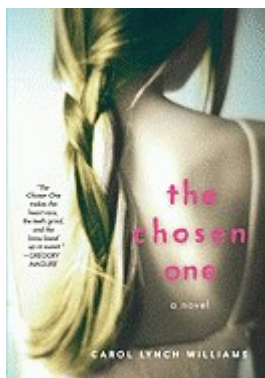


NECBA'S SPRING GALLEY REVIEW PROJECT TOP 10 LIST

First started in 1996 these lists are our bi-annual attempt to identify as many high-quality titles as possible from among the numerous new middle-grade and young-adult fiction books. NECBA booksellers read ARCs from as many publishers as possible, and review and rate as many of as we can using [The Chittenden Rating Scale](#). Here is a link to the full [Spring 2009 Galley Review Project](#). Previous seasons can be accessed [here](#). A [printable version](#) of this web page is also available.



The Chosen One by Carol Lynch Williams

978-0312555115, \$16.95
St. Martin's Griffin, May 2009

Core audience: ages 13+

Notable: Premise, strong voice, interesting setting, timely subject handled beautifully

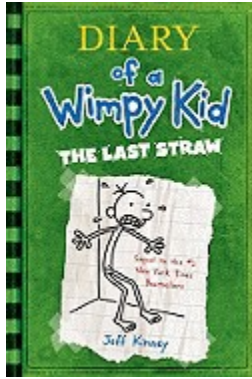
Review: I bit the insides of my cheeks the whole time I was reading this suspenseful, realistic story of a young girl in an isolated polygamous community whose enforced “engagement” to her 60-year-old blood uncle wakes her up to the truth about the religious leadership’s corrupt motives and controlling, misogynistic underpinnings. Thirteen-year-old Kyra struggles to hold on to the love of her large family, even as she resists the chilling news that she is to marry cruel old Uncle Hyrum. She is just a young teen, and drawn to a teenage boy, but the elders of the community seem to take all of the young girls for themselves, running off (and worse) the young men who might be competition for both wives and power.

The pressure to stay obedient takes both emotional and physical forms; what keeps Kyra's spirit from being broken are the books she secretly borrows from a bookmobile she's discovered driving along one of the compound's border roads, and her connection to a few very important people in her life. The power in this story lies in its warm, human depiction of Kyra's family and the solid, though often complicated, love that connects them — which readers recognize as the same for all families, regardless of circumstances.

Williams shows great delicacy with a subject that could lend itself to easy moralizing and caricature characters, but one of the most horrifying aspects of the story is that the over-the-top violence and craziness of the leaders' actions mirror what has actually happened in communities like these across the country. (Doing a little research on the topic, I discovered several similar real-life news accounts, one of which in particular was frighteningly close to the events in *The Chosen One*.) Williams' writing is simple, spare, poetic, and light, which balances the seriousness of her subject matter.

The age range is listed as 12-up, but this will be an intense read for some sixth graders. Spoiler alert: I had to skim a few pages, barely reading, because the disciplining of a very young child was so harrowing and helpless-making (but ultimately not as horrific as I'd feared), I just couldn't stand it. *Shabanu*, a book with similar themes but a vastly different setting and context, might be a better choice for slightly younger readers, though it has also has an intense scene toward the end. You can't tackle difficult topics without facing the truth, can you? -- and although I speak as a complete outsider, it seems to me that Carol Lynch Williams has done an amazing job of bringing some ugly truths to light, while celebrating the resilience, love, and spirit of the young women who survive the experience.

Reviewer: Elizabeth Bluemle, The Flying Pig Bookstore Rating: 9.0



Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Last Straw
by Jeff Kinney

9780810970687, \$12.95
Amulet, January 2009

Core audience: ages 9-14, grades 5-8
Notable: diary style, drawings

Review: This third installment of the Wimpy Kid series certainly measures up. Our unlikely hero, Greg Heffley, is a fairly average middle-schooler, and that's what makes him so great. Through his hilarious hijinks and laugh-out-loud drawings, we get a glimpse into the world of this wimpy kid, who has to deal with such challenges as a dad who blasts classical music to scare away neighborhood teenagers and a best friend who isn't exactly the brightest crayon in the box. Greg is always getting into trouble and scheming to find new ways to get out of homework and chores. A great read for kids who don't like fantasy.

Reviewer: Suzanna Hermans, Oblong Books & Music Rating: 9.0



Evolution of Calpurnia Tate
by Jacqueline Kelly

9780805088410, \$16.95
Henry Holt, May 2009

Core audience: Middle grade girls / fans of adventurous females
i.e. Laura Ingalls, Caddie Woodlawn.
Notable: Debut author

Review: As the only girl in a family of 6 brothers in 1899, Calpurnia's life

seems to be all planned out for her. Her mother has decided she's ready for cooking lessons in addition to the piano & sewing lessons already taking up her days. But an attentive Callie has other things in mind, like why there are more yellow grasshoppers than green ones in her yard that summer & what that patch of strange looking grass by the lake really is. Under the tutelage of her cantankerous grandfather (who is attempting to concoct a new type of beer from Pecans) she discovers a love of science & finds that life can be more fun if you simply open your eyes to the world around you.

With each chapter starting off with a quote from Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, this is an entertaining read-aloud of a feisty girl trying to make her own voice heard in a world that is changing fast. All of the characters are fully developed in their own little stories, from the oldest brothers' first attempt at courting to her best friends' fear of performing piano in public. Definitely one to watch for next year's Newbery!

Reviewer: Heather Doss, Bookazine Rating: 9.0



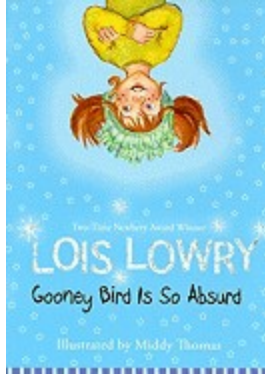
Gentlemen
by Michael Northrop

9780545097499, \$16.99
Scholastic, April, 2009

Core audience: 15 and up
Notable: Well-drawn suspense, great companion to *Crime & Punishment*

Review: This debut novel is something like *The Wednesday Wars* meets *The Outsiders* — a school-based story focused around a group of semi-bad-boy buddies, the kind of teens who sit in the back of the class and direct their smarts toward out-of-school pursuits. When one of their number confronts a teacher and then disappears, the group begins to wonder if another teacher, their English instructor, might have something to do with his disappearance. Northrop expertly leads the reader through the unfolding of the mystery and its aftermath, set against the backdrop of a class studying Dostoevsky's *Crime & Punishment*. Literary parallels are not uncommon in YA literature, but this one is particularly well done. The author creates an impressive ramping up of suspense and realistic, not supernatural, horror — the kind we can get ourselves into, inch by inch, step by step, despite our best intentions. One of just a few one-sitting books I've come across this year.

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



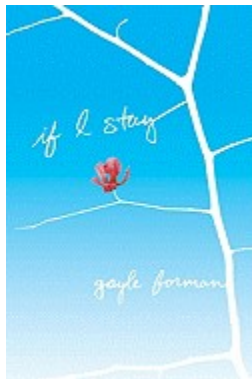
Gooney Bird Is So Absurd
by Lois Lowry, illus Middy Thomas

9780547119670, \$15.00
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, March, 2009

Core audience: ages 6-10, grades 1-4
Notable: Poetry, characters, emotional validity

Review: That darned Lois Lowry. She can move me to tears with a 105-page second grade reader full of pedagogy. In this latest Gooney Bird Greene volume, Mrs. Pidgeon is teaching her class about poetry. But like the good teacher she is, she's not so much teaching her students as she is helping them to learn. Gooney Bird claims she learns better when her brain is warm, a condition she creates with a hat that accommodates her pigtails – and looks suspiciously similar to a pair of ruffly green panties. Gooney's so grave about it that everyone respects her choice in spite of themselves – even Mr. Leroy, the principal. There's much more to the plot, but I don't want to give it away, except to say that it demonstrates the power and comfort of poetry more clearly than anything besides Love That Dog and Hate that Cat. Each of the Gooney Bird Greene books could stand alone perfectly well, but up to the present, I believe this one is my favorite.

Reviewer: Carol B. Chittenden, Eight Cousins Rating: 9.0



If I Stay
by Gayle Forman

978-0525421030, \$16.95
Dutton, April 2009

Core audience: 14 and up Primarily Girls
Notable: Strong Musical Elements, Lots of tragic pathos

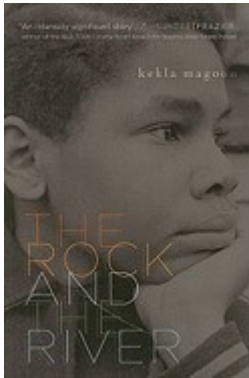
Review: If Aristotle had reviewed Gayle Forman's *If I Stay* in his *Poetics* as an exemplar of Young Adult tragic fiction, he would almost certainly have expressed great displeasure. After all, he considered the proper engine for pathos to be the fall of an otherwise virtuous person based upon a single tragic flaw, whereas *If I Stay* works strongly to evoke pathos from arbitrary tragic circumstances befalling its teenage heroine, Mia. Forman begins her novel by deftly drawing Mia's sympathetic family and then sending them off to a car accident on a snowy road, in which her parents die straightway and her seven-year-old brother lingers in the hospital. Mia, a gifted musician, is herself badly injured. Prior to the accident she had stressed out over the prospect of leaving behind her wonderful boyfriend, rock star musician Adam, for a prestigious

music academy. In the wake of her tragedy, the term “if I stay” takes on fresh meaning.

If *If I Stay* were a 10-meter platform dive, it would start out with a low degree of difficulty, given the benefit of all that tragic material, but Forman pulls it off amazingly well. The characters are clearly drawn and our sympathies are engaged on many levels. Mia narrates the book from a state of heightened awareness as she lies in a hospital bed, seemingly unconscious. This unusual narrative device conveys a vital immediacy much like that found in Terry Trueman’s *Stuck in Neutral*. In the end, as we listen through Mia’s ears to Adam’s wrenching plea that she stay, one part of our mind is registering that Adam is an impossibly good guy, but somehow it doesn’t matter.

If I Stay is a tearjerker that works because it is both heartfelt and tightly constructed. Teen readers should be more than ready to incur Aristotle’s wrath and join booksellers in embracing this fantastic new book.

Reviewer: Kenny Brechner, DDG Booksellers Rating: 9.0



**The Rock and the River
by Kekla Magoon**

9781416975823, \$15.99

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, March, 2009

Core audience: ages 9-14, grades 5-8

Notable: historical fiction, civil rights

Review: In *The Rock and the River*, we meet Sam, a 13-year-old growing up in 1968 Chicago. Sam is the son of a prominent civil rights activist: a man whom he loves and respects greatly. Sam's older brother, Stick, begins to drift away from the family, becoming more and more secretive about his whereabouts and activities. Sam discovers literature about the Black Panther party under Stick's bed, and decides to confront his brother. What ensues is a conflict of ideology that nearly tears their family apart. *The Rock and the River* by Kekla Magoon is a compelling read, with strong characters and a vivid backdrop of Chicago in the year Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated.

Reviewer: Suzanna Hermans, Oblong Books & Music Rating: 9.0



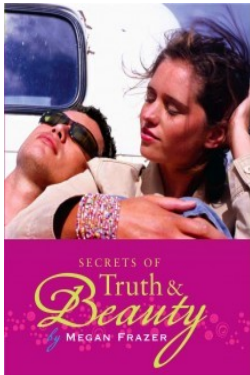
Scat
by by Carl Hiasson

9780375834868, \$16.98
Alfred A. Knopf, January, 2009

Core audience: boys and girls grades 6-8
Notable: humor, suspense, environmental issues, sensitivity to others' feelings

Review: A much disliked and feared biology teacher goes missing during a class field trip in the swamps of the Everglades. There us a fire that abruptly puts an end to the trip. The class "delinquent" with a history is blamed then truly framed. As with most of Hiasson's stories, there are the dishonest developers (of oil this time!) and plenty of caring enviromentalists. The endangered black panther also makes an appearance. Nick and Marta display plenty of chutzpa and courage in trying to find out what happened to their missing teacher and clear their classmate of the unfair arson charges. Of special interest is the fact that Nick's father returns from his National Guard stint in Iraq with a missing arm. Nick has his own right arm taped up in a move of solidarity with his Dad. Together they try to strengthen their left arms with the backyard baseball practice they have always shared. There is something for everyone here. Despite some "too easy" personality changes and a totally unbelievable substitute teacher , a good choice for middle grade teachers to use in the classroom.

Reviewer: Sue Carita, The Toadstool Bookshop Rating: 8.5



Secrets of Truth & Beauty
by Megan Frazer

9781423117117, \$15.99
Hyperion, June, 2009

Core audience: Girls, 12 and up
Notable: Debut novel, set in New England - starts in Portland and ends up in western Mass

Review: When Dara Cohen was little, she was a singing sensation and brought home the Little Miss Maine crown. Now she's 17 and not so little anymore. When an autobiographical film project is horribly misinterpreted, she is hauled out of school by her controlling mother and set to finish up her semester at home, in between trips to her new counselor. This is where Dara says enough. She road trips to a collective goat farm in Massachusetts to stay with the sister no one talks about and she has never met. There are so many books with teens about self-image and I really appreciated this one because Dara emerges from her summer a better, changed person, but its not because she miraculously lost

weight and became perfect looking. I think the book deals with her issues realistically and better still, there's blossoming romance, a lesbian sister and gay best friend, and still another pageant, to keep the story going.

Reviewer: Laura Lucy, White Birch Books Rating: 9



Wintergirls
by Laurie Halse Anderson

9780670011100, \$17.99
Viking, March, 2009

Core audience: ges 14+, girls
Notable: Eating Disorders, Cutting, Recovery

Review: Laurie Halse Anderson's newest novel has blown me away. Though I confess it is the first book of hers that I've read, the minute I was finished I couldn't wait to devour everything she has written. Lia and Cassie have been friends for years, but when Cassie is found dead in a hotel room Lia's life begins to spiral out of control. Both girls had been battling eating disorders, and Lia's anorexia begins to take over as she is haunted by the spirit of her friend. This haunting novel will surely become the go-to book for eating disorder recovery in older teens. In that respect, it is important to note that it does not glamorize anorexia or bulimia. Lia is a smart girl whose disease begins to overpower her, and through her eyes we see her desperation and frustration with the system. I dare say this is one of the best books I've ever read.

Suzanna Hermans, Oblong Books & Music Rating: 10