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A Closer Look: Spotlight on Verse Novels

by Kristin McIlhagga, Ph.D.

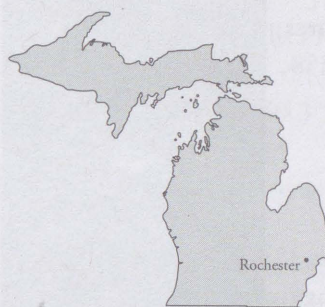
Genre and format are two key concepts for anyone reading, studying, using, or teaching with children's and young adult literature (really any literature). Genres provide readers with clues of what to expect from the content of text. Fantasy asks readers to suspend disbelief to escape into the world of a story. Historical fiction asks readers to consider an historical event to gain context of a fictional story. Non-fiction asks readers to trust the information provided as factual.

Formats provide readers with clues of how to navigate a text. Graphic novels ask readers to interpret images that are equally or more important than words on a page in order to fully understand the narrative. Picturebooks provide readers with an opportunity to consider the relationship between illustrations and text in a book. Do they mirror, enhance, or contradict each other?

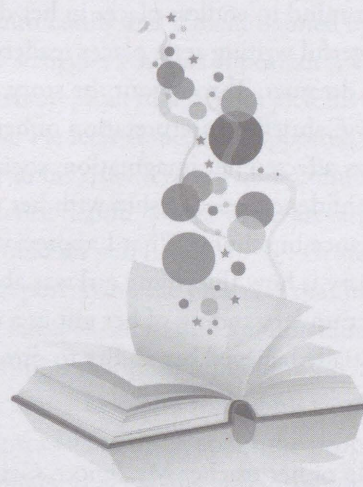
For this issue of the *Michigan Reading Journal*, we are highlighting verse novels. While titles like *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse, *Love That Dog* by Sharon Creech, and *Crossover* by Kwame Alexander are readily found in many classrooms; there are many other titles that would enhance classroom and library shelves.

Verse novels (also called poetic novels or novels in verse) are narratives "composed of separate poems that work together to tell a story" (Coats, 2018, p. 133). This form is often used in classroom instruction because of a presumed accessibility for all readers based on minimal text and a significant amount of white space that make the format appear to be a quick read. While this may be true in some instances, this narrow view of the format does a disservice to the books as well as readers.

"A good verse novel is not just an abridged version of a more complex narrative, but is instead an artistic creation where attention must be paid to form as well



**Kristin
McIlhagga, Ph.D.**



as content" (Coats, 2018, p. 134). To fully experience verse novels, it is imperative to remind our students that poetry asks readers to slow down, to linger in the word choice. In the crazy busy world of teachers, we hope that this month's reviews also inspire you to slow down and linger in the poetry of one of the books reviewed here.

Book reviews in this issue were written by teachers enrolled in Oakland University's "Author and Illustrators Craft" summer graduate course.

Reference

Coats, K. (2018). *The Bloomsbury introduction to children's and young adult literature*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Words with Wings

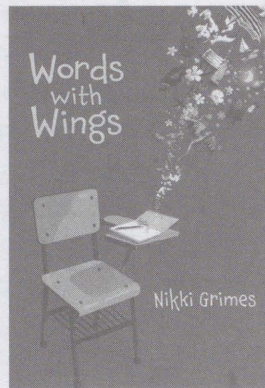
by Nikki Grimes

Word Song / Boyds Mills Press

2013, ISBN: 9781590789858

84 pgs, Grade 3 and up

Review by Mariam Fahs



Words with Wings, a novel comprised of 70 poems, tells the story of Gabriella's young life experiences. Throughout the story, author Nikki Grimes begins a verse with, "Say the word..." and shows how one word can take this little girl's brilliant mind to endless places in her dreams. Grimes's powerful writing style places readers in the mindset of a dreamer. Throughout the story, the author unpacks how Gabrielle's interpretation of her parents' separation has affected her imagination, social experiences, self-confidence, relationship with her mother, and performance in school. What I appreciated most about this story is how the young girl was able to transform her understanding of her gift as a dreamer. Gabriella initially believed her ability to dream was a disadvantage.

With the help of her teacher Mr. Spicer, Gabriella begins to realize her imagination as a value to herself and others. The story ends with Gabriella feeling eager to return to school the next day with new found confidence supported by her teacher, her classmates, and even her mother. Grimes's choice to use poetry and poetic devices to tell Gabriella's story, draws readers in to her life in a way that prose could not. Gabriella's life and experiences are accessible and encourage readers to realize that they too may be dreamers. Grimes makes this book easy to fall in love with and difficult to put down. Readers are able to see their young selves in the main character, and finish the book with a smile on their face. I highly recommend *Words with Wings* to readers of all ages.

Hurricane Dancers: The First Caribbean Pirate Shipwreck

by Margarita Engle

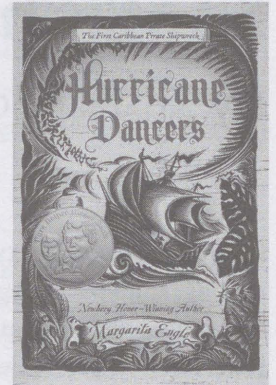
Henry Holt & Company, LLC

2011,

ISBN: 978-0-8050-9240-0

145 pgs, Grade 6 and up

Review by Veronica Klausmeier



Quebrado is a slave on the ship of the infamous Caribbean pirate Bernardino de Talavera.

This historical-fiction verse novel traces the story of Quebrado's life journey alternating between five different narrators. His name, given by the pirates, translates to "broken boy" and signifies being born to a Taino mother and a Spanish father. With a dream-like resonance, Quebrado expresses both curiosity and conflicted feelings for his Spanish father. The fear and abuse he experiences are evident from the beginning, expressed through haunting memories of his home and a longing for familial ties.

A hurricane strikes the ship, providing a terrifying yet fortunate escape for Quebrado. Engle's poetry reflects how Quebrado's emotions move from intense fear of the storm to embrace the freedom it offers. His experiences and freedoms are contrasted with the individual stories of each character who is also experiencing their own "storms" of life. After the hurricane, Quebrado goes on to experience love, acceptance, and freedoms that he could only imagine possible in his previous life as "broken boy". He befriends young lovers and offers his own acceptance and salvation in a unique and unexpected turn of events as he becomes responsible for the fate of his previous captors.

Hurricane Dancers provides a too-rare window into slavery and lives of both Native people and colonizers of the Caribbean islands. Engle weaves an entrancing story about love lost, love found, dreams, hopes, and desires, but also contrasts these stories with the darker side of humanity. It is evident that hope is a flame that cannot be extinguished, no matter how much cruelty, selfishness, or ambition is present in the individual.

Hurricane Dancers ends with Quebrado changing his name to signify embracing the freedoms that are a part of his inheritance as a human being.

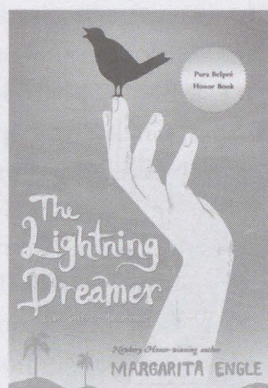
***The Lightning Dreamer:
Cuba's Greatest Abolitionist***

by Margarita Engle
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
2013,

ISBN: 978-0-547-80743-0

167 pgs, Grade 6 and up

Review by Carolyn Hughes



The Lightning Dreamer is a fictionalized biography of Cuban author and abolitionist Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda, known as Tula. Tula has always been very drawn to words and stories, and has always resented the idea that women must be married off to their highest bidder at age 14. When she encounters the words of rebel poet Jose Maria Heredia, she discovers a whole new world where one can take control of their own destiny. Driven by the rebel words, Tula begins to carve out her own path in life, challenging all the traditions held sacred by her family.

Engle's use of poetry is gentle as it flows through the page, yet each word conveys a strong message about female empowerment. Engle pays wonderful homage to Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda, using poetry to paint Tula as an intelligent and passionate free thinker. Engle's words themselves reflect deep love and admiration for the poet. Engle sets up a story where Tula is constantly challenging society's expectations, in a way that shows how Gomez de Avellaneda was light years ahead of her time. Not only does Engle portray Gomez de Avellaneda as a fierce and unapologetic feminist, but she also eloquently discusses racism in a way that is just as relevant today as it was back in the 1800s. Through her use of carefully crafted verse, Engle strings words together in a way that leaves the reader frantically highlighting their favorite passages, so that they may never forget how poignantly these sensitive topics are discussed.

Garvey's Choice

by Nikki Grimes

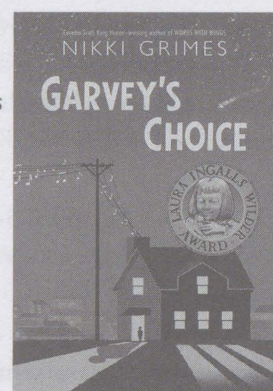
Word Song / Boyds Mills Press

2016,

ISBN: 978-1-62979-740-3

108 pgs, Grade 8 and up

Reviewed by Taylor Hargraves



Garvey is not the athletic high school student that his father wants him to be. Told in verse novel using Japanese tanka form (5-7-5-7-7 syllable count), Nikki Grimes captures the emotional roller coaster of a teenage boy trying to navigate feelings of not fitting into family and a mold defined by someone else. Garvey struggles with his appearance, as well as not being the stereotypical, high school jock his father thinks he should be. He feels alone, not supported by his father and inferior to his sister. Garvey finds comfort in *Star Trek* and science fiction novels; while his father tells him, "Football would do you better" (p. 6). Grimes does a beautiful job portraying the pressures that high school, society, and families can put on an individual. Garvey makes friendships that push him out of his comfort zone and in return help him to find his true identity, encouraging readers to think about the people that have influenced them. This moving and inspirational book pushes readers to consider both negative and positive impact they can have on others and shows readers that they do not have to surrender to the pressures cast upon them. The first-person narration reveals Garvey's raw emotions as he considers consequences of choices about his life. Throughout the book Grimes makes readers feel his pain and his loneliness and finally his triumph and relief. Garvey provides hope for anyone trying to navigate the complexities of relationships and identity in their own life.

Must Read Texts

Long Way Down

by Jason Reynolds

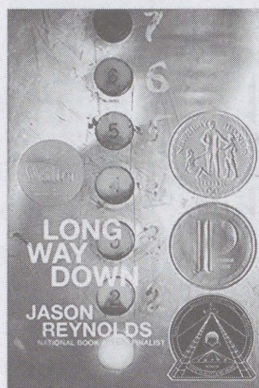
Simon & Schuster Children's
Publishing Division

2017,

ISBN: 978-1-4814-3825-4

306 pgs, Grade 8 and up

Review by Katie Raines



Jason Reynolds transforms 60 seconds on an elevator into a profound and touching story about Will, a young man struggling to make a decision that has seemingly been laid out for him by “the rules” of his neighborhood. Told in first person, Will draws readers into his mind and experiences, making it nearly impossible to put the book down. While the surface-level plot is focused on Will and his decision, a closer look reveals a deeply complex exploration of one broken, poverty-stricken neighborhood, overrun with drugs and revenge. However, it does more than just depict a boy in this life. It challenges the thinking and beliefs that promote the vicious cycle that results in its continuation and countless, senseless deaths. Told in verse, Reynolds achieves this depth using poems with titles like “Random Thought” and anagrams that provide insight to the type of person Will is and his struggles with what he feels he has to do in order to right a wrong. This gives the reader compassion and empathy for the young Will, and other young people who may be in the same or a similar situations.

Reynolds is a master of words and language and captivates the reader by personifying feelings, utilizing repetition in meaningful ways, and intense emotional descriptions that cut to the reader’s core. This verse novel beautifully describes the cyclic destruction caused by the struggles of poverty in urban areas and drug dealing, as well as Will’s realization and reflection on the devastation this has cost his family and neighborhood.

Requiem: Poems of the Terezin Ghetto

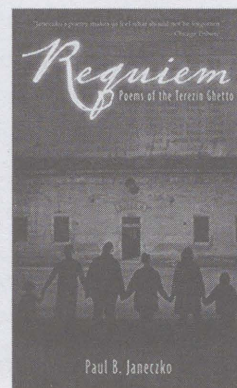
by Paul B. Janeczko, illustrated by
unknown artists from the Terezin
Ghetto

Candlewick Press

2011, ISBN: 978-0-7636-4727-8

102 pgs, Grade 8 and up

Review by Emily Carlson



There are times in history that elicit empathy, even in those who have never experienced them. The events are so unimaginable the brain has no other option than to internalize in search for comprehension. What did it look like? How did it smell? What did people feel? In *Requiem*, Paul B. Janeczko uses poetry to bring out this human reaction to the Holocaust by creating an emotional journey through the Terezin Ghetto. Using verse, he manipulates words to help his readers connect to people from long ago and far away, showing that one person’s emotions can parallel those of another, even those of someone whose experiences are different from our own.

Janeczko uses poetry to slow the reader down. He often places only one or two words on a line forcing the reader to pause, contemplate and truly digest each word’s importance. For example, throughout the novel the mood is established using lines such as “windows smashed” (p.1), “blackened burned” (p.1), “we spilled” (p. 7), “I shiver” (p. 36), “I long” (p. 67). Different than many other novels in verse, the reader is always aware they are reading poetry. Language and phrasing become the vehicle in which one travels through Terezin, slowly experiencing how the Jewish Ghetto felt.

Although a greater story is being told, importance is placed on emotions and mood over character and plot. Each poem is a first-person account by a different character who only exists for that moment and never interacts with any other characters in the book. Love is a theme woven into many of the Jewish poems. Stanzas such as, “I long/To know/The beat of your heart/Again” (p. 80) humanize the situation and allow each reader to

draw upon their own understanding of love and loss. Artwork, created by prisoners of Terezin and discovered after the end of the war, is incorporated throughout and provides another layer of depth to the book. Emotional relationships accessed through stories like *Requiem* are how we can begin to grasp something as incomprehensible as the Holocaust.

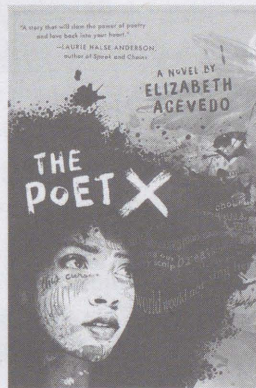
The Poet X

by Elizabeth Acevedo

Harper Teen: Harper Collins Books

2018, ISBN 978-0-06-266280

361 pgs, Grade 10 and up



“Pero, tú no eres fácil” (p. 10).

Xiomara has been told for as long as she can remember, “You sure ain’t the easy one” (p. 10).

She uses her fists when she can’t find words, doesn’t want to go to confirmation class, curses, and wants to kiss a boy. Her Mamí expects her be “la niña de la casa” (p. 42), love Jesus, and do as she is told without question. Told in first person, *The Poet X* tells the story of a teen who will not be limited by her Dominican mother, the Catholic faith, and ultimately herself.

Acevedo captures the complexities of Xiomara’s growing awareness of her own sexuality, wrestling with the messages she receives from home, church, and Caridad, who reminds her that feelings of lust are a sin. She is trying to sort out how it is possible to be attracted to men, when they also lust after her and make lude comments. Then, in sophomore biology, Xiomara is assigned to work with a boy named Aman. They begin meeting to share music and soon, “In my dreams, his is a mouth that knows more than curses and prayer...” (p. 85).

Xiomara’s twin brother (who she calls Twin) and her friend Caridad are foundations in her life. Twin is quiet, a genius, and Xiomara is sure he is the only man she will ever love (because he won’t hurt her). When Twin finds a crumpled announcement for a poetry club at her high school, he pulls it from the trash, flattens

it and says to Xiomara, “The world’s been waiting for your genius a long time” (p. 73). Caridad is like a sister to the twins; the three grew up together, and she is the friend that is always there for Xiomara, but also calls her out on her BS.

On one level, *The Poet X* is about Xiomara’s relationships with Mami, Papi, Twin, Caridad, and Aman; relationships with her teacher Ms. Galiano and other kids at school; and about her relationship with God and the church. But ultimately, this is a book about Xiomara learning about herself and finding her own voice. Her English teacher, Ms. Galiano provides support, encouragement, and space for Xiomara to share the poetry she has always written. Acevedo’s choice to write this story using poetry adds to the complexity of Xiomara’s character and adds a depth and feeling in ways that prose never could.

Author Biography

Dr. Kristin McIlhagga is an Assistant Professor of Reading and Language Arts at Oakland University. Her interests include children’s and adolescent literature, teacher education, language arts methods, English education, and multicultural literature. She can be reached at kmcilhagga@oakland.edu.

