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The Well-Stocked Bookshelf: Reviews of Young Adult Literature

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The Well-Stocked Bookshelf: Reviews of Young Adult Literature

BY ED SPICER

Dear reader, if you are at all interested in the world of teen or children's literature, peruse this list of titles and make note of the number of pages listed for each book reviewed. The number of pages for *Anya's Ghost* is 222, for example. The total number of pages read for the books listed in this review is 11,481 (give or take an error or two or a book or two cut from the review). Since I write about this many reviews three times a year, it means that I have to read about 100 pages each and every day. However, we must also factor in the truth that to find a book to review requires reading books that will *not* be reviewed because they are too awful to review. For every three books that I finish, I will read another book that I will not review. Since I teach first grade and since I do presentations on books for the younger end of the spectrum, I also read and annotate about 400 or more picture books and easy readers each year. There is also my committee work. This time it is the Morris Committee, which honors the very first publication of an author who is debuting a book for teen readers. There are well over one hundred debut books this year, and I have read most of them or enough of them (at least 50 pages) to render my opinion on their award worthiness. Reviewers read an awful lot of books. While I hope that I make the books sound exciting and worthy of your time, my own personal life, on the surface is rather dull. *Watch Ed read. Read, Ed, Read!* While this reading load can be (and *is*, from time to time) mind numbingly dull, most of the books that I feature take me to other worlds and I never describe my reading life as anything other than a gift. As with my reviews in the fall issue of the *Michigan Reading Journal*, books with an asterisk (*)/ at the end of the title listing designate books that are written by a debut author. One of these debut authors will become a great author whose books are read all over the world, studied in schools, and given as gifts. Which author? Which one of these books will stay in print for the next 50 years? I hope you enjoy the books I found this season.

Brosgol, V. (2011). *Anya's ghost*. (Ill. by the author). New York: Roaring Brook Press/First Second. 222 pp. ISBN: 978-1-59643-713-5. (Hardcover); \$19.99.*

Anya falls into a well that serves as the home for a lonely ghost. When Anya is rescued, the ghost hitchhikes its way into her life. The ghost provides Anya with useful information that helps Anya find ways to be successful in school, just as she had been wishing. Ghosts, however, often have their own agenda, which often makes life very dangerous and frightening. *Anya's Ghost* is a graphic novel drawn mostly with black and gray, but employing delightful dollops of eerie purple to evoke the ghostly mood that makes this story work. While we obviously celebrate the art (which even Neil Gaiman compliments), the text of this story should not be overlooked. The exchanges between Anya and her mother are prototypical teen-parent conversations, despite the fact that Anya is a Russian immigrant who believes her ethnicity is somehow preventing her from fitting into her school. The strength of this book isn't so much the evil ghost story (although I predict most teens will like this element best), but the very ordinary story of a young girl who feels she doesn't fit in, believes that boys do not find her attractive, yearns to make friends, and is annoyed when life doesn't go out of its way to make things easy. Along the way Anya is forced to come to terms with opportunistic friends, evaluating her own family culture, and recognizing that our real self-worth is something we create and not something others decide. While the text

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is strong, the artwork in this book is exquisite in the way that it shows emotions and character growth (I especially like the humiliation that is drawn so well during the scene in which Anya and Liz are at the party). Secondary characters are fully alive both in art and plot. Our ghost is delightfully, increasingly creepy. Purchase this one for both middle school and high school libraries.

Mullin, M. (2011). *Ashfall*. Terre Haute, IN: Tanglewood Publishing, Inc. 466 pp. ISBN: 978-1-933718-55-2. (Hardcover); \$16.95.*

Home alone for the weekend, Alex, like any teen eagerly anticipates the joyous freedom from his family. When a supervolcano erupts, the ashfall blocks the sun and buries Alex's hometown in a sickly cloud of darkness. Priorities reestablished, Alex sets out in search of his family. The eruption, however, has unleashed more than just chemical-laden ashes falling from the sky. With food and water supplies virtually wiped out, the competition for very scarce resources has unleashed the worst in human behavior. Gangs, theft, distrust, violence, apprehension, and panic are the order of the day. Those alone, like Alex, are especially vulnerable. Fortunately Alex meets Darla, and together they travel away from the devastation in search of family, or at least a place in which they can live without fear. Combining very real science with an adventure story that is sure to please teens, Mullin has written a book that may be used in geology classes as well as one that can be handed to those disaster-loving teen readers who don't mind reading about eating rabbit brain here and there.

Flack, S. (2011). *Bunheads*. New York: Little, Brown and Company/Poppy. 294 pp. ISBN: 978-0-316-12653-3. (Hardcover); \$17.99.

Hannah Ward may love Jacob—and the wealthy balletomane, Matt, is showing her considerable attention—but Hannah is a bunhead and nothing can compete with the chance to leap from bunhead to ballerina. Flack's expertise and experience with the New York City Ballet adds a level of authenticity to this book that shines through on every page. Her knowledge of the world of dance, however, is added deftly in a way that moves this romantic coming of age story forward. The dance elements are used to great effect to compare Hannah to others her age: "Above us, chandeliers illuminate our twirling bodies, and I wonder if this is what prom must be like. I didn't go to my prom..." (p. 4). This title explores the obvious sacrifices that any professional must endure to reach the top and, when those sacrifices become too much, the danger of abuse. Flack clearly loves dance and understands the sacrifice necessary to dance with a professional dance company, yet she does not shy away from discussing eating disorders and the abuse that can be inflicted upon young girls who wish to dance professionally. She does this convincingly and leaves judgment to the reader. The combination of an in-depth, accurate, honest look at the world of dance and a story that has Hannah waltzing into her own life is done so well that high school readers will eagerly discuss the merits of *Bunheads* (which has an absolutely fabulous cover).

Taylor, L. (2011). *Daughter of smoke and bone*. New York: Little, Brown Books. 438 pp. ISBN: 978-0-316-13402-6. (Hardcover); \$18.99.

Regular readers of this column know that I love trying to predict award committees' choices. Here is another book that I predict will show up on the Printz list this January. Anytime an author writes a story that is largely romance yet can keep me reading hours after I should be sleeping, they must be a serious contender for *many* awards. In this book, our protagonist, Karou, is a fairly normal outsider teen art student living and drawing in Prague. Well, Karou is as normal as one could hope, considering she is a chimaera, has a beastly father, and spends her time collecting teeth from animals, including humans. Like many teens, she senses something incomplete in her life and is

not quite certain just who she is. Brimstone, her father, however, tells her nothing about her past and nothing about his work, but continues to send her on ghoulish errands collecting teeth through the magical portals that connect the chimaera worlds. When Karou is almost killed by a seraphim, her puzzlement over her identity only increases. When the portals to her family's world are destroyed, Karou is forced into a journey she both craves and dreads. The details of her past, of Brimstone, of the angel who attacked her (and the person who seems to know more about her than she knows herself) are revealed in magical, mysterious, moody, poetic prose that evokes both a world that we have never seen before and one that is surprisingly familiar. We see Karou as a teen whom we could pick out of a yearbook, despite the fact that she can fly, speaks 24 different languages, and wields a mean pair of curved knives. The ending will please fans because the story comes to an ending, but makes it clear that we are not done with the story. The world building in this novel is careful, lyrical, creative, and filled with passion. Purchase multiple copies of this title, which is not only extremely well written, but certain to be popular with a large number of high school readers—male and female.

Gantos, J. (2011). *Dead end in Norvelt*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux. 341 pp. ISBN: 978-0-374-37993-3. (Hardcover); \$15.99.

Jack Gantos writes some of the strangest fiction for children/teen readers that one could hope to find. From his *Rotten Ralph* books, through the *Joey Pigza* books, to the exceedingly bizarre *Love Curse for the Rumbaughs*, Gantos provides readers with a world most of us cannot imagine. Authors are often asked about inspiration and the most common answer is one that involves mining the details of everyday life to flesh out stories. To say that Jack Gantos has lived a very unusual life is putting it mildly. *Dead End in Norvelt* uses a very real town in Pennsylvania to tell a story based on real events in Gantos's life. Using his own nosebleeds and a fictional version of his real self, Jack tells a tall tale of his life. Grounded for life (the summer), Jack must assist Mrs. Volker with collecting facts for her obituaries. She is also the town's medical examiner, which provides her with the expertise, in her mind, to cauterize the veins inside Jack's nose—once she bakes her poorly functioning, arthritic hands with hot wax to get them working. With each death, a part of the dwindling town drifts away and readers discern that Norvelt is destined for extinction. Mrs. Volker has made a promise to Mrs. Roosevelt that she will take care of the original town members, and she is determined to record their stories, which she hopes will save the town. But someone is buying up the houses and moving them to West Virginia. While the mystery is not that mysterious and the plot is not that plot-driven, what elevates this book—or makes it something totally disgusting, depending on your view of humor—is Jack's amazingly creative and bizarre sense of humor. Give this book to middle school and high school students who seek the random, appreciate the weird, and believe that odd juxtapositions require laughter. As an aside, which I know Jack would appreciate, I often find myself wondering what would happen if Jack Gantos and Polly Horvath (*The Canning Season*) had children?

O'Neal, E. (2011). *The false princess*. New York: Egmont. 323 pp. ISBN: 978-1-60684-079-5. (Hardcover); \$16.99.*

Nalia wears princess clothes, eats princess food, and does princessy things like learning dead languages, consulting with magicians, dancing royal dances, and keeping the hoi polloi at a distance. On her 16th birthday, however, all of her princessiness comes to an end. It turns out she is not the real princess at all, but a fill-in, fake princess put in place to protect the real princess from an ancient curse placed on her by an evil witch. Now, she and her princess habits and ways must go to live with poor people who wash their own clothes and eat whatever is available. What must she think of the real princess? What will the young man who seems to love her think when she is no longer Nalia the

Princess, but Sinda the most definitely *not* a princess? When Sinda decides that she can no longer live with her aunt, she decides to return to the castle to study magic, which seems to be welling up inside her. Once back in the castle, however, Sinda discovers that even the real princess has secrets—secrets so big that, if certain powerful people discover she knows them, she will die. The plot twists in this book are so much fun that we can forgive a few loose ends. Readers will romp along with the author, delightfully turning page after page. Echoes of many familiar fairy tales will come to mind unbidden by virtue of the author’s carefully selected language and references. Readers will smile in grateful recognition of seeing old friends honored in such a fun way. This book is appropriate for both high school and middle school libraries.

Seiple, S. (2011). *Ghosts in the fog*. New York: Scholastic Press. 221 pp. ISBN: 978-0-545-29654-0. (Hardcover); \$17.99.*

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese navy bombed Pearl Harbor. Four days later the United States declared war on Japan (Germany and Italy too). D-Day was on June 6, 1944. And if we look at timelines of World War II, we will find many dates that have been burned into our collective memories (Kristallnacht, November 10, 1938; Hitler is *Time* magazine’s, Man of the Year, January 2, 1939). In all of these dates, in all of my memories of the major events of World War II, I do not ever remember reading about the Japanese invasion of Alaska. Do you? This fact alone is enough for me to recommend Seiple’s surprising nonfiction account of the Japanese invasion and occupation of several of the Aleutian Islands. While this story gets off to a sluggish start, once we really begin to learn of the bloody battles, told from the perspective of those living on the island, it is absolutely riveting. Did you know, for example, that the battles on the islands were among the bloodiest hand-to-hand combat battles of the entire war? The obvious question is why so many American people know so little, if anything, about this part of the war. Don’t miss this book! Purchase it for every middle school and high school library and bring it to the attention to the history teachers and history lovers in your school district.

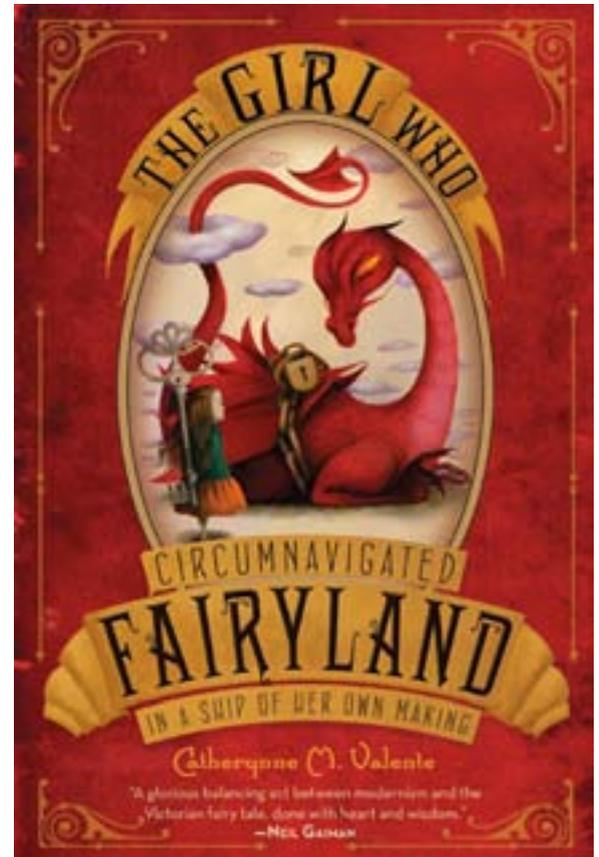
Carson, R. (2011). *The girl of fire and thorns*. New York: HarperCollins/Greenwillow. 424 pp. ISBN: 978-0-06-202648-4. (Hardcover); \$17.99.*

Each year during our annual high school writing contest, I read numerous pieces of writing from students in which religion plays a prominent role. *The Girl of Fire and Thorns* is about religion in a voice that sings faithfully. Carson’s book brims with personality and the main thread of the story concerns Elisa, a young woman who many believe will be their savior. She was chosen by the gods and has the Godstone embedded in her navel to prove it. Only one person each century receives this gift, and with it the knowledge that those chosen are expected to fulfill an essential, but unknown, task. On her 16th birthday Elisa is secretly married to a king in the hopes that this marriage will forge an alliance and preserve peace in the troubled kingdom. However, her gemstone is also a very serious military target and evil animagi are able to use these stones to wreak havoc. Other countries want these gemstones for their own reasons. Everyone who knows of her Godstone believes she is chosen; the only one who doubts this is Elisa. The plot is not as important as Elisa’s poor self-esteem. She realizes early on that the King, who is the most beautiful man she has ever seen, has a mistress and does not love her. She is not a svelte princess, but a hefty young woman who loves to eat. The plot is not as important as her intense struggle to read her holy books, study the wisdom of religious scholars, and pray faithfully to learn how to deal with the problems of life. She prays and studies while she is a princess, and she prays and studies while she is a captive. She prays and studies when she has a major role in the war with the animagi. Religion is an essential element of her life, and she is the unique character in a cast of extremely

distinctive characters. Elisa is a character who is like many of her teen readers: a normal person that has a valuable spiritual gift and is frustrated because she is not always sure just how to use her gift. She is anxious because she is not sure what her god wants her to do. In fact, she believes that she is chosen by mistake, even though Elisa's god has not made a mistake, and someday Elisa will accept this fact. The character development is a major strength, and this is a nail-biting, white knuckle read that will have readers buckled into their reading chairs. This book reads much faster than its 424 pages. While this book does deal with marriage, sex, and violence, these topics are largely implied and are not treated explicitly. This book is most at home in a high school, but mature middle school students will also enjoy it. And for all its serious religious nature and lofty themes, one thing that I appreciate about this book is its carefully chosen humor. Don't be surprised to see this one make lists and, perhaps, even win awards.

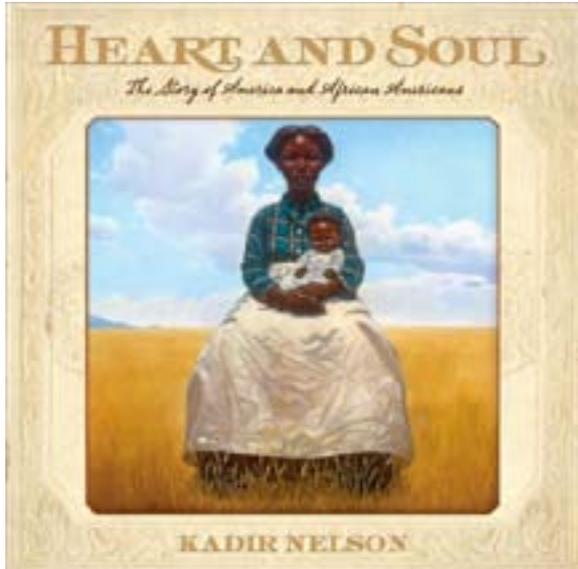
Valente, C. M. (2011). *The girl who circumnavigated Fairyland in a ship of her own making*. New York: Macmillan/Feiwel and Friends. 256 pp. ISBN: 978-0-312-64961-6. (Hardcover); \$16.99.

In 1871 Lewis Carroll wrote *Through the Looking Glass* (about 6 years after *Alice in Wonderland* was published). If Lewis Carroll were alive today, he just might be Catherynne Valente, and he just might have written *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of her Own Making*. September leaves home without telling her parents because children are heartless (it takes a lot of time and effort to grow a heart) and travels with the Green Wind to Fairyland. Very soon she is separated from the Green Wind. Later she is ordered by the evil Marquess to bring back whatever she finds in a coffin. She meets A-L and travels with this partial library beginning to understand that she cannot ask him questions about Summer or Winter or pan because he doesn't go up that high. She learns the value of shoes, tries to retrieve a spoon for a witch, and discusses the taxonomy of fairies, although not necessarily in this order. We meet a Wyvern, a shark, and even Death (among others) puts in an appearance. There is a price to be paid for going to Fairyland. You may get very hungry, you may have to sacrifice your shadow, you may get separated from the key (to understanding). While this book has more of a connected story and plot than the Alice books, it shares with them a delight in language, a love of the letters, and the thrill of putting words together that sound like song. While September travels and struggles in Fairyland, she is also beginning to grow a heart. For those poetry lovers who learn as much from surrender as they do from logic, this is a thrilling language voyage: "It is well known that reading quickens the growth of the heart like nothing else" (p. 4).



Nelson, K. (2011). *Heart and soul: The story of America and African Americans*. (Ill. by the author). New York: HarperCollins/Balzer + Bray. 108 pp. ISBN: 978-0-06-173074-0. (Hardcover); \$19.99.

Does the book world need another overview of American history when so many are already on the market? To answer this question, let's ask another: How many American history overviews feature African Americans? In Nelson's latest book we have pictures and information about Josephine Baker, James Brown, George Washington Carver, Charles Drew, Medgar Evers, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Barak Obama, Adam Powell, the Tuskegee Airmen, Ida B. Wells, and more. What a gift to all students



to finally see a history of America filled with image after image of a people who are often viewed and considered less kindly (to say it politely).! What a gift to African American students to see themselves in a history book that has such amazing artwork! Kadir Nelson may be one of the most talented artists in the country. This is an overview, and there will be criticisms that the very nature of an overview demeans some of the more complicated discussions. Those who have studied Rosa Parks, for example, become legitimately annoyed by portrayals of her that neglect to mention how brilliant and calculating and fearless Parks is. When she was arrested, it was with her full knowledge and participation. Years of planning and discussion and laying groundwork went into her arrest. While *any* person would be “sick and tired of being sick and tired” (p. 86) when faced with the injustice of Jim Crow, what is more accurate is that Parks helped orchestrate her arrest so her legal team could finally challenge this in court with a witness (Parks) who would answer questions articulately and fend off cross examination expertly. Yet despite small oversights such as Nelson’s depiction of Parks, this book is an excellent addition to any library

anywhere in the country. The artwork alone makes this book a must-buy.

Hubbard, K. (2011). *Like Mandarin*. New York: Random House/Delacorte. 389 pp. ISBN: 978-0-385-73935-1. (Hardcover); \$17.99.*

Grace Carpenter’s mother drags along to beauty pageant after beauty pageant. She fails miserably as a contestant because she cares more about writing and school than she does about the contests, which are far too political and contrived. Grace has skipped a grade and is not one to seek the limelight. When Grace does not win an essay contest to whisk her with the wind to Washington, she fears that she will end up just like her momma, stuck forever in Washokey, forever scheming to find a different course. When she is paired on a project with Mandarin, the town’s wild child, Grace is both attracted and repelled. Mandarin offers her friendship and the status of being with the most talked about student in the school. It is difficult for Grace to make friends; this offer is huge. Grace is shy. Mandarin does what she pleases when she pleases. She knows all of the rumors about herself and does not seem to care, although she loves pulling anonymous pranks on the town. Like Grace, she yearns to escape Washokey, but first she must decide what she wants to do about high school. Grace is smart enough and pliable enough for Mandarin to use as a graduation ticket, or so she thinks. Mandarin convinces Grace to bolt from Washokey for the sunny shores of California. They make a plan to leave just before Grace’s trip to Washington, which, it turns out, she did win, when it is discovered that the original winner plagiarized his winning essay. With each prank and each adventure that Mandarin swirls them into, Grace becomes increasingly nervous about their plans. She admires Mandarin’s bold, assertive nature and wild beauty but she begins to detect some serious character flaws stemming from her neglectful, drunken, dysfunctional family. Will the lure of having a larger than life whirlwind friend blow Grace off course? Like any good wind, like the Santa Anas in California or the Mistral winds in France, they may not be able to blow a rock completely off course, but they are very likely to alter it—and sometimes that is for the best. This is a finely crafted, poetic first novel that deserves to be in every high school library.

Kirby, J. (2011). *Moonglass*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 232 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4424-1694-9. (Hardcover); \$16.99.*

Anna's mother walks out into the water and drowns herself one night. Now Anna must try to move past a sea of emotions to find a life of her own. Unfortunately, her father has decided to move Anna back to Crystal Cove, the place he met Anna's mother and where the ghost of the past is making a normal life virtually impossible. Crystal Cove is a real place and the cottages and the description of this area are excellent, but this factual extrapolation is just a detail. What is important is that Kirby does an excellent job of using the setting to create a mood that matches Anna's exploration for answers. From the beginning epigraph in which the extremes of water are introduced to Anna's final beach walk with her mother, Kirby's novel dances on the water. The language is excellent throughout and it continually plays with the water: "I paused and squinted at the cottage in the dark, waiting for something. But there was nothing. Just the crash of another wave and the stillness that followed" (p. 8). "I knew that meant we were done and that we'd smooth over the surface I'd just tossed a rock into. But even the waves that crash down on the beach start out as tiny ripples, far out at sea. They just gain strength over time" (p. 34). This use of language matches the difficulties that both father and daughter have in dealing with the suicide. Kirby injects a bit of mystery into the text, which also is resolved in waves. The story is deceptively simple. The suicide is an unresolved issue that happened before the book begins. The fact that Kirby deals with the guilt that often threatens to drown family members dealing with suicide is another excellent part to this book. The sense of place, the poetic language, a convincing main character, the historical setting, the convincing depiction of adults (and I think it is necessary to point out that it is rare that we see an adult portrayed—convincingly—as both teen and adult), the gradual resolution of the mother's death, and the portrayal of mental health in a realistic and compassionate manner make this a book that is a must buy for high school libraries. Since this is a first time author, please mention to potential readers that Kirby's writing will appeal especially to those fans of Sarah Dessen, who has written a blurb for this book. I look forward to Kirby's next book.

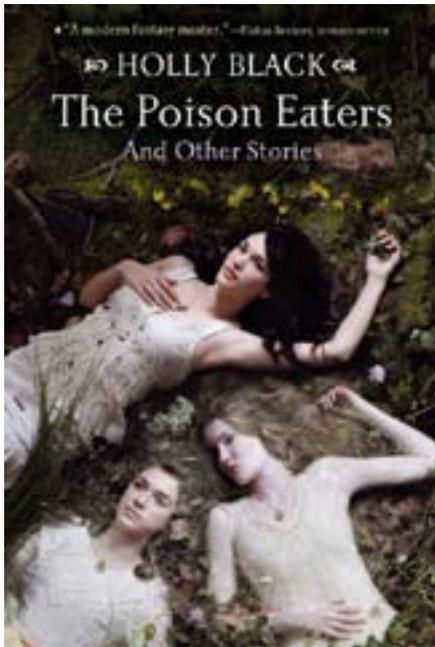
Hubbard, J. (2011). *Paper covers rock*. New York: Random House/Delacorte. 185 pp. ISBN: 978-0-385-74055-5. (Hardcover); \$17.99.*

Alex is a boarding school student with an ear for language in a school for the elite. Wracked by guilt for his failure to save a drowning classmate, Alex vents some of his emotion through his poetry. Miss Dovecott, his English teacher and object of his fantasies, is a wise and perceptive young educator. She happened to be one of the first adults on the scene the night drunken Thomas dives into the water, instead of jumping, and drowns. In Alex's writing she senses that there is a part of this story that still remains to be told. Glenn, who was with Alex and Thomas that night, lives in fear that Miss Dovecott will get them kicked out of school. Glenn hatches a plot to neutralize Miss Dovecott, and Alex and his poetry are the bait. Each year dozens of books feature poetry, but Hubbard's book may win the prize for having the most literate, most well-crafted poems published this year:

I nip them at night from the bed
 outside the dining hall—daffodils,
 hyacinths. In the morning I cradle
 them to class in a vase. My students
 ask where I got them, they know
 I don't have a yard of my own.
 I say I got them from the place
 inside me that has to bloom
 then die to make room for more green.
 They call me a thief, but they smile. (p. 47)

This book immediately recommends itself to literature lovers, both teachers and students. While the poetry in this book is excellent, Hubbard perfectly captures the sexual tension and anxiety felt by many teen boys. The ending is nuanced, believable, and surprisingly predictable, which I mean as a compliment of the highest order. The intertextual play with *Moby Dick* and “Her-man” Melville fits the story, fits Alex’s voice, adds a rich layer to the novel, and balances the “paper covers rock” game element. The way Hubbard handles Glenn and his motivations is storytelling at its finest, and she does not spoil the book by telling us the answer. This leaves the book open to multiple interpretations, which are supported by the text. Who knows? Maybe future students will be analyzing this book instead of *Moby Dick*. Did I say that the poetry is top notch? Purchase this for high school libraries and place additional copies in the classrooms of English teachers.

Black, H. (2010). *The poison eaters and other stories*. New York: Simon & Schuster/Margaret K. McElderry Books. 213 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4424-1232-3. (Paperback); \$9.99.



Holly Black’s visit to Grand Haven, Michigan, to record *The Poison Eaters and Other Stories* gave me an excuse to read this twisted collection of short stories and to conduct an interview with Holly; view it online at http://www.spicyreads.org/Author_Videos.html. When my own children were in high school, I still managed to find the time to read to them, and I have been known to read aloud to the high school students who attend my galley group meetings. They still have very fond memories of me reading Walter Dean Myer’s “The Prom Prize” from *Every Man For Himself: Ten Short Stories About Being a Guy* to more than 60 teens at one of our meetings. I am hoping that educators do not forget that short stories make excellent read alouds for students. Black’s collection will grab the attention of students, although maybe “In Vodka Veritas” is not a story that many teachers will chose to read to students, even though it has a significant Greek myth thread spilling through its pages. Filled with vampires, ghosts, werewolves, and, of course, faeries (some of whom will be familiar from her *Modern Faerie* series), Black has re-imagined these creepy characters and placed them largely in contemporary urban settings. This collection received a starred review from Kirkus. Even better, I watched a room full of teens wait for an hour to have Black sign copies of this collection of stories. Purchase these stories for high school libraries.

Violi, J. (2011). *Putting makeup on dead people*. New York: Hyperion. 330 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4231-3481-7. (Hardcover); \$16.99.*

Isn’t the title alone reason enough to purchase this one for your high school library? At the funeral of a classmate, Donna notices the eyeliner and pale eye shadow on the dead body. A bit later she meets Joe Brighton, the mortuary worker who put the simple base coat on Donna’s father when he died. If these two sentences seem off-putting, avoid this book. If quirky dark humor appeals to you, if you are a fan of *Love Curse of the Rumbaugh’s*, you will enjoy this young adult version of Deborah Wiles’s *Each Little Bird that Sings*. Donna has melted into her grief after the death of her father and needs lessons on how to say hello and interact socially. Noticing the makeup on the corpse is the beginning of Donna’s new career goal of becoming a mortician. Violi has a wicked sense of humor that serves this macabre dead people fashion show story: “Linnie’s long hair hangs in green-and-black stripes—a little painful on the eyes right next to Snooter’s bright red spikes. It’s like Christmas and Death had babies” (p. 163). In the midst of the dead bodies and burials, however, is a very sweet story of Donna learning, once again, to join the living, to take chances, to love, and to grow.

Goode, L. (2011). *Sister mischief*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press. 367 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7636-4640-0. (Hardcover); \$16.99.*

What's not to love about a group of girls from Holyhill, Minnesota, who label themselves as the baddest all-girl hip hop crew in the Twin Cities, especially when they are very aware that they are not Black? They are, however, Jewish, White, Indian, Christian, lesbian, straight, smart, idealistic, and friends. They are also determined to carve a place for the music they love in a Midwest school that is not very eager to embrace music, especially music that advocates equal rights for the LGBT community. Goode has a fine ear for language, and the song lyrics are filled with smart ideas that make the reader wish for an accompanying soundtrack. Listening to Esme Rockett and her crew of smart, rebellious teens may cause some to doubt whether these are really teens; all I can say is these conversations remind me of very similar conversations I heard from my own high school daughter. Goode allows us to see these young women and this school in all their complexity—racially, economically, culturally, intellectually, sexually, and especially, musically. For those of us older folks who are able to think back upon what our music did for us and how it energized us and made us feel alive, *Sister Mischief* will be an absolute delight, even if Esme is not doing Arlo Guthrie covers and singing old Donovan songs. Hip hop in Minnesota—love it! This book is a high school book that will be loved by students more than their less musically tolerant teaching staff.

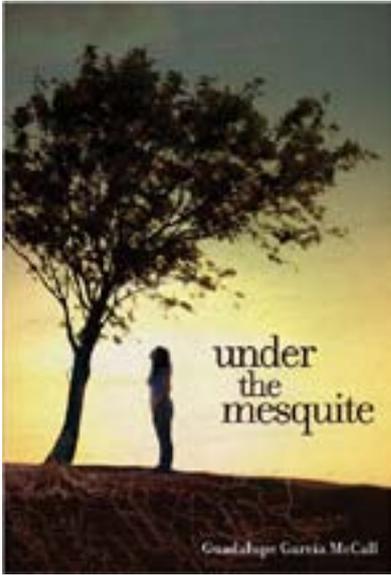
Gourlay, C. (2011). *Tall story*. New York: Random House/David Fickling Books. 298 pp. ISBN: 978-0-385-75217-6. (Hardcover); \$16.99.*

Bernardo is moving from the Philippines to London to be reunited with his mother and half-sister, Andi. Bernardo is *tall*, very tall, 8 feet tall. Andi wants to play basketball, but she's short. When she finally lands a spot on her school's basketball team, she hopes that her tall half-brother embraces basketball as firmly as she does. However, Bernardo's arrival and his dubious health due to his gigantism force the family to move, and Andi's basketball dreams are dimming. Bernardo is happy with the thought of being reunited with his mother, but in San Andres, Bernardo is revered as a savior, like his giant namesake who saved the town long ago. Ever since Bernardo's amazing growth spurt, which Bernardo believes is the result of curses from witches, earthquakes have disappeared from the town. And now he is moving away! This book mixes tall tales, folklore, witches, curses, and the culture shock of big city London after life in a small Filipino town to create a very unusual and unique personality. The magical realism allows Gourlay to broach topics like cultural apathy in a non-judgmental way:

Hundreds of Casualties in Massive Philippine Earthquake. But “hundreds” are not people, are they? And blank faces on TV are not people either. I shook myself. Andi, I told myself sternly, don't think about it. Don't drive yourself crazy. Think about something else. Think about basketball.” (p. 249)

Bernardo deals with society's expectations and the stereotyped belief that all tall people play basketball. Bernardo is just learning English and knows nothing of the school culture. He endures the frustrations of not being able to communicate very well, even with Andi, to say nothing of the fact that his physical condition has caused all 8 feet of him to come crashing to the ground. Despite these serious issues, the heart of the book is its ethereal, upbeat tone. As we witness Bernardo and Andi bonding, we straighten ourselves, stand up tall, and cheer for this exceptional story that just may dig itself onto award lists. This book will be at home in middle school and high school libraries; I can even picture a few very bright elementary students loving this one, too.

McCall, G.C. (2011). *Under the mesquite*. New York: Lee and Low Books. 224 pp. ISBN: 978-1-60060-429-4. (Hardcover); \$17.95.*



Any time a book begins with a poem about a young girl who is creeped out about finding and holding her own umbilical cord, *un tesoro*, I am hooked. These 47 poems tell the story of Lapita, a high school student trying to juggle school, friends, and family. Unfortunately Lapita’s mother’s cancer has her off balance and these juggled items come crashing down. McCall uses the Texas setting and Spanish language expertly. Mesquite in Texas evokes two very different reactions—welcomed guest or uninvited pest, which serves as an appropriate metaphor for many Mexican Americans in Texas and other states. McCall pens images of a close family: Mami peeling potatoes, Papi teaching his young daughter how to write the letter S, and the eight children swimming or watching television or doing chores around the house. However, McCall often creates poems in which readers see both the love and the problem. This book combines the mundane family detail and the unrealistic expectations of both mother and father to force readers to confront the sort of future that Lapita and her classmates should expect from society. This is really driven home a few poems later, “to be or not to be / mexican,” when her school friends angrily accuse her:

“Then stop trying to act like them,” Mireya says accusingly.

“You’re Mexican, just like the rest of us. Look around you. Ninety-nine percent of this school is Mexican.

Stop trying to be something you’re not!” (p. 81)

All the while, Lapita’s mother is slowly dying and her father has stopped working. Money is in short supply and Lapita finds herself trying and failing to fill her beloved Mami’s shoes. Her schoolwork plummets and her brothers and sisters wander off in their own direction. Lapita’s family, which is an essential part of her life, is falling apart. This is where the mesquite tree comes to play, a tree that often has roots thicker than its trunk, a tree that defies all attempts to control it or kill it.

Lapita writes poems under the mesquite. She thinks about who she wants to be under the mesquite. In the end this mesquite tree provides the strength necessary for Lapita to see herself transplanted:

A glossary of Spanish words and phrases accompanies this book. It is also a realistic look at the pressure teens face in school culture that often underestimates the importance of family in many Mexican American communities. While this book focuses on a specific Mexican American family, much of its punch is applicable to any family. Purchase this book for all high school and middle school libraries and take care to bring this book to the attention of both Spanish teachers and literature lovers.

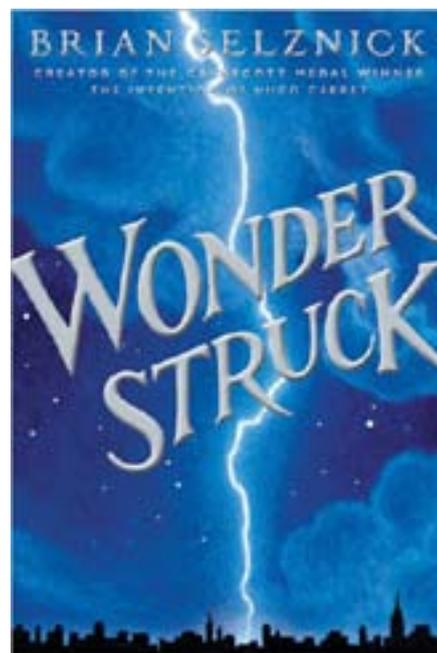
Whaley, J.C. (2011). *Where things come back*. New York: Random House/Delacorte. 232 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4424-1333-7. (Hardcover); \$16.99.*

Cullen’s brother, Gabriel, has suddenly and mysteriously disappeared during a time in which their very boring town of Lily, Arkansas, is attempting to draw in tourist dollars with sightings of the Lazarus bird, previously thought to be extinct. This book is a religious, cosmological *tour de force* that includes the study of the book of Enoch, which never really made it into the Bible—perhaps because it is so filled with fallen angels and evil kings. Enoch begins with a young man whose eyes are opened by God, and he begins to see visions. The use of this dubious spiritual book, which many believe comes from

Ethiopia, is an excellent framing device for this journey of sorting proverbial wheat from chaff. The image of the Lazarus bird suggests to readers that we will be burying beliefs and giving birth to new ones based on tradition, perception, experience, and thoughtful consideration. What I love about this book is that is actually more akin to a Pullman book—a critique of the mega-church notion of religion, but still filled with a spiritual, existential hope for a personal growth, even if ultimate meaning remains aloof. Life is good except for all of the lies and dead bodies that try to trap you into traveling to Ethiopia to serve God, for example. Along the way, we have Benton Sage struggling to discover the meaning of life. He thinks he might find it in his missionary work in Ethiopia. This rather grim tale is spiced with the voice of a teen and his sarcastic humor. Cullen is as believable as they come, and wittier. The ending of this book does a remarkable job of pulling the threads tightly together. I can't at all see this one gaining Newbery consensus, but it is my dark horse pick for Printz consideration. I love this odd little book! What's not to love about a book that mashes the South with Ethiopia; fringe religion with a presumed extinct woodpecker, which becomes a Biblical metaphor; a murder mystery with a coming of age story? When is the last time an existential thriller won a children's book award?

Selznick, B. (2011). *Wonderstruck*. New York: Scholastic Press. 640 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-545-02789-2. (Hardcover); \$29.99.

Have you ever wondered how to communicate effectively and accurately the story of someone who cannot hear? So much of my everyday world at home and in school involves sound. I speak to students. I listen to music. I notice that odd noise coming from our family room and wonder just what my dog is doing. Sound permeates just about every experience I have. Consequently, *Wonderstruck* is the perfect title for a book that accomplishes so very much, including the ability to visually sing. Both Ben and Rose are deaf, and both wish their lives were different, but not in quite the way we might expect. Both take off on a quest to discover what is missing from their lives. Ben is looking for a father whom he believes may be in New York; Rose seems to be escaping from her own home. She ends up in New York as well, with a fascination for the silent movie star, Lillian Mayhew. Rose's story is told in pictures; Ben's story uses text. These stories are about 50 years apart, but eventually they will intersect in a most satisfactory and surprising way. What is remarkable about this book is that to understand Rose's story (set 50 years before Ben's story, 1927), we need to read Ben's story; Ben's story is also completed by Rose's visual story. My first impulse after finishing was to go back and read it again, and the text and artwork reward this persistence. Both the art and text re filled with moments of agonizingly beautiful pathos that is logical and ethical. That is, the use of emotion derives logically from the story and is not inserted simply to force a reaction. The Schneider Family Book award, which awards a \$5,000 prize and a plaque to the author whose book best depicts the experiences of living with disabilities, can be given right now to Selznick. That award will only be one of several honors this amazing book will receive. The *Invention of Hugo Cabret* garnered a Caldecott medal for Selznick; there is buzz that *Wonderstruck* could be on the Newbery list this January. I will be wonderstruck if it is, but the fact that folks are talking about the text in those terms speaks to the growth in Selznick's artist-author career. Pick this book up if for no other reason than to see an example of a text that defies categorization and may give us a glimpse of a new form that other creative people will be publishing in years to come. I will not be sharing this title with my first graders, but I can easily see upper elementary students exploring the book. It seems best suited for middle school readers; but I have already heard from high school students who sing its praises.



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