a strange German girl who was sent to England by her parents. And there's a secret tunnel running under the castle overlooking the town. Finally, he finds a way to help in the amazing rescue of 300,000 British troops from the beach at Dunkirk.

Review: The book brings the story of the miraculous rescue at Dunkirk vividly to life. It is also a striking story of life in England during the war. There are lots of issues for discussion – Alec is allowed to quit school and during an argument Alec's father hits his son. Through it all, Alec's mother is present, but does not to have much of a voice.

The book, with its attractive cover, should appeal to those 11-14 year old boys who love to read about WWII.

Reviewer: Vicky Uminowicz, Titcomb's Bookshop

Rating: 7.5

Once Upon a Time in the North, by Philip Pullman

978-0375845109 \$12.99 David Fickling Knopf / Random House, April 2008

Core audience: Readers of Golden Compass and ages 12- adults (yup! This has the flavor of an adult western!)

Notable aspects: Plot, characters, imagination, language, humor

Review: This is a great prequel to *The Golden Compass*! The gutsy Texas Balloonman, Lee Scoresby, with his daemon rabbit, Hester, meets the powerful polar bear, Iorek Byrnison, and they make a team to reckon with! We even learn how he won his trusty Winchester rifle! When his balloon has a malfunction and is forced to land at the Barents Sea Company Depot at Novy Odense, Lee finds himself in challenging circumstances. There is corrupt leadership, a charming young lady in distress, a movement to rid the area of the powerful worker bears, and strange doings at the Depot. With a far different "flavor" from *The Golden Compass*, but with lots of wit, great "wild west" lingo, and plenty of heart-stopping action, this book will totally satisfy *Golden Compass* fans and certainly bring in a few more! The manuscript cover mentions a board game with spinner and pieces. Geeesh! The story will stand on its own merits- without accoutrements!

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop, Milford, NH

Rating: 9

One Small Step, by P. B. Kerr

978-1416962021 \$16.99 Margaret K. McElderry Books/Simon & Schuster, June 2008

Core audience: Children (mainly boys) ages 9-14 who are interested in space flight

Notable aspects: Space travel, NASA, chimpanzees, child caught between separated parents

Plot: *One Small Step* is the story of a boy who goes to the moon with two chimps on a test flight before the actual first moon landing in 1969. 13 year old Scott is the son of a flight instructor and, with his father's help, has secretly learned to fly. When a chimpanzee is no longer suitable for a test flight to the moon, NASA recruits Scott to take the chimp's place. Scott, accompanied by his friend, Kit, is secretly put through astronaut training and the adventure begins.

Review: The book was written for space-crazy kids who would like to put themselves in Scott's place. The story has lots of information about astronaut training and space flight, including the most detailed description of going to the bathroom I've ever read. Readers will meet some real astronauts and learn a lot about how chimps were trained for space flight. Scott's friend, Kit, provides some good lessons in friendship and a nice dose of humor. There's a lot of reality readers will need to suspend, including the whole premise of the book, but for some reason, that didn't really bother me. The story is just a fun adventure sure to appeal to future astronauts. There's a rather startling mystical ending,

but a very nice use of of a poem about flight by a young pilot who died at age 19 in WWII.

The background story of Scott's separated parents is a little stereotypical, but the ruse of attending an exclusive school in Scotland to hide Scot's adventure from his mother adds humor and more interesting facts.

Reviewer: Vicky Uminowicz, Titcomb's Bookshop

Rating: 7.5

The Opposite of Invisible, by Liz Gallagher

978-0375841521 \$15.99 Wendy Lamb (Random House), January 2008

Core audience: 13-18 year olds

Review: The social issues and moral decisions illuminated in this book for high school readers are right on target. The party and school settings are authentic, but the author seems to overdo the cityscape. The use of drugs and alcohol and the confusion about sexual behavior are examined in a first person account that is on the naive end of the scale but well done.

Reviewer: Joyce Miller, Baker Books

Rating: 7

Ottoline and the Yellow Cat, by Chris Riddell

978-0061448799 \$10.99 Harper Collins, May 2008

Core audience: Ages 7 – 11, more girls than boys

Notable aspects: Wonderful integration of illustrations into text; sly sense of humor; smart, quirky, independent heroine Ottoline Brown's parents are great travelers, so she lives under the supervision of Mr. Munroe (who looks strangely like cousin Itt) in apartment 243 of the Pepperpot Building. Ottoline likes to observe things and keeps a notebook with sketches and clippings from newspapers. When a string of missing lapdogs and strange burglaries comes to Ottoline's attention, can she, with the help of Mr. Munroe, figure out what is going on? Throw in odd shoe collections, disguises, a yellow cat, a gang of purebred dogs and a bear on vacation in the basement laundry and you have a perfect recipe for fun. Will this book get serious review and/or awards attention later in the year? Probably not. Will young readers find the pictures enthralling and the silly tale unputdownable? My guess is yes, they will. Adults reading these with children should find lots of fun things to giggle at, too. Am I eagerly anticipating the next book in this series? Yes. Yes, I am. This should sell well in HC and make an easy recommendation.

Reviewer: Kari Patch, Harvard Book Store

Rating: 7.5

Additional review of Ottoline and the Yellow Cat:

Core audience: Ages 7-10, boys or girls

Notable aspects: Mystery, humor, loads of illustrations, dogs, cats

Review: *Ottoline and the Yellow Cat* is a rather clever little tale of a young girl who lives in an apartment with "Mr. Munroe," a small and hairy creature originally from a bog in Norway. Ottoline's parents travel the world and leave her in Mr. Munroe's dubious care, but her mother stays in touch with postcards from time to time, and always seems to know what Ottoline is up to at any moment. Ottoline is quite happy with this arrangement and her parent's absence is hardly a matter of concern. The book reminded me quite a bit of *Eloise*, who loved her parentless life at the Plaza with her nanny.

In this first volume of a series, Ottoline and Mr. Munroe try to discover who is carrying out a string of burglaries and why lapdogs are disappearing.

What drew me to the book in part are the wonderful drawings, which quite detailed and humorous and feature a dramatic use of red. The artwork appears throughout the book and reminds me of Hilary Knight, who illustrated the *Eloise* stories, or Robert Lawson. Lots of fun and, with all the illustrations, should be popular as a beginning chapter book.

Reviewer: Vicky Uminowicz, Titcomb's Bookshop

Rating: 7.5

Pandora Gets Jealous, by Carolyn Hennessy
978-1599901961 \$12.95 Bloomsbury, January 2008

Core audience: Age 10+

Review: Ever wonder what would happen if Pandora's Box were opened? The first book of the Mythic Misadventures series introduces the young maiden who is struggling with the pains of being a bored teenager whose father is a Titan. Deciding to impress her classmates with the famous box as part of her presentation for the big class project, she accidentally unleashes the evils trapped within on the world. Now she has 6 months to recapture them all or her family will suffer the wrath of Zeus!

Similar to the Percy Jackson series, it educates kids on the Greek gods, myths & legends in a light-hearted way. For example, when the gods want to meet in secret they distract Zeus with information about where some "pretty young things are skinny-dipping" & he takes off disguised as a shark while Hera follows as a vulture.

Reviewer: Heather Doss, Bookazine

Rating: 8

Path to Punishment, by Jeanette E. Alsheimer & Patricia Friedle
978-1571974822 \$18.95 Ivy House, January 2008

Core audience: Ages 11 and up

Notable aspects: Good characterization, historical detail, point of view

Review: Although *Path to Punishment* is the sequel to *The Trouble With Tea*, it stands on its own. Patience Burgess of Plymouth, the central character of *The Trouble With Tea*, becomes involved with the colonists' side of the Boston Tea Party while staying with her friend, Anne Wentworth, in Boston. Anne Wentworth is the central character in *Path to Punishment* as she travels to England to meet her secret finance, a British

subject and loyalist. The reader sees British life at that time and the reaction to the colonists' actions in Boston and the plans to punish the colonies. The plot includes espionage, mysterious deaths and secrecy as to Anne's and her betrothed's allegiances and connections. The book is well written and researched and the mysterious events keep the reader engrossed in the story. The local authors are presently working on book three which will continue the story while centering on a third character.

Reviewer: Janet Bibeau, Storybook Cove

Rating: 8

The Patron Saint of Butterflies, by Cecilia Galante

978-1-59990-249-4 \$16.99 Bloomsbury, April 2008

Core audience: Ages 12-16 girls, and some boys who would enjoy a new twist on a realistic YA novel.

Notable aspects: The book is set in a religious commune. There is not much talk of scripture or religion in the book, instead, it starts out subtly, and not so subtly, letting the reader see how the leader of the commune has come to have all the power. There is some rather graphic description of corporal punishment at the outset which might disturb some readers.

Review: *The Patron Saint of Butterflies* walks a fine line of exploring the inner workings of a religious cult while not overwhelming the reader with religious details. Two best friends, teenage Agnes and Honey, are beginning drift. Agnes strives to be a very good commune member with aspirations of sainthood, supplanting her will to the leader. Meanwhile, Honey is starting to very strongly question everything about the isolated commune and her own upbringing.

During a visit, Agnes' grandmother uncovers the truth about the commune: children are very harshly and violently punished and no one does anything to stop it. A very bad accident to Agnes' brother takes Agnes, her brother, Honey and Grandma off the commune. There the story really takes a great turn. Each child is confronted with the modern world and each reacts differently to it in very believably ways.

I must admit, I'm sucker for a good book about commune life, but I think any kid looking for a different YA voice, would really enjoy this book.

Reviewer: Josie Leavitt, Flying Pig Bookstore

Rating: 7.5

Additional rating for *The Patron Saint of Butterflies*:

Reviewer: Janet Bibeau, Storybook Cove

Rating: 8

Peeled, by Joan Bauer

978-0399234750 \$16.99 Putnam / Penguin, May 2008

Core audience: Girls, ages 12-16

Notable aspects: First-rate, gossipy details of what makes a small town a community: stock & oddball characters, family commitments, champions the little guy

Review: Meet Hildy Biddle, ace reporter on the staff of her high school newspaper, The Core. The town rag, run by sleazy editor Pen Piedmont, starts spreading rumors that a deadly ghost is haunting the creepy, abandoned house on Farnsworth Road. As fear grips the town, Hildy and the staff of The Core must use all of their know-how, and all of their courage, to get the facts before it is too late. Who, or what, is actually behind the haunting in Hildy's town, a ghost, or something even more sinister, something like big business? With the help of a new boy in town who just might be decent enough to be worthy of Hildy's affection, the red-sweat-shirted Elders Against Evil, a Polish bakery owner, and an out-of-work newspaper man, Hildy might just find the courage to fight the powers that be. Hildy is a Bauer specialty, a funny and kind heroine, with a good, solid head on her imperfect shoulders. There are also other classic Bauer touches, the wise elder with a knowing twinkle in her eye, the gruff yet tender-hearted male advisor, and all the humor that goes into small-town squabbles, serious and otherwise. Moves briskly, readers will root for Hildy, in all of her pursuits.

Reviewer: Jessica Adams, Eight Cousins

Rating: 7

Additional review of Peeled:

Review: Ditto. I love Joan Bauer. Probably more to the point, my 16 year old daughter does, too. Really, who else could have a main character whose father has died (and whose boyfriends have cheated on her), a struggling agricultural community, Solidarity and the Polish revolution, and freedom of the press issues without getting heavy or (too) depressing? Light, but substantial, and plenty of humor. Also, great cover.

Reviewer: Rondi Brower, Blackwood & Brouwer Booksellers

Rating: 8

The Penderwicks on Gardam Street, by Jeanne Birdsall

978-0375840906 \$15.99 Knopf, April 2008

Core audience: Girls 8-12

Notable aspects: Characters, plot, language

Review: It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a widowed man in possession of four lively young daughters must be in need of a brainy, beautiful, sympathetic bride. We know the outcome from the start. But the daughters, anxious and distracted, take a little while to twig, and therein lies the pleasure for the reader. Birdsall once again opens characters as precisely as a leaf shutter lens. Each of the four sisters has a strength that's also a weakness, and the interplay among them (justice/mercy, imagination/exactitude, romance/practicality, etc.) keeps the plot tumbling merrily forward. Much as I loved reading this sequel to *The Penderwicks*, I'm hoping that if there's a third volume, it will toss in some unpredictability.

Reviewer: Carol B. Chittenden, Eight Cousins and BookStream

Rating: 8.5

Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Battle of the Labyrinth,

by Rick Riordan 978-1423104168 \$18.99 Hyperion, May 2008

Core audience: Ages 9-12; the millions of fans who love this series!

Notable aspects: Humorous chapter headings. Familiar characters you already love, new characters that help keep the pace moving swifter than a Colorado river. An author who knows his research and his fans.

Review: By now the routine is somewhat familiar, a new Percy book is released, my son and I dash to the store the moment it hits the shelves and then we spend every waking moment reading it out loud. Normally I do the reading but this time we alternated chapters and I must say it made the whole read-aloud experience a bit new to me--I'm not used to being the listener. Often I would find myself thinking "I could get used to this." Did I say "often," I don't think I meant that exactly, because the entire time we were caught up in Percy's world we were totally riveted. The action, the suspense, the characters, some new and some old, it was all there. It was all so fabulous, that I wanted to go back and read the other three books straight through.

In this penultimate book, Percy and Annabeth are back at Camp Halfblood gearing up for an attack by Luke and his army. As the title suggests, our heroes must go into the Labyrinth to try and stop the evil Kronos and those on his side. There are battles, there is an interesting backstory involving Daedalus and his son Icarus, and Mrs. O'Leary the hellhound provides just a touch of comic relief. Grover and Tyson are also on this quest and though they don't exactly like each other, they make a great team. Two of the characters from Book three make an appearance here and it seems as if everything is getting set in place for the final book. So some may say this ending is a bit unsatisfying, I say it's just a bridge to Book 5. Unfortunately we have a bit of a wait before we can cross over.

One of the best parts about reading these books together is how my son can pick out the Greek references much quicker than I can. And yet it doesn't mean I enjoy it any less. Nor does it mean they are predictable, it just means Riordan has done his research. He does a spectacular job of writing for kids and adults. Now we just have to wait for that last book...

Reviewer: Beth Reynolds, The Norwich Bookstore, VT

Rating: 8

Pirates of the Retail Wasteland, by Adam Selzer

978-0385734820 \$15.99 Random House, April, 2008

Core audience: Fourteen- to eighteen-year-old bohemian high school intellectuals

Notable aspects: Unusual argument for shopping local

Pirates of the Retail Wasteland follows the exploits of a group of cynical, disaffected, gifted and talented type High School Students who rouse themselves from their torpor to try and save the last non chain business on their town's strip. This establishment is a grungy, congenial coffee shop called Sip. To do this the group decides to take over the new chain coffee shop, Wackford's, that has come to put Sip out of business. As the narrator, Leon, puts it, "Taking over the Wackford's might not prove any real point. It might not save Sip. But at least I'd be doing something." Selzer's characters are dead on, and the target audience, though a limited one, will thoroughly enjoy this. Some side

plots, such as Dustin's, one of Leon's friends, quest to triumph over his nemesis, the school's gym teacher, Coach Hunter, by writing him morbid poems, are very entertaining. Leon's gang is an even mix of guys and gals, and there is relationship banter and light sexual innuendo aplenty. Adults trying to find a book to give a member of the target audience, tough eggs, will be thrilled by the reception accorded *Pirates of the Retail Wasteland*.

Reviewer: Kenny Brechner, DDG Booksellers

Rating: 7

The Postcard, by Tony Abbott

978-0316011723 \$15.99 Little, Brown, April 2008

Core audience: Ages 8-12

Notable aspects: Family issues, mystery/intrigue, literary style

Review: When Jason joins his Dad in his recently deceased grandmother's Florida home, he is in for a lot more than endless cartons to pack, realtors to see, and funeral arrangements to be made. The grandmother he had never known had quite a life in her past. With old black and white postcard illustrations at the start of each chapter to set the mood, there is an old serialized magazine detective story from the pulp fiction era whose chapters keep cropping up, and Grandma seems to have been part of the story! With the help of Florida neighbor, Dia, Jason hoofs it around St. Petersburg piecing together the parts of a life he never knew. I like that readers are introduced to the old time detective story in style of Mickey Spillane and that modern Jason is drawn into it. This is a new take on mystery genre for young readers. They'll enjoy it. There is also the secondary story about Jason's parents needing a break from each other and Jason's strained relationship with his Dad. This story doesn't need that alternate story line. Sadly, it seems almost an "obligatory" thing, to have those elements in stories today. This one would do just fine without it!

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop (Milford)

Rating: 8

Princess Ben, by Catherine Gilbert Murdock

978-0618959716 \$16.00 Houghton Mifflin, May 2008

Core audience: Girls 9-13

Notable aspects: Fractured fairy tale with strong female spin on the princess role

Review: Princess Benevolence is a slightly overweight, clumsy and outspoken princess who faces an unknown future when her royal parents are murdered. Locked in a tower much of the day by her ruthless aunt (who is eventually unveiled as clueless in child-rearing rather than wicked), she discovers a magic room and powers she didn't even know she possessed. As she develops them, she learns a great deal about herself, the responsibilities of leadership, and her place in the world. There are funny references to a wide array of traditional folk and fairy tales, and good character development. In typical style, Catherine Gilbert Murdock weaves a funny, relevant, and entertaining tale of a female heroine worth cheering. This doesn't have the depth of Murdock's YA novel Dairy Queen, which I adored, but it is still great fun and one that her fans, will enjoy.

Reviewer: Gretchen Baker-Smith, Baker Books

Rating: 7.5

The Red Necklace, by Sally Gardner

978-0803731004 \$16.99 Dial Books, May 2008

Core audience: Older middle and high school students who like historical fiction

Notable aspects: Combination of historical setting, adventure, magic and romance

Review: The subtitle of this book is "A Story of the French Revolution" and it contains the drama and violence that this implies. Yann Margoza is a magician's assistant with a gift for magic himself. When he and his friend and mentor Tetu the dwarf are called with the magician to perform at a party for the Marquis de Villeduval, Yann meets the Marquis' daughter Sido. They also encounter the evil Count Kalliovsky, whom they know too much about and whom they must flee to save their lives. The Marquis is forced to promise the Count that he can marry Sido. The rest of the story unfolds as the French Revolution is occurring and we see selfish and greedy nobles and hungry and violent mobs as Yann and Sido both try to escape the Count's plans for them. The author provides historical background in the back of the book, which will be useful in understanding the forces at work in this complex time. The story she tells is certainly engrossing, with characters we care about and lots of adventure, but the violence is very graphic at times.

Reviewer: Nancy Felton, Broadside Bookshop

Rating: 7

Rose By Any Other Name, by Maureen McCarthy

978-1596433724 \$16.95 Roaring Brook/Holtzbrinck, March 2008

Core audience: Girls, ages 14+

Notable aspects: Character, sensitivity to family and other issues

Review: Rose has planned a rambling road trip along the Australian coast for herself. She is nineteen and obviously trying to work out a very emotional problem. Surprise! Mom insists on going along so they can visit dying Gran before returning home. Ouch! Mom doesn't know that her ex and his new girlfriend will be there as well. That brings new emotional complications for them both. There are lots of stops at familiar surfing spots where Rose remembers other times. Little flashbacks occur throughout the trip. During the trip, they pick up a male hitchhiker who has his own family problems to work out. The three of them share some poignant moments about love, family, and letting go. While visiting Gran, Rose and her Dad and sisters manage to find a new understanding of each other. By the end we know why her relationship with best friend Zoe, who is in the hospital battling cancer, is estranged. Rose has had an affair with Zoe's Dad. (She was serious, he wasn't!) By the time Rose gets back home, she can see things with a new slant. There is new gusto for the writing of her newspaper column and possible renewal of a relationship with a nice guy Zoe had "stolen" from her in the past. It's a coming of age story with lots of angst. Rose found out who she really is and it was sort of fun going along for the ride.

Reviewer: Sue Carita The Toadstool Bookshop (Milford)

Rating: 7

Runemarks, by Joanne Harris

978-0375844447 \$18.99 Alfred A. Knopf / Random House, January 2008

Core audience: Boys and girls, ages 11-15

Notable aspects: Imagination, issues, humor, characters

Review: Young Maddie is treated with suspicion by the locals because of a "ruinmark" on her hand. It is 500 years after the End of the World and those in power are totalitarian, disapproving of everything that would remind people of the old way of life, the old stories. Imaginative thinking would result in a trial and then "cleansing". Maddie can use magic but it is intuitive. She has learned a few spells from One Eye, considered a crazy vagrant. One day he encourages her to go below Red Horse Hill to find an ancient relic somewhere in the multi-leveled worlds below. Thereby hangs a fast-paced adventure full of odd characters and imaginative settings. Norse mythology with a twist and wonderful details will sweep up readers looking for non-stop action told with lots of "meat", humor and ideas to think about.

This is a book to reread and savor even more the second time around. My expectations for a this, a first teen book by a favorite adult author of mine, were high. Harris did not disappoint.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop (Milford)

Rating: 9

[Additional review for *Runemarks*:](#)

Core audience: Teen fantasy readers; some adult spillover

Notable aspects: Excellent command of Norse mythology, strong characters, well written

Review: *Runemarks'* strength is such that it is even able to render the hype on the galley accurate, namely that *Runemarks* is "A Major Children's Book Debut By The Bestselling Author of *Chocolat*." Mythology has been a rich fantasy lode of late, of course, most notably in the Percy Jackson series by Rick Riordan. *Runemarks* is not at all *The Lightning Thief* with Norse Gods, however. Where Riordan sets his books very much in our world, using the Gods to jazz things up, Harris places *Runemarks* firmly inside the realm of Norse Mythology. Yet it is an extended realm because the world of *Runemarks* is post-Ragnarok, it begins where Norse Mythology traditionally ends.

Surt has had his way with the nine worlds, Thor and a few surviving Aesir are imprisoned in a black fortress beneath Hel, and Odin walks the world as a eyed sage seeking to a more favorable ending to the next world encompassing upheaval. The story's central character, Maddy, is marked for magical ability by a rune on her skin. She is imaginatively cast as the second coming of the Seeress, the oracular poet of the Elder Edda who is credited with pronouncing its vision of the end of the nine worlds, The Volupsa. Odin makes for a very compelling and authentic Gandolfesque sage, and Harris' command of the dramatic tone and resonance of the Volupsa gives the book a satisfying quality. *Runemarks* is not as fast-paced, lighthearted, nor as immediately accessible as the Percy Jackson books, but, as when Gandalf stared down Denethor, one senses that it has "the greater power."

Reviewer: Kenny Brechner, DDG Booksellers

Rating: 9

Additional review of Runemarks:

Core audience: Strong readers, ages 13 and up

Notable aspects: Language, characters, use of mythic themes

Review (from audio, 14 CD's): This long and involved tale has a Nordic Dungeons and Dragons feel to it: characters from various eras, worlds, and aspects contend in the ever-dynamic balance between Order and Chaos. Each must follow the rules of its prescribed nature, and old scores, former alliances, favors due play a big role in determining events. Mostly this happens in Underworld, entered through the eye of the Red Horse on Red Horse Hill. The unifying thread is Maddie, the everychild, who is, not surprisingly, the One with destined powers to influence the struggle in her own age. Though I grew bored with the endless back and forth, I never lost enjoyment of Harris's brilliant language and her sly sense of humor.

Reviewer: Carol Chittenden, Eight Cousins and BookStream

Rating: 7

Savvy, by Ingrid Law

978-0803733060 \$16.99 Dial Penguin, May 2008

Core audience: Ages 9-11

Notable aspects: unique, creative story

Review: When a Beaumont becomes thirteen, he/she gets a "savvy". One of Mibs' brothers can cause hurricanes while the other can produce electricity. These gifts have resulted in moving away from bodies of water and home-schooling! On her 13th birthday, Mibs' father is in a horrible accident. Mibs is convinced that her savvy will save her father's life and stows away on a bible-seller's bus along with several characters -- 2 of her brothers and the preacher's daughter and son. The book is full of fun escapes, twists and turns, but with a predictable good ending. She does help her father using her savvy -- a most unusual savvy. The underlying message to the reader is that we all have special gifts.

Reviewer: Janet Bibeau, Storybook Cove

Rating: 7

Additional review for Savvy:

Review: This fun story for grades 4-6 is enhanced by wonderful quirky words and very unusual situations. It's a pre-teen road trip unlike any other. It's also about learning that everyone has special talents, even though some are more outlandish than others (like being able to mind-read tattoos and cause electrical happenings and wind storms). Of prime importance is the idea that it isn't enough to have "savvy" but to be able to keep it under control. Fun to handsell now, this will be an easy sell in softcover, especially if the engaging cover remains the same. Readers will wonder what Law will come up with next.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop (Milford)

Rating: 7.5

Sebastian Darke: Prince of Fools, by Philip Caveney

978-0385734677 \$15.99 Random House, April 2008

Core audience: Ages 10+, both genders

Notable aspects: A fun, funny adventure. Characters are well developed. A classic swashbuckler with a seriously evil villain and a young hero who perseveres.

Plot: Sebastian Darke is a young man who has inherited his father's business; unfortunately, unlike his father, Sebastian is a decidedly unfunny jester. With his father's talking buffalo, Max, pulling the wagon, Sebastian is off to seek a position as court jester to King Septimus of Keladon. The travelers encounter and are befriended by Captain Cornelius Drummel, a tiny but mighty warrior who is also headed to Keladon.

When the trio come upon a carriage under attack, they join the battle and save Princess Kerin of Keladon from a band of brigands. They deliver the princess back to her kingdom. Her uncle, outwardly happy to see her safe and sound, is secretly annoyed that she was not killed... as he had arranged. Septimus is simply regent until his niece Princess Kerin, takes the throne when she turns eighteen. Septimus intends to see that never happens. The king sends Cornelius into an ambush in an unsuccessful attempt to get rid of him. Sebastian is drugged and thrown into the dungeon. But Max is in the royal stables, where he can observe the intrigues of the castle. When Kerin is kidnapped, fortunately Max has heard details of the plot. Sebastian, Cornelius and Max follow the kidnappers and rescue the princess again. They return to Keladon where Kerin rallies her subjects and overthrows her uncle.

Though smitten with the princess, Sebastian doesn't get the girl; so he, Cornelius, and Max set off to find the lost treasure of the legendary pirate king, Captain Callinestra. Book two in the series will be *Sebastian Darke: Prince of Pirates*. It should be fun.

Ellen Richmond, Children's Book Cellar

Rating: 7

Secrets of the Cirque Medrano, by Elaine Scott

978-1570917127 \$15.95 Charlesbridge, February 2008

Core audience 11-14, girls most likely

Notable for historical ambiance, character

Picasso's masterpiece painting, "Family of Saltimbanques" is the basis for this story about Paris in early 1900's. Fourteen-year-old Brigitte works in her aunt's cafe in Montmartre during the bohemian era of Picasso, traveling circuses, and the Spanish Revolution. Through her eyes and ears readers become involved in the starving-artist ambiance of the day and a bit of international intrigue as well, involving a plot to overthrow the Russian Tsar. More about this is shown in the author's afterwords than in the actual story. Fans of historical fiction will enjoy this. Readers who enjoy learning about artists and their paintings may find this an eye-opener.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop (Milford)

Rating: 7

The Seer of Shadow, by Avi

978-0060000158 \$16.99 HarperCollins, March 2008

Core audience: Ages 8-12; boys and girls; anyone who likes a shivery tale

Notable aspects: A well-written ghost story that delivers shivers without being violent or gory. Atmospheric, historical setting. Interesting background information about the history of photography.

Review: In 1872, Horace Carpentine is an apprentice in New York City. His father has placed him with a photographer, believing that the fledgling craft will suit Horace's scientific bent. Approached by wealthy Mrs. Von Macht to take her portrait, the struggling photographer Enoch Middleditch accepts the commission eagerly. Mrs. Von Macht wants a photograph to decorate her daughter's tomb so the "beloved child" need never feel lonely in her grave. Middleditch sees a golden opportunity. He decides to con the woman by creating a "spirit photograph" of the daughter, Eleanora. He's certain other wealthy clients will flock to him for photographs of their dear departed. Horace is appalled by the scheme, but he must do what his master orders. His role will be to use a hidden camera to take pictures of portraits of Eleanora in the Von Macht mansion. In the darkroom, Middleditch will insert a "ghostly" image of her daughter into Mrs. Von Macht's portrait. His fame and fortune will be guaranteed.

Middleditch, however, is not the only person who is a fraud. When Horace befriends Pegg, the Von Macht's African-American servant, he learns the truth about Eleanora and her death. He also realizes, to his horror, that the Eleanora in his photographs is not the Eleanora in the portraits he photographed. He has truly photographed a spirit, an angry ghost intent on revenge. Middleditch flees the city, accused by Mr Von Macht of a fire he did not start. Horace and Pegg know the truth of the fire and try to avert further disaster as the book races to an exciting climax. Eleanora's spirit is finally freed.

In a final chapter, Horace takes Pegg to his parents. As abolitionists, they welcome her. Several years pass, Pegg and Horace marry, move to Vermont, and have a child they name Eleanora. He has become a photographer, but resists taking portraits for fear of what they may reveal.

Reviewer: Ellen Richmond, Children's Book Cellar

Rating: 8

The Sherlock Files #1: The 100-Year-Old Secret, by Tracy Barrett

978-0805083408 \$15.95 Holt, May 2008

Core audience: Ages 8-12, both genders

Notable aspects: A fun mystery for middle grade readers in which the legend of Sherlock Holmes is given a modern twist. Logic and observation skills are encouraged.

Review: American brother and sister, Xena and Xander Holmes, have recently moved to London with their parents. As they explore their new home, they discover that Sherlock Holmes was their great-great-great-grandfather. Inducted into the Society for the Preservation of Famous Detectives, the kids are given an old casebook from their ancestor, *SH Cases: Unresolved*. Intrigued by the prospect of being able to unravel a mystery that their ancestor did not or could not solve, Xena and Xander turn to the book and read about a painting, *Girl in a Purple Hat*, which had mysteriously disappeared nearly 100 years ago. Then, a newspaper article about the artist Nigel Batheson and an upcoming exhibit of his paintings (sadly not containing his lost masterpiece *Girl in a Purple Hat*) piques their interest. Can they solve the case before the exhibit opens in a week? A photographic memory, the logic and deductive skills inherited from their ancestor, Sherlock, plus some contemporary high-tech gadgets (conveniently being product-tested by their mom!) help the kids get to the bottom of the mystery.

Reviewer: Ellen Richmond, Children's Book Cellar

Rating: 8

Simon Bloom, *The Gravity Keeper*, by Michael Reisman

978-0525479222 \$16.99 Dutton, February 2008

Core audience: 4th to 8th graders, good readers who do well in school and take some heat for it.

Notable aspects: Effective blend of science and fantasy

Review: Those who feel that science fiction and fantasy are separate genres which shouldn't be shelved together will regret their non-conformity when confronted with the task of shelving *Simon Bloom, The Gravity Keeper*. *The Gravity Keeper* is, after all, a science fantasy, and a good one at that. The basic concept is that the various physical sciences are subject to powerful books, Teacher's Editions of their respective subjects. These books are essentially alive, and in turn choose a keeper to safeguard and exercise their laws and powers. Each keeper has his or her own separate conclave within a larger group known as the Knowledge Union. People who don't know about the books are "outsiders." The union is secret, and union members pose as teachers and members of academia to keep outsiders safe and on the straight and narrow. This structure is highly derivative, outsiders being essentially muggles. Union members meet in places outsiders can't penetrate, and so forth. On the other hand the use and function of power in the book is interesting, accessible and makes for particularly engaging action sequences.

The story follows Simon Bloom, a sixth grader, and two of his friends. When the keeper of The Teacher's Edition of Physics, Ralfagon Wintroflin, is hospitalized by two people intent on stealing the book, the book chooses young Simon as its new keeper. The idea of objects of power choosing a keeper is as old as, well, Excalibur, even if it resonates more currently with wands choosing their witch or wizard, but it works very eloquently here, as the book communicates directly with Simon. Simon is able to manipulate physical laws himself, and to designate one of the book's laws to the control of each of his two friends. Thus Owen and Alysha become masters of velocity and capacitance respectively. The concept is built around Plato's parable of the cave, the use and manipulation of ideal forms in the shadow realm, similar to the mastery of dragon speech in *Earth Sea*, or the mechanics of the Kabbalah. Reisman really makes the application of

scientific principles a satisfying dynamic in the book. The three kids are more or less stock characters, but they are likable stock characters, and make a good set of friends. The villains are conflicted, and have a legitimate beef. As for Ralfagon Wintroflin, he will, unfortunately, make those who wondered whether Dumbledore had truly died take reincarnation theories with a new seriousness. On the balance though I think kids will really like *Simon Bloom, The Gravity Keeper*. If *The Gravity Keeper* were a wand we should say that the wood was plain, but that it had an unusual core which gave it a genuine freshness and vitality in Reisman's hands.

Reviewer: Kenny Brechner, DDG Booksellers

Rating: 7+

Sir Lancelot the Great (Knights' Tales I), by Gerald Morris, illus by Aaron Renier 978-0618777143 \$15.00 Houghton Mifflin, May 2008

Core audience: boys ages 5-10

Notable aspects: humor, adventures, open typeface, introduction of classic Arthurian trope

Review: Morris has recast the characters of Arthurian lore as 10-year-old souls in 21-year-old bodies: ultimate courage, physical strength and coordination, but more interest in shiny armor than in beguiling damsels. This allows for maximum adventure and humor, with minimal social or political consequences. Lancelot defends the weak, but also likes his afternoon snooze, and his celebrity status is a darned nuisance. Thus Morris introduces a string of eight Arthurian episodes (but not the ones kids are most likely to know already), in which Lancelot triumphs as much by wit and character as by force of arms. This would make a first-rate read-aloud for ages 5-8, or a short, fairly easy self-read for 8 to 10-year-olds.

Reviewer: Carol B. Chittenden, Eight Cousins and BookStream

Rating: 8.5

Stink and the Great Guinea Pig Express, by Megan McDonald
978-0763628352 \$12.99 Candlewick Press March 2008

Core audience: Ages 5-8

Notable aspects: Boy-centric, humor and word play, sibling relationships, animals.

Review: I love Stink and this latest adventure makes me love him even more. Stink and his friends are working on a school project, a cereal box version of the Great Wall of China, when they find three escaped guinea pigs. Mrs. Birdwistle from Fur & Fangs pet shop has agreed to find good homes for 101 guinea pigs, rescued from a lab. The kids decide to help out and the adventure begins. Megan McDonald includes lots of facts about guinea pigs and big sister Judy makes an appearance in this utterly appealing addition to the Stink Saga.

Reviewer: Lorna Ruby, Wellesley Booksmith

Rating: 10

Six Innings: A Game in the Life, by James Preller

978-0312367633 \$16.95 Feiwei and Friends (MPS), March 2008

Core audience: Baseball fans aged 9-14, Matt Christopher readers who are ready for the next level.

Notable aspects: Way better writing than is usually seen in a "sports" book.

Plot: Earl Grubb's Pool Supplies plays Northeast Gas & Electric in the Little League Championship game, while Sam, who has cancer and is in a wheelchair, has to call the play-by-play instead of participating in the game (Library of Congress summary)(I'm hopeless with plot).

Review: This is very much a baseball book. There are box scores, lineups, even lineup changes! Each chapter is a half inning. You have to know or care about baseball, preferably both, to really enjoy this book. However, it is also much more than a baseball book. You come to know the players; their hopes, fears, dreams, struggles, relationships. Sometimes the writing is almost painfully beautiful. There is honesty - 2 of the three boys who play the whole game for one team are coaches' kids. "That's the way it is in Little League, everybody knows it." There is humor. Sam and Mike become friends in first grade "right after Aaron Foley threw up during a math lesson. Spectacularly. Gloriously. Voluminously." There is strategy. There is suspense. There is fun. And the good guys win - thank heavens.

Reviewer: Rondi Brower, Blackwood & Brouwer Booksellers

Rating: 8.5

Suddenly Supernatural, by Elizabeth Cody Kimmel

978-0316066839 \$15.99 Little, Brown, June 2008

Core audience: Ages 9-12

Notable aspects: Fun story; happy family with functional, loving mom (imagine!)

Review: "The undead are ruining my life. I blame my mother." Thus begins *Suddenly Supernatural*, a school story/mystery featuring Kat, a middle-schooler whose mother is a medium ("and not the kind that fits in between small and large"). Not only is Kat's mother's profession beginning to bring unwelcome attention at school, but Kat discovers that she has inherited her mother's gift. The old man in old-fashioned clothes twinkling merrily at her in her friend's living room is, in fact, a ghost. The girl in the library, the haunted one with the bags under her eyes and a flute in her hand, is a spirit -- one who needs Kat's help. Fortunately, a new friend and an understanding mom are on hand as Kat unravels a decades-old school mystery and begins to navigate her own powers, which may have a dark side.

What fun it is to read a story like this: a genial, companionable book with a touch of the supernatural. Younger-middle-grade friendship issues are dealt with nicely, the mom-as-medium story is handled with humor and lightness, and there's just enough spookiness to add suspense and open the door to the next volume in this new series. (Oh, and there's a newly adopted lovable dog -- always a plus.) Though I haven't yet read the popular Gilda Joyce books (shame, shame!), I suspect *Suddenly Supernatural* will appeal to the same crowd. Eva Ibbotson fans should also enjoy this one.

Reviewer: Elizabeth Bluemle, The Flying Pig Bookstore

Rating: 7.75

Suite Scarlett, by Maureen Johnson

978-0439899277 \$16.99 Scholastic Point, May 2008

Core audience: Teen girls (and advanced younger readers)

Notable aspects: Realistic sibling interaction, family-run hotel setting

Plot: Scarlett Martin's family owns the Hopewell, an Art Deco hotel that has seen better days. On her 15th birthday, conveniently the first day in the novel, Scarlett's parents have had to let go the only non-family employee left. Now it's up to Scarlett and her three siblings (Spencer, 19, actor; Lola, 17, beautiful; Marlene, 11, spoiled survivor of childhood disease) to help maintain the hotel and, just possibly, turn the family's luck around. Into the hotel moves Mrs. Amberson a wealthy former actress with connections and money who just may be the ticket to better times. At the very least, she's the ticket to a summer of adventure.

Review: Maureen Johnson's books are perfect for teen girls or for those intrepid readers who want more advanced material but whose parents may worry about too much sex or violence or what-have-you (see also Shannon Hale). It's not that she doesn't tackle difficult or real topics (divorce, death in the family, questioning of sexuality), it's that she does it without having to exploit the situation to provide the action in her novels. Sadly, Maureen Johnson is probably never going to get a big literary award for her efforts (Because who recognizes well written books that are grounded in reality that show good things happening to decent characters, after all?) but I'll keep reading and hand-selling her books as long as she keeps writing them. I found myself giggling out loud at the end of *Suite Scarlett* at Spencer's antics and realized I had a crush on a 19-year-old fictional character. That should say something about her work. (Maybe it just says I'm a weirdo. Also a definite possibility.) This may be a harder sell in HC, but in PB should be an easy sell.

Reviewer: Kari Patch, Harvard Book Store

Rating: 8

Additional rating of Suite Scarlett:

May I add my score to Kari's review of *Suite Scarlett*? I agree with everything she said, but I would give the book a 7 1/2. It was a fun read!

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop (Milford)

Rating: 7.5

Additional comment about Suite Scarlett:

I didn't finish reading the book because I was thoroughly dismayed to find so many errors in the galley, but I assumed they were oversights that would be fixed. Now I find those were NOT corrected in the final version. Though I'll always chuckle at the idea of someone lighting a room with "scones" – or trying to butter and nibble a sponce (one of three such problems in the first 5 pages), I don't think I want to subject *Eight Cousins* customers to such shoddy work.

Carol Chittenden, Eight Cousins and BookStream

Sunrise over Fallujah, by Walter Dean Myers

978-0439916240 \$17.99 Scholastic, May 2008

Core audience: Ages 13 and up, more boys than girls

Notable aspects: Iraq war setting, characters, suspense, moral conflict, humor, pathos, strong ending

Review: *Fallen Angels*, published 20 years ago, is the story of Richard Perry, a Harlem teenager serving in Vietnam, meeting the horror and exhilaration of war face to face. In *Sunrise over Fallujah*, his nephew Robin, unclear about long term goals, has enlisted and arrives in Kuwait just before the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The setting allows Myers to work almost like a composer: distinct characters, each with distinctive voices, come forth, blend, chorus, solo, and reprise. There's Marla Kennedy, a tough woman who prefers to stand in the Humvee's hatch handling the gun; Jonesy, who drives and wants to open a blues club; Victor Rios, who's humiliated by the gift of a stuffed monkey, Captain Miller, the medic who swears a blue streak when she's not mothering; Captain Coles, who worries about his troops, but stays cool under fire; uptight Corporal Pendleton, father of two and the first – but not the last -- to die; and Harris, an angry racist as vulnerable as the next breathing body when the shooting starts. And there are the Iraqis, few with names but many with human faces, some with deadly intentions, and all with enormous difficulties. This requires no plot beyond Robin's survival, and he has plenty of close calls, in each of which he learns things he doesn't want to know, and grows into a man who appreciates life and values friends, dead and alive. It's hard to imagine a reader who would read 10 pages and then stop before page 282. Definitely one of the best of the year.

Reviewer: Carol Chittenden, BookStream and Eight Cousins

Rating: 9

Additional review of Sunrise over Fallujah:

Review: Carol, you beat me to it! I just finished *Sunrise over Fallujah* and thought it was not only one of the best books of the year, but one that should be required reading for any middle or high school student even remotely thinking of enlisting. It gives a real, nitty-gritty sense of what it's like to be a soldier in a war, without romanticizing, demonizing or glorifying the soldiers or the Iraqis. I agree with your rating of 9.

Reviewer: Nancy Felton, Broadside Bookshop

Rating: 9

Additional review of Sunrise over Fallujah:

Review: I echo everyone's 9. I just think EVERYONE should read this book - so we have the first idea what we've been asking of our young (and not so young) men and women. We've sent one Marine brigade back to Iraq 5 times (unlike the Army's single tours of 15 months, Marines are often 6 months in, 6 months out) and some of those guys are all of 23. I'd rather see it called a "companion" than a sequel, though. Certainly it's richer if you know Richard Perry of *Fallen Angels*, but I don't think necessary. Along with everything else, Myers has captured the Army of each period - a fascinating comparison.

Reviewer: Rondi Brower, Blackwood & Brower

Rating: 9

Additional review of Sunrise over Fallujah:

Review: I felt the same about the FALLUJAH book, even handed my gally to a social studies dept head to get it put on summer reading lists. I would give it an 8, keeping in mind the audience it is intended for.

Reviewer: Mimi at Baker Books

Rating: 8

Additional rating of Sunrise over Fallujah:

A great follow-up to *Fallen Angels*.

Reviewer: Heather Doss, Bookazine

Rating: 9

Swan Kingdom, by Zoe Marriott

9780763634810 \$16.99 Candlewick, March 2008

Core audience: Teen girls

Notable aspects: Language, plot, character

Review: Echoing Anderson's Wild Swan story, this is truly a fairy tale for teens! In the fairy-tale Kingdom, Alexandra feels she is inadequate compared to the athletic and intellectual prowess of her brothers. She doesn't realize the worth of the magical healing gifts she possesses until she is forced to make her own rules and act intuitively to save her kingdom from her evil stepmother. There is a story within the story, an arduous journey, near-poisoning, transformations from human to swan, disguises, a handsome and kind stranger, and enough evil to keep anyone reading from cover to cover. Lots of beautifully written visual imagery and romance will have teen readers wanting more from this debut author.

Review: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop (Milford)

Rating: 7.5

Take Me There, by Susane Colson

978-0670063338 \$17.99 Viking Penguin, May 2008

Core audience: Ages 14 & up; Teens who want to read about NYC glamour, and find *Gossip Girl* a bit hardcore

Notable aspects: Strong character voice, spot on dialogue

Review: Told from the point of view of three teens during one week of their lives, Colson's latest is a fun, if sometimes frustrating, look at a group of friends attending the Eames Academy in New York City. The week is divided into two parts and each half of the week is narrated 3 separate times by Rhiannon, James and Nicole. They are just finishing up their junior year, studying for the Regents exams and getting ready for The Last Blast—a dance being held instead of prom.

Rhiannon has just broken up with her boyfriend, Steve. He's now dating Gloria, Rhiannon's arch nemesis. James is happy Rhiannon has left Steve, but they're just friends, right? Or does James want more? Nicole is trying her best to be supportive of Rhiannon, but past memories keep coming back to haunt her. These three stories intersect with each of the narrators telling the same about the same situations from their point of view. Which is where it all gets confusing. You think the storyline is moving ahead, but actually you're revisiting the same situation, different perspective. The voices, however, ring true and the language is spot on. Which again made it a little difficult to read, but a teen would probably think they'd finally found something totally authentic.

The sex, drugs and abuse are all there, but are only a part of the big picture. The characters are the definitely telling this story, the issues aren't dictating the lines. A pleasant change from some other YA novels, and will most likely do well in paperback.

Reviewed by: Beth Reynolds, The Norwich Bookstore

Rating: 6.5

Three Little Words, by Ashley Rhodes-Courter

9781416948063 \$17.99 Atheneum, Simon & Schuster, January 2008

Core audience: Girls 13-17, especially those with an appetite for Dave Pelzer's books

Notable aspects: Sympathetic memoir; child abuse. Includes photographs

Review: For those who feast upon the carrion of child abuse, this is a compelling memoir. Rhodes-Courter was the child of a 17-year-old. The mother bonded lovingly with Ashley and a second child, Luke, before the mother wandered off into drugs and the criminal justice system. At age four, Ashley and Luke were shunted into their first of fourteen foster homes, always carrying the bright flame of hope to be reunited with their mother. Ashley was bright and perceptive. In 1998, at age thirteen, she was adopted by an affluent family that adored her. Her memories of those nine years, mostly awful and some truly horrific, but always hopeful, are buttressed by thorough research. The result is a book that reads like a 300-page Ann Landers column: utterly compelling, if not the pinnacle of literary achievement. In something of a fairy tale ending, Rhodes-Courter became a party to a lawsuit against the Florida foster care system. She also won wide recognition for speaking to groups of child advocates, legislators, foster parents, educators, and others. While the book doesn't have the literary qualities of *The Glass Castle*, it does have real informational and emotional value.

Reviewer: Carol Chittenden, Eight Cousins and BookStream

Rating: 8

Additional rating for *Three Little Words*:

Heartbreaking & uplifting at the same time.

Rating: Heather Doss, Bookazine

Rating: 8

Trouble, by Gary Schmidt

978-0618927661 \$16.00 Clarion, April 2008

Core audience: teens

Notable for issues: bigotry, family dynamics, social class issues, bullying, and for sensitivity to teen feelings, language

Review: When Henry's idolized older brother is hit by a truck while out running, the stage is set for a deluge of events that will forever change the people of his town, Blytheburg, where rich and successful people send their kids to the local prep school, and neighboring Merton, now a struggling old mill town where many Cambodians have settled to live blue collar lives and observe old family customs. Henry's ancestors had built their house on the North shore of Massachusetts, to be away from Trouble, and now Henry's family can't seem to get away from it. It was in the heart of his idolized older brother, whose bullying and mean-spiritedness hadn't really been noticed by his loving family. It followed his sister with secrets of her own. It followed Chay Chouan whose whole life had been nothing but Trouble and more to come. Trouble follows the two boys as they unwittingly end up together on a trip to Mt. Katahdin for a climb that will eventually bring healing. Thankfully (because it would be too "pat") there is no easy happy ending, although we find intimations that there is hope for all. With poignancy, humor and language rich with imagery, Schmidt weaves a masterful and ironic tale of two young teens' struggles to find pride in themselves and a family that learns that Trouble can't be avoided but can be overcome. It is also a beautifully told tale of one Black Dog with two masters equally loved, of fathers who need to be more than they are, of honor deserved (and not) , and ultimately, of grace.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop (Milford)

Rating: 10

The Trouble Begins at 8: A Life of Mark Twain in the Wild, Wild West, by Sid Fleischman 978-0061344329 \$18.99 Greenwillow, July 2008

Core audience: Ages 9-12; Boys or girls, but especially boys!

Notable aspects: Biography, gold rush, wild west. If children think writers live boring lives, this will change their minds!

Review: One of my great big joys in reading this book is that it's really interesting - and fun - to read a tribute of one writer by another. Sid Fleischman truly admires Mark Twain. You "feel the love" as Fleischman describes Twain's adventurous soul, his incredible sense of humor and his amazing ability to tell a story.

The writing is conversational and many of the stories use Twain's own words. It's a tone Fleischman adopts himself throughout the book and sometimes it's hard to tell who's doing the writing. For the most part, this works well. About Twain's early education, for example, Fleischman writes, "Sam regarded it as akin to child abuse that his father, elected justice of the peace, scraped up the funds to send him to the log schoolhouse at the edge of town, there to be tamed. He was four and a half years old, troublesome, busy, and with an imagination in constant flight. His war with formal education began."

Fleischman recounts Twain's experiences on the Mississippi, of course, and also his travels west by stagecoach, his unsuccessful search for gold, the clever way he got himself out of fighting a duel, and his trip to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii). Twain just jumps from one adventure to another, and throughout much of his life he soaked up knowledge (signing up to learn 3 languages at once), read voraciously and wrote.

The book ends with a time line of Twain's life, a list of references from Twain's works for the various quotes, and Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." Most interesting, the last chapter of the book talks about the problem of writing the biography of a man who "once confessed that he remembered things whether they happened or not." Fleischman reviews some of the stories in the book and allows that some may or may not have happened quite as Twain told them, including the duel.

This will make a good book to suggest to students who have to read a biography for school and it should keep even the more reluctant readers engrossed, though at 195 pp. it did seem a little long. Illustrated with photos and illustrations from Twain's books.

Reviewer: Vicky Uminowicz, Titcomb's Bookshop

Rating: 8

The Trouble with Rules, by Leslie Bulion

978-1561454402 \$14.95 PeachTree, April 2008

Core audience: ages 7-11

Review: Nadie and her next door neighbor/best friend Nick are in fourth grade now and there is an unwritten rule that girls and boys are not allowed to be friends. Boys and girls sit at different tables in the lunch room and they certainly don't walk to school together. There are repercussions for that sort of behavior (bullying type). That's why Nadie and Nick walk together most of the way to school and then split up the last couple blocks and then pretend not to be friends during school. But then a new student, Summer, joins their class and she doesn't care about those kinds of rules. She does things like sitting at the boys' table and getting in a contest to out-gross the grossest boy in the class. At first Nadie blames Summer when her friendship with Nick goes sour and seems on the verge of ending. But as she gets to know Summer better, she begins to admire her self-confidence. Soon, the entire class (boys AND girls) are working together on a project to create a bike/skate maze in an empty cul-de-sac at the end of Nadie's and Nick's street, which becomes the topic of the class newsletter.

Karlene Rearick, The Alphabet Garden, Cheshire, CT

Rating: 7

The Truth About My Bat Mitzvah, by Nora Raleigh Baskin

978-1-4169-3558-4 / \$15.99

Simon & Schuster

March 2008

Core audience: Girls only 9-12 (book is purple and jacket is pink and purple!). Children of mixed Jewish/Christian marriages will identify most with Caroline's situation.

Notable aspects: Fast, easy read (144 pages); explores usual pre-teen issues of friendship and social identity, with the added issue of religious and family identity.

Review: Caroline is 12. Her mother is Jewish, her father is Christian, holidays from each are celebrated in the home, but in a secular, American way (i.e. Christmas is the biggie and no one goes to church or synagogue). Her best friend Rachel has been spending the past year getting ready for her bat mitzvah, and Caroline has helped with the party planning. Caroline's maternal grandmother has just died - the funeral is chapter one. In chapter two her grandfather gives her a Star of David necklace that had been her grandmothers. In chapter three she discovers that a rift in her grandparents family was caused by her grandmother being thought "too Jewish" by her prospective inlaws. The rest of the book is the next three months. Caroline grieves for her Nana - there is a beautiful, poignant flashback to a shopping trip Caroline and Nana took in NYC. She contemplates asking to have a bat mitzvah - will it be disloyal to her father? She navigates middle school, including the popular girl who is at least insensitive and possibly anti-Semitic (although that's too strong a word) and the boy she might like. All the issues are addressed lightly, but without trivializing them. There is a glossary at the end for the Hebrew and Yiddish used in the text. I suspect the readers will primarily be Jewish or mixed or have Jewish friends and relatives. The intermarriage rate among Reform Jews has been over 50% for some time now, so this is a larger group than one might think. I just don't know if it has a general audience. Still, with so many books about the Holocaust, it's nice to have something with a happy ending for the kids shelf at the synagogue library.

Rondi Brower, Blackwood & Brouwer Booksellers

Rating: 7

Tunnels, by Roderick Gordon and Brian Williams

978-0439871778 \$17.99 Scholastic / The Chicken House, January 2008

Core audience: Young Adult fantasy readers, will pull in general readers as well.

Notable aspects: Strongly imagined convincing world with compelling characters.

Review: As long as you are willing to think of Britain as a hat in order to give a tired metaphor another moment in the sun, then we may say that Scholastic has managed to pull another rabbit out of the hat with *Tunnels*. Scholastic has done a particularly good job culling foreign talent for the American market; witness Cornelia Funke and J.K. Rowling. *Tunnels* will continue that trend. The central idea of the *Tunnels* is that roughly one hundred years ago an underground city was founded beneath London. The Eternal City was orchestrated by a shadowy group called The Styx. The Styx form a master class below ground, and used their influence on an influential surface dweller, or Topsoiler as they are called, in order to bring about their underground realm. At the time of the story, present day London, The Styx control a kind of apocalyptic religion, and some menacing scientific gadgets, to keep control underground. The Eternal City was abandoned due to plague, and its inhabitants now live in The Colony, on a slightly higher level. Below the Eternal City lies the Deeps, a dangerous unexplored realm to which The Styx banish their enemies. Adult readers of YA fantasy are required to forgive eponymous names for some reason, and so it is with Will Burrows, the fourteen year old protagonist of *tunnels*. Will, though a Topsoiler, shares with his father a passion for digging and urban archeology. When his father disappears below ground Will, and his

friend Chester follow. It turns out that Will was actually born in the Colony, from which his mother escaped, the only successful escapee on record, and that his Topsoiler family is not his real family. To top things off his sister Rebbecca turns out to be a Styx, planted in the family to keep tabs on him. For a co-written book *Tunnels* is fairly seamless. Filled with satisfying characters, convincing action, genuine surprises, and a well controlled exposition, *Tunnels* is both credible and compelling. The Styx, for example, though evil, are complex and ordered in their actions. There is in fact a lot of grey area in both the underworld and the surface world, which really makes Will's individuality stand out. The bottom line is that *Tunnels* offers a convincing, accessible world which many readers will find habitable indeed.

Kenny Brechner, DDG Booksellers

Rating: 9

Additional review of Tunnels:

Fourteen-year-old Will and his father share a love of archaeological digs. They tunnel under modern-day London and stumble upon an abandoned Tunnel. They are sure that they have discovered something BIG! Readers will find this an intriguing, mysterious, fresh, and compelling story that keeps them turning the pages.

JP Schittina, The Flying Pig Bookstore

Rating: 8

Uncle Pirate, by Douglas Rees, illus. by Tony Auth

978-1416947622 \$15.99 Margaret McElderry/Simon & Schuster, June 2008

Core audience: boys ages 5-10

Notable aspects: Humor, school satire, clean fun

Review: This little book (100 p.) accomplishes exactly what it sets out to do, no more and no less. Wilson's a fourth grade loser, and his parents are in straitened circumstances, so things are going from bad to worse when Mom's long-lost black sheep brother Bob shows up, bringing his pet penguin with him. But wait! The penguin talks, Bob (Desperate Evil Wicked Bob) is a pirate, and Bob is game for even the dangers of the Very Elementary School. In a few short weeks he sorts out Wilson's social status, his wimpy teacher, the felonious principal, and even wins the hand of the redoubtable school secretary. Along the way he serves up great lashings of pirate speech and monikers, condiments ("Just a dollop of Old Capstan") and honor ("signing articles"). The slow, bullying girl is enlisted to teach the penguin to read, and before you can say "landlubber", Desperate Evil Wicked Bob has a full time job and the entire school is "shipshape and Bristol fashion." Especially endearing is the absence of malice.

Carol B. Chittenden, Eight Cousins and BookStream

Rating: 8.5

The Underneath, by Kathi Appelt

978-1416950585 \$16.99 Simon & Schuster, May 2008

Core audience: 6-12 year olds

Notable aspects: An exceptional read aloud

Kathi Appelt took such loving care crafting *The Underneath* that one feels rather a pang knocking out a hurried review. Still, as young readers will discover in the book's pages, life is rather full of this sort of irony. *The Underneath* is set deep in a primeval Texas bayou, and follows a group of very strong, well drawn protagonists. There is a calico cat and her two kittens, who befriend and are befriended by a hound who is chained in front of a dangerous bayou dweller's tilted house. His name is Gar Man. There are also some magical creatures who are central to the story, a Lamia, Grandmother moccasin, trapped in a jar for a thousand years, and the alligator king, a one hundred foot long gator. The characters in the book are all interwoven, so that their stories form a sort of narrative ecosystem. The magic in the book involves the power of profound emotion, longing, love, hatred, regret, which have a spell-like quality in the story, and influence other powers in the bayou, the ancient Trees for example, to intercede on or against their behalf.

Appelt uses a lyrical style strengthened by direct repetition to provide an immediacy for young readers or listeners. The danger, the story, is real, and they too should take heed. Speaking of Gar Face, we are told that "over this past quarter century, the years have softened the Old Pine. Not so Gar face. Do not cross his angry path. Do not." The narrative perspective moves from character to character, and often accentuates the interrelated nature of their emotions, their longing, regret, and hunger, by shifting to a different character to close out the brief chapters. The magical creatures are blends of animal and human, Lamias, half snake half human, Hawk man, and so forth. Furthermore, unlike the purely evil, but fun, Lamias one finds in macabre fiction, such as in Clark Ashton Smith's peerless *The End of the Story*, these creatures can change form only once, and are capable of actually mingling, rather than simply preying, on human society. In the end I suspect that **The Underneath** will make a superb read aloud. It's scary and intense, but filled with characters and concepts deeply appealing for children too young to read the story, but who would adore sharing the experience with an adult.

Kenny Brechner, DDG Booksellers

Rating: 9

[Additional review of *The Underneath*:](#)

Having just finished reading *The Underneath* ten minutes ago, and presently still blowing my nose, I just have to add my two cents to the recent *Underneath* reviews. I agree with the other reviewers that the packaging appeals to younger readers and looks really appealing. The story is definitely geared to cause nightmares in anyone under the age of 12 not truly hardened by today's media offerings. I still cringe to think of wonderful old Ranger being hit across the face with a board by his EVIL MASTER and being led to water's edge to feed to a tough old crocodile! The scene where he has the kitten and his mom in a burlap bag being thrown into the water for crocodile bait stays with me as well. I am seething to think of all our young readers who are happily engaged with family kitties and puppies who sleep on the beds with them! There are too many truly mean-hearted and nasty images of animal abuse for younger children. That said, I wish the book had been targeted for an older audience.

The writing is pretty wonderful. It has that aura of old southern swamp storytelling reminiscent of Crocker's *Swamp Rat*, which I loved handselling. There the predators somehow fit in with the natural order of things. The aspects of nature all being related was similar to that of *The Underneath*. Appelt's affinity for trees, birds, etc is wonderful

and is a major part of the charm of her book. I wonder that all those great writers mentioned at the back of the book giving her such good guidance had no opportunity to steer her to an older readership. I'd say this would be a suspenseful and very absorbing read for 12+. I sincerely doubt that younger readers would even think of identifying with the old snake's anger at losing her mate to another.

I can't give it a score for the 8-12 set. If this was for older readers, I'd score it high for language, suspense, and ideas about the natural world. Thanks for letting me vent.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop (Milford)

Rating: Unrated

Additional review of [The Underneath](#):

I'm with you, Kenny, on this one. Though probably one of the saddest & darkest middle grade novels I've ever read, the lyrical nature of the words just begs for it to be read (& preferably aloud). I'm waiting for a feedback review from a 5th grader now.

Reviewer: Heather Doss, Bookazine

Rating: 8.5

Waiting for Normal, by Leslie Connor

978-006089089 \$15.99 HarperCollins February 2008

Core audience: Girls 10-14

Notable aspects: Characters and their development, realistic depiction of living with a parent with psych/personality disorder, plot.

Review: This is yet another book about a child with a really hard life. Addie lives in a trailer under the highway overpass with her messed-up mom who has either a bipolar disorder, ADD, or some combination thereof. Addie tries her hardest to make things appear to be normal, but the situation spins more and more out of control until a fire renders her homeless and blows the whistle on her neglect. The thing that makes this book so memorable and so compelling is Addie. She is spunky, honest, sincere, and full of hope despite her bleak home life. She makes friends with the people who own and run the local grocery store across the street, and they, too, are wonderful characters. In the end, they help Addie to accept help from outside adults and agencies and head towards a better life.

Addie reminded me deeply of children and teens I've worked with over the years who have that same miraculous, survival gene, and I just loved her. Young teens, especially those who have been in the foster system, homeless shelters, or have family members with mental illnesses will strongly relate to her situation. This book is hope-filled without being syrupy.

My only concern about this book is that it's marketed for 8-12 year olds, and I don't know many 8 year olds who could -- or would want to -- handle living through the reading of this book. Addie's mom's mental health (and use of alcohol) is so sad, and then, too, there is the death of one of the grocery store friends near the end that is also heartbreaking. I think this book should be in YA rather than in Children's. I do think it is going to sell by word of mouth quite well when it comes out in paper.

Reviewer: Gretchen Baker-Smith, Baker Books

Rating: 7.5

Additional review of Waiting for Normal:

Review: Sometimes you read a review and you have to go back and check the title because you're pretty sure the reviewer must have read a different book. Well, this is the backwards of that. I think Gretchen not only read the same book, I think she read my copy!

Just two additional thoughts. For reasons not clear to me, YA novels like the football penalty "piling on." The person with the ball has already been tackled and more people jump on the pile anyway. That's how I felt about the death at the end.

The cover. The whole point about this trailer is that it's in the middle of Schenectady - what exactly is all that empty blue sky?

Reviewer: Rondi Brower, Blackwood & Brouwer Booksellers

Rating: 7.5

Wake, by Lisa McMann

978-01416953579 \$15.99 Simon Pulse, March 2008

Core audience: Girls, age 13 + up

Notable aspects: Typical teen issues intermixed with dream science

Review: Seventeen-year-old Jamie lives with her alcoholic mother in the poor part of town. She appears to be a typical teenage loner with a rough home life, except that she also harbors a bizarre secret. When she is in the same room as someone who is asleep, she inexplicably enters a coma-like state and falls into the other person's dream. She has been able to keep this problem a secret, but in high school, it is more challenging as students constantly fall asleep in class. Jamie hesitantly begins a relationship with an attractive boy with a burnout reputation. Apparently, Cabel has his own dark secrets that Jamie gets a hint of when she witnesses one of his dreams. After a series of misunderstandings, Jamie and Cabel learn to trust and subsequently help each other.

Overall this is a satisfying story with a unique dream angle that will appeal to teenage girls. Jamie is a positive role model, working toward her goal of college attendance in spite of her circumstances. The hopeful conclusion seems a wee bit contrived, but it worked.

Reviewer: Val Tate, Village Book Store

Rating: 7

The Willoughbys, by Lois Lowry

978-0618979745 \$16.00 Houghton Mifflin, March 2008

Core audience: Ages 9-12

Notable aspects: Parody of old-fashioned children's books

Review: The story is one of stock characters: wicked parents leaving rather stupid and obnoxious children to fend for themselves, a wise and capable nanny, an abandoned

baby, a wealthy gentleman grieving his lost wife and son, a train snowbound in the Alps, etc., etc. A glossary at the end provides dryly amusing explanations of some old fashioned vocabulary, followed by a Bibliography of “Books of the past that are heavy on piteous but appealing orphans, ill-tempered and stingy relatives, magnanimous benefactors, and transformations wrought by winsome children.” Lowry has undertaken a literary education for her readers, starting with the Gooney Bird Greene books, which are about how a story grows out of daily experiences. *The Willoughbys* follows, for a little older readers, with the apparent intent of showing readers how to spot familiar characters and themes, enjoy them for what they’re worth, but avoid any emotional investment in them. If Daniel Handler hadn’t done so much of it first, *The Willoughbys* would be plowing new ground, and we’d all be falling down with giggles, joy, and amazement. If someone less brilliant than Lowry had written it, we’d all be raving about “a new talent as delightful as Lemony Snicket.” Lowry is always a brilliant writer, so we’ve come to expect excellence from her. This book is well worth reading, but it gives more giggles and joy, not so much amazement.

Reviewer: Carol B. Chittenden, Eight Cousins and BookStream

Rating: 8

Additional review of The Willoughbys:

I agree with everything Carol said in her review. I enjoyed the giggles, the joy, the literary background, and yes, thought of Heidi, loving the bibliography of old -fashioned stories at the end. Kudos to Lowry for trying something altogether different from her usual darker, thought-provoking books. This one is a solid 8 and lots of fun.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop, Milford, NH

Rating: 8

Bonus Reviews from child readers/reviewers

These are reviews of four books written by students in a 5/6th grade class. They followed the NECBA template and the Chittenden Scale. They are certainly edifying, interesting, and fun. — Kenny Brechner, DDG Booksellers

Chancey of the Maury River, by Gigi Amateau
987-0763634391 \$15.99 Candlewick Press, May 2008

Core audience: Ages 10-12

Review: *Chancey of the Maury River* is about this horse named Chancey. Chancey's owner Monique has to sell Chancey. She finally takes him to the Maury River Stables. That is when Chancey meets Clair. Clair falls in love with Chancey and gets her mom to buy him and day after day Clair takes good care of Chancey and Clair does not stutter when she is around Chancey he makes her feel brave. Chancey had to go to surgery because he was turning blind. The blindness was caused by a tumor in his eye.

I thought this book was good because it gives so many details so you

can pretty much see the story in your head. I also thought it was good because it was like I was in the story. I would defiantly give this book a 8 because it wasn't the best but it was good.

The Magic Thief, by Sarah Prineas

978-061375873 \$16.99 HarperCollins, June 2008

Core audience: Kids of all ages

Review: This book is about Conn, a gutter boy and thief of Twilight town which is one of the three islands in the Magicus Peninsulas. Thinking he will pickpocket enough for supper, Conn steals a wizards locus stone. Then as the wizard offers him dinner and the stone nearly kills Conn, he is entered into apprentice ship by the wizard because the stone almost killed him, and didn't do it automatically. Conn is soon thrown into disaster as the three islands have a magical decay. The wizards ruling the first island are cowering. The under lord Crowe is sitting back laughing. Then there's the Duchess, but no one knows about her. Conn must turn into a cat, avoid misery eels, find his locus stone in 30 days, and fine out what's up before the cities are destroyed... along with everyone else. This book is fantasy, which can be told by the magic and powers. There is also the use of magic to heat and light houses and run factories. Like magic is a power source. I couldn't put the book down, it was action packed. Full of sorrow and surprise with just the right amount of magic. I give it a two thumbs up and hope anybody would also do the same. Much appreciation's for Sarah Prineas and can't wait for book two.

Rating-10!!

Seekers: The Quest Begins, by Erin Hunter

978-0060871222 \$16.99 HarperCollins, June 2008

Core audience: Ages 10 and up

Review: This book is about the adventures of three bears named Kallik, Lusa, and Toklo. They were separated from their families when they are cubs. These three bears are destined to find each other and go on a quest they cannot imagine. I liked this book because it made me wonder what would happen next. I also liked it because of the bad things happen to the bears, like when Kallik is flying in a net under a small plane the plane blows up with Kallik hurtling towards the ground.

I give this book a 9—best of the season.

Rating: 9

Additional review of Seekers: The Quest Begins:

Core audience: Boys and girls ages 10-15

Notable aspects: Wilderness through the bears point of view, quest, violence, minor shape-shifting

This book starts slow, but picks up speed as it goes along. This text is remarkable because of the fact that it is written in the bear's point of view. The bears are slowly, painfully brought together in a quest of their own survival. Will these unlikely companions stick it out, or will their own past be too much for them to handle? Kalik, the strong-hearted Polar bear, remembers a horrifying past. The vision of her mother being

devoured by Orca haunts her, along with the memory of Taqqiq her long lost brother. Kalik vows that someday she might find her brother, Taqqiq. Lusa, a softy, a dreamer from the zoo, is destined to escape from the zoo and live in the beautiful outside world she knows very little of. Her father King tells her such Ideas are foolish, but when Oka, mother of Toklo, comes to the zoo Lusa is mystified and vows to find Toklo, a strong, independent Grizzly torn by an unforgettable past. When Toklo's brother Tobi dies, Toklo loses more than just a worthless whelp he had to take care of. His mother became crazed and abandoned him. Now he has to learn his hunting skills himself, or pay dire consequence. This book was one of my favorites, definitely a keeper on the shelf. I am honored to be one of the first to read such an awesome book.

Reviewer: Randon

Rating: 9.8

Additional review of Seekers: The Quest Begins:

Core audience: The existing legion of *Warriors* fans

Notable aspects: Bear Adventure

[Note from Kenny: I was very interested to know what *Warriors* fans would think of Erin Hunters knew series, *Seekers*, and commissioned a young *Warriors* fan to read *Seekers* and write up his impressions. This review was written by a ten year old. He read the book several times before bringing it back.]

Review: *Seekers* is a story that has blown my mind. When I first read *Warriors: Into the Wild*, I thought that writers could not get any better books out... I was wrong. In the thrilling story of *Seekers* a young female black bear in a zoo yearns for the wild. She wants a more exciting life. She hears stories of the wild from the mother of Toklo, the grizzly cub. The mother is mad with grief from losing her other son. Other characters are a grizzly cub that has lost a brother and a mother who is alone. Also a polar bear whose young'un lost her brother and her mother when she was eaten by a killer whale. This is an exciting story. If you read this book you'll be thrilled beyond your wildest imagination. This is a great book and I urge you to read it.

That little bit was for readers. For bookstore owners you might want to know that this is a serious book but there is a bit of humour. This is a book of descriptive writing and intense environment. I highly suggest this book.

Dylan Roberts, Age 10, DDG Booksellers **Rating: Special comparative rating:**
Warriors on a scale of 1-10: 8 Seekers on a scale of 1-10: 10

Did Fleming Rescue Churchill?: A Research Puzzle, by James Cross Giblin 978-0805081831 \$16.95 Henry Holt, April 208

Review: This book is about a kid named Jason. He has to do a research report on someone named Alexander Fleming. While doing research he finds stories on how Alexander's father saves a boy named Winston. The problem is he finds conflicting stories. then he finds out that they are not true but he finds a way to put them in his report. I thought this book was good but I have read better. So I rate this book 7-some

would like it. People who have to do a report should read this because it gives information on how to do a research report.

Reviewer: Darin

Rating: 7

Heck: Where The Bad Kids Go, by Dale E. Basye

978-0375840753 \$16.99 Random House, July 2008

Here is a second review, and second rating of *Heck: Where The Bad Kids Go*. It was made by a fifth grader. This book is about the tale of the Fauster children, Milton and Marlo, and their adventure of a lifetime or in this case an afterlife time. After Milton and Marlo were blown up in a sticky marshmallow explosion at the local mall they go straight to Heck, where the bad kids go. You may know why Marlo is there because she is a shoplifting crook, but Milton never does anything wrong right...WRONG! His sister put something in his bag to steal, he didn't know but that is what sent him to Heck. Their adventure to escape Heck is only just the beginning. Personally I didn't like the book because it was very boring and it couldn't keep me hooked, so it took me a very long and hard time reading it. The beginning was good, having the main characters die in the beginning was genius. I give the book a 3 because it was ok but slanting downward to not so ok.

Reviewer: Greg Baxter Grade 5/6 Cape Cod Hill School

Rating: 3