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Great Lakes, Great Books

by Lynette Marten Suckow



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Marten Suckow**

The Great Lakes Great Books Award list for the 2020-21 school year has a large offering of titles that allow literacy to flow from the classroom. Students who learn language skills in spoken or written form will take those tools with them everywhere. Applying knowledge of maps and diagrams to fully understand your surroundings, recording observations of plants and animals over time, corresponding quickly by electronic mail, replacing familiar words with new labels in a new language, and creating new recipes by following the old ones are only a few of the ways literacy is enriched beyond the classroom walls.

Each year, the Great Lakes Great Books committee selects 40 books, published within the last two years, to introduce K-12 classrooms to some of the best books available. Teachers and librarians provide students with books from their grade-level lists and allow them to vote on their favorites. Great Lakes Great Books is one of Michigan Reading Association's Student Involvement projects, promoting active participation in the reading process by students. Look for a classroom ballot, student certificate, promotional bookmarks, last year's winning titles, and the opportunity to nominate your favorite new book at www.michiganreading.org under the Awards and Grants tab.

MAPPING SAM by Joyce Hesselberth features Sam the cat's nightly travels to show "what is where and how to get from here to there." The author engages Sam's help to highlight different maps and ways of mapping. Sam shows readers several ways to explore the outdoors in order to get a new perspective on the world and understand it better. In addition to a geographic map

tracing Sam's movements around the neighborhood, readers are introduced to a transportation map, two biological diagrams, a cutaway view of the local pond, a diagram of a water molecule, a world map, a constellation chart of the stars, a map of the solar system, and a blueprint of a building. The clear, colorful illustrations convey a whole new way of thinking about the power of maps and their importance for recording new discoveries.

MOTH: AN EVOLUTION STORY by Isabel Thomas tracks the evolution of the peppered moth over the course of the last 200 years. Back in the early 1800s, the light form of the peppered moth had mottled black and white wings that provided camouflage against tree bark, while the dark form of the moth had black wings that contrasted with the tree bark, making them easy prey for bats and birds. As the Industrial Revolution arrived, depositing soot and pollution on the surrounding area, the tree bark changed color. The darker moths were less noticeable against the soot-colored trees and became the dominant color of the peppered moth. A century later, the factories cleaned up their emissions, the soot washed off the trees, and the light form of peppered moth began to regain its numbers. Even though the title refers to evolution, the story documents natural selection as the process that leads to evolution, which further leads to the adaptation of a species to better survive its surroundings. This book is very easy to understand and wraps up with an adaptation of its own beginning sentence, "This is a story of light and

Must Read Texts

dark, of change and adaptation, of survival and hope.” Daniel Egneus adds to the impact of this integration of storytelling and natural science with an eye-catching, reflective cover and magnificent illustrations that stay with readers long after they close the book.

TO NIGHT OWL FROM DOGFISH by Holly Goldberg Sloan and Meg Wolitzer is a lively middle-grade story about the families we’re given and the friendships we create on our own. Written as an epistolary novel, this tale is told entirely through e-mail messages between two 12-year-old girls. Book-loving Avery from New York City and sports-loving Bett from California, secretly known to each other as Night Owl and Dogfish, couldn’t be more different. After routinely looking through her dad’s e-mails, Bett discovers that her father met someone at a conference and has been dating online. She also learns that the two fathers plan to visit China together, while sending both daughters to a summer camp in Michigan. Bett’s subject line to Avery is “You don’t know me,” which ends up with 62 replies back and forth while the girls learn about each other and think about the possibility of becoming sisters. Bett’s gregarious grandmother enters the story, along with Avery’s surrogate mother, to provide family histories while introducing discussion on sexual orientation, race, becoming a teen, and reinventing families.

OTHER WORDS FOR HOME by Jasmine Warga features Jude, a young Syrian teen who loves American movies and wants to be a movie star someday, along with her best friend, Fatima. Her older brother, Issa, is a university student who actively participates in student protests against the government, making the family a target for political retaliation. After a raid on their home, Jude and her mother are sent to Cincinnati, Ohio to live with her uncle and his American wife. Jude is now faced with using the English she learned from the movies in order to improve her language skills and thrive in a new country. Although Jude extends the hand of friendship to her very American cousin, Sarah is clearly not interested in having relatives that eat and dress ethnically. The cousins’ relationship is strained to the breaking point when Jude and Sarah try out for the same part in the school play. A good deal of cultural

information about Islamic religion, Syrian food, and women covering their hair when they reach puberty is included in the text. It’s also a story about being a part of two countries at the same time; achieving new skills while, at the same time, retaining the old routines. By writing in verse, Warga emphasizes human ideals and minimizes descriptive geography, sending the message that people everywhere want to be understood and valued.

WITH THE FIRE ON HIGH by Elizabeth Acevedo is a beautifully written novel about a teen mother with a flair for making delicious food. Emoni Santiago of Puerto Rican heritage, lives in Philadelphia with her grandmother, attends high school, cares for her two-year-old daughter, and works part-time to help with expenses. She cooks for fun and intuitively spices the food with flavors that reflect her emotions. When a culinary arts curriculum becomes available at school, Emoni enrolls, but is soon disillusioned with the emphasis on following directions and the lack of creative freedom. After almost dropping out of the program, Emoni’s best friend and grandmother convince her to stick with it. As a result, she takes a class trip to Spain and finds herself immersed in amazing hands-on restaurant experiences, while being mentored by renowned chefs. At the same time, one of Emoni’s culinary classmates wants to date her, forcing her to think about her future with a child and a career. Acevedo, author of the award-winning *THE POET X*, skillfully conveys the emotions of a teenager trying to make good decisions that will affect the rest of her life.

Author Biography

Lynette Marten Suckow works at the Peter White Public Library’s reference desk in Marquette, MI where she provides assistance with library resources and digital technology. She holds a master’s degree in education from Northern Michigan University, is actively involved with the Marquette-Alger Reading Council, and has been a Great Lakes Great Books Award committee member since 2006. She can be reached at lynette.suckow@gmail.com.