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Bookends: Reviews of Young Adult Literature

BY JENNIFER CRAMER, EDITOR

INCLUDING REVIEWS BY DEB MCNEIL AND KAITY NETTLE

The adolescent characters encountered in many of the books reviewed this month are struggling with what many of us encounter on a daily basis. They are examining societal and familial ideas and legacies in order to define and forge their own burgeoning identities. But does this process end when we leave adolescence? Truly it does not. This process of looking at one's past to define one's present never ends. Perhaps this is why Young Adult (YA) literature is such an enjoyable feast for adults as well as teens. Ironically, reading allows us to escape our own overwhelming or mundane moments as we experience the monumental circumstances the characters face.

As teachers and parents, reading YA novels offers a world of opportunity for communication with adolescents; if there's a bridge to gap, sharing books that remind us of our common goals and histories is one of the best ways to do that! For this reason, I asked a special friend of mine, 11th grade Avondale High School student Kaity Nettle, to review two books for this column. Kaity is a voracious reader who often "test drives" my books before I even have a chance! Another review is written by friend and "library keeper" Deb McNeil, with whom I often discuss books and from whom I steal candy corns. May you enjoy their book reviews as much as I enjoy my reading friends!

Zevin, Gabrielle. (2007). *Memoirs of a Teenage Amnesiac*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux. 271 pp. ISBN: 0-374-34946-0 (Hardcover) \$17.00

In *Memoirs of a Teenage Amnesiac*, we learn from Naomi what it might be like to suffer a head injury and forget the last several years of one's life. After falling headfirst down stairs at her high school, Naomi becomes an amnesiac and has to reacquire herself with her group of friends, her hobbies, her boyfriend Ace, and her family. She has forgotten key elements of the last 4 years of her life: her parents are divorced, her mother is remarried, and she has a half-sister, Chloe, whom she wants nothing to do with. She and her father have relocated to a very beige and modern home and her dad is engaged to marry Rosa Rivera, an eccentric tango dancer. She apparently loves tennis and working on the yearbook with her witty and faithful friend, Will, yet these activities don't seem to hold the same fascination for her as they did prior to her injury.

It doesn't take long for Naomi to begin re-discovering herself. After breaking up with affable but not-so-deep Ace, Naomi gets involved in drama in order

to get closer to James, a mysterious boy who was nearby when she fell. It is this relationship that ultimately serves as the catalyst for Naomi's healing. James is a troubled young man who attempted suicide after the death of his older brother, and Naomi feels she can relate to his difficult past. It leads her to question her current life as she abandons much of what—and whom—she used to hold dear.

As we near the end of the story, Naomi's memory returns. Though she chooses not to reveal this to anyone, a surprising discovery leads her to realize she is not only who she was before the accident but also who she became afterward. *Memoirs of a Teenage Amnesiac* allows the reader to consider why it sometimes takes serious circumstances to open our eyes to that which is beaming brightly in front of us all along. Zevin's repeated reference to Emily Dickinson's poem "I'm Nobody" reinforces the idea that sometimes we have to forget who we are in order to become who we are meant to be. (JC)

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Moore, Perry. (2007). *Hero*. New York: Hyperion DBG. 428 pp. ISBN 1-4231-0195-2 (Hardcover) \$16.99

Perry Moore, an executive producer of the Chronicles of Narnia films, has created a wholly unique fantasy adventure in his first novel, *Hero*. While accustomed to the superhero genre with its many films, comics, and fans, I had never before read a novel that blends the genre with the difficult realities of teenage life until now. The novel is set in a society typical of today with one key difference. There is a league of Superheroes who pretty much take care of business when it comes to the criminal element of the world.

Thom, a high school basketball star, is struggling with a variety of issues including coming to terms with his homosexuality. Equally complicated is his father's tainted past as a legendary superhero left maligned and disfigured after a devastating incident and his mother's disappearance. (No one ever claimed it was easy being a superhero).

Events intensify as Thom discovers his own secret power when he "auditions" for a league where each player has to overcome individual weakness to, well you know, Save the World. In the midst of the action, Thom unlocks secret batcaves from his parents' past, discovers that heroes are not always what they seem, and realizes "These Powers, they're just a part of you, Thom, but they're not all of you" (367). To further complicate the story, Thom faces falling out of favor with his quietly heroic but disgraced father after falling for a secretive, confusing guy. Thom meets all these challenges with candid likeability.

With the popularity among teens of shows like "Heroes," this book has memorable and relevant characters that pack a punch leaving me to anticipate more from this creative author. (JC)

Westerfield, Scott. *Extras*. (2007). New York: Simon Pulse. 417pp. ISBN 1-4169-5117-2 (Hardcover) \$16.99

Up until this point, fans of Scott Westerfield's wildly popular *Uglies* trilogy have been exposed to a futuristic world in which adolescents undergo surgery to make themselves beautiful. Unfortunately, this surgery creates more than pretty faces thanks to a secret "intervention" designed to keep pretties unconcerned with anything except having a good time and looking swell. Rounding out the first trilogy is a moral struggle between two rival factions.

Westerfield's first New York Times #1 Bestseller, *Extras*, is possibly his best book yet. While it is unusual, perhaps even contrary, to have a fourth book in a trilogy, Westerfield creates some intriguing new characters for his eager audience by building on the effects and history of the society he's imagined.

Aya Fuse is at the center of the action as a "reputation bomber." An insecure but extremely determined "extra," her popularity and prettiness factor are of embarrassingly low rank. Her initial plan to report a story about train-riding girls is motivated by her need to up her face rank. There are a lot of questions in this new society, however, where popularity is the only thing that matters and every move is recorded on camera. Just as things become more dangerous for Aya and her friends, hero Tally Youngblood of the *Uglies* trilogy makes her appearance. It seems Aya has uncovered a secret that could result in world-shaking possibilities and not all of them good! But rather than risk spoiling one or all of these novels for readers, what happens next will remain top secret!

This series of novels offers an excellent, thought-provoking escape from a teenager's daily reality. At the same time, the stories bridge to reality by addressing debates about reconciling our true selves with the demands and expectations of misled societal perceptions. What is particularly exciting are the descriptions of ever-advancing technology and gadgetry the young are pioneering. Finally, the names and labels for people, objects, and circumstances provoke interest in the language itself about how it will evolve over time. (KN)

Gee, Joshua. *Encyclopedia Horrifica: The Terrifying TRUTH! About Vampires, Ghosts, Monsters and More*. (2007). Hong Kong: Scholastic, Inc. 129 pp. ISBN 0-439-92255-0 (Hardcover) \$14.99

Although many of my students love to read, there are always a couple of books my die-hard "non-readers" dive for during SSR. The *Ripley's Believe it or Not* books are a safe bet (one of which recently disappeared, believe it or not, from my classroom) and now adding to that collection is *Encyclopedia Horrifica: The Terrifying TRUTH! About Vampires, Ghosts, Monsters and More*. Highly appealing to a variety of teens because of its scintillating look at aliens, psychic phenomena, ghosts, Dracula, Krakens, mermaids and more, the book also includes a gallery of fascinating pictures and illustrations on

every creepily colorful page. Author Gee announces to readers in an introductory letter that he has been fascinated by the "origins of fright" since he was a child and shares his hobby with flair. The pages combine timelines, lists, trivia bubbles, documents, artifacts, old posters, and images that keep readers (and, for that matter, self-proclaimed non-readers) happily busy and highly entertained. Among the details included is a list of phobia names: fear of Bogeymen, "Bogyphobia," fear of books (huh??) "Bibliophobia," the eight stages of fright as described by ghost hunters Dom and Dan, the Top Five Most Horrific Hoaxes, The Forbidden Bookshelf, and a timeline of Alien History.

This is a great book for all adolescents with its reader-friendly format including a table of contents, selected bibliography of great sources, and an index. Teens will love learning the story of the Bell Witch, matching wits with the experts' analysis of ghostly images caught on camera, discovering the curse of the Hope Diamond, and testing their own ESP abilities with the Zener flash cards. I especially recommend this for the "reluctant" readers who enjoy shorter pieces that provoke discussion and reader interaction! (JC)

Cave, Patrick. *Sharp North*. (2006). Atheneum. 528 pp. ISBN 978-1416912224 (Hardcover) \$16.95

In *Sharp North*, English author Patrick Cave presents the story of Great Britain and Scotland in the future where an ice age, brought about by ecological indifference, is nearing an end. The people are ruled by "The Great Families" who have usurped political power by cloning themselves and keeping "spares" in outlying countries. At the same time, The Great Families have been controlling the fertility options of the rest of the country.

Sharp North opens with an intriguing sequence in which teenage Mira, out for a run in the frozen landscape of Scotland, witnesses the murder of a woman who has been watching her. This event is witnessed by her friend, Gil. When Mira returns to the scene, the murdered woman has disappeared, and Mira finds a scrap of paper once held in the victim's hand. Both Mira's and Gil's names are printed on the

paper followed by the unsettling word *watcher*. This puzzling experience leads to a series of events that will forever change Mira's life. Mira sets out on an adventurous search of her origins and the world in which she lives. With the help of a boy intrigued with her, Mira ultimately comes to an understanding of the corrupt events that have left her world a tenuous place.

Cloning, genetic engineering, and global climactic change are exciting and prevalent topics today in literature for both teens and adults. *Sharp North* fills the imagination's desire for future possibilities with adventure and imagination from a variety of perspectives. Look for this planned trilogy to continue! (DM)

Hall, Barbara. *The Noah Confessions*. (2007). New York: Delacorte Press. 215 pp. ISBN 978-0-385-73328-1 (Hardcover) \$15.99

"Whatever is darkest in you needs to be dragged out into the light. Not ignored or denied. Acknowledged and announced. Then you can stop suffering. You weren't born to suffer" (187). This is the advice lovingly given to 16-year-old Linnie Russo by her mother, Cat, who died in a car accident 8 years before. The advice is direct evidence of what Linnie's mother had experienced years before when she herself was Linnie's age. It is given to Linnie as she hovers between life and death after a surfing accident (These circumstances may provide extra incentive to consider a mother's advice).

The Noah Confessions begins when Linnie learns from her father of a mystery regarding her mother's upbringing. Her father believes it is time for his daughter to know of her mother's history and, therefore, her own legacy. The novel takes on a story-within-a-story format that allows readers to slip between Linnie's narrative and her parent's history written as a letter by Cat as a teenager. What Linnie learns about her mother is more than vanilla family history. Cat's shocking confession and its aftermath are revealed and we discover that Cat did not spend her short life ignoring or denying what was dark in her life. She was able to overcome it and find love in the process. Will Linnie be able to do the same? (JC)

Almond, David; Colfer, Eoin; Doyle, Roddy; Ellis, Deborah; Hornby, Nick; Lanagan, Margo; Maguire, Gregory; Ozeki, Ruth; Park, Linda Sue; Wynne-Jones, Tim. *Click*. (2007). New York: Scholastic/Arthur A. Levine Books. 213 pp. ISBN 0-439-41138-6 (Hardcover) \$16.99

A probable mermaid, Russian prisoners, an Irish hooligan, a futuristic Australian girl, a Japanese war veteran, and his angry brother await you as the many characters whose stories are deliciously told and intriguingly interwoven in *Click*. George Keane, or "Gee" as he is more frequently called, is a man who lived a big life as a famous photojournalist. When he dies, he leaves his bereft and beloved granddaughter, Maggie, a gift in the form of a puzzle. He leaves his angry, adolescent grandson, Jason, a gift as well. For Maggie and Jason, these gifts will have much to do with the people they meet, how their lives are lived, and who they eventually become.

Gee was not the sort of man to live an average life rife with typical experiences. His work took him through wars, continents, and a number of eras causing him and his camera to affect many lives. The stories of these many lives and their connection to Gee's, Maggie's, and Jason's is a tale about learning to love unconditionally. While Gee may have not been a perfect human, he touched all who encountered him.

Almost as wonderful as the story itself is its origin. Ten writers co-authored this book, each writing a chapter, and the royalties from the sale of *Click* benefit Amnesty International. In spite of each chapter having been written by a different author, the finished narrative is captivating with a plot that never loses its seamless but distinct rhythm. Each chapter is told from the point of view of a different character with some able to function as stand-alone stories. The sparkle lies in the riveting voice of each author. Characters of all different ages live in the past, present, and future. The novel is a study in voice and genre with the unique style of each storyteller blending masterfully into one story for multiple readers. Very well done! (JC)

Shusterman, Neal. *Unwind*. 2007. New York: Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers. 335 pp. ISBN 1-4169-1204-5 (Hardcover) \$16.99

We might not know what the future holds but we hope it's not this: A second "civil war" fought over pro-life versus pro-choice. In order to end the war, the constitution has been amended to include what is known as "The Bill of Life." Hoping to satisfy both sides, it has been decided that "human life may not be touched from the moment of conception until a child reaches the age of thirteen." This is where it gets ugly: from the time a child turns 13 until the age of 18, the child's parents may choose to have that child "unwound." Unwinding is a process of keeping the child alive, but in a different form. The child does not technically die but goes through a process where body parts, all of them, are broken down and used for transplants.

Why, you ask, would parents allow their children to be "unwound"? If a child is more trouble than a parent had bargained for, parents simply sign an order sending their troublemaking juvenile to a Harvest Camp where roasting marshmallows and swimming are not top priority. After signing the order, parents cannot change their minds or the outcome. Such is the case with Connor, a slightly angry but otherwise normal 16-year-old who decides he is not going to hang around once he learns of his parents' signing. Risa, an orphan living in a state home until her time to unwind, and Lev, a boy destined to be unwound for an elevated and supreme purpose, complete the cast of characters. When these three meet under extraordinary circumstances, the reader should be prepared for another surprising change.

This story had me quickly turning pages to learn the fates of these carefully crafted characters. In one especially shocking chapter, the unwinding experience is vividly conveyed causing the reader to consider the value of life itself. A must-read! (JC)

Meyer, Stephenie. *Eclipse*. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 629 pp. ISBN 0-316-16020-2 (Hardcover) \$18.99

If you haven't read Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* and *New Moon* yet, you don't know what you're

missing! Now Bella is back in the third installment of the addictive series. In *Twilight*, Bella moves to Washington state to live with her dad having no idea what sort of adventure and romance await her. After falling in love with gorgeous Edward, she soon learns why this mysterious boy is so elusive and unique. Their romance has more than the usual ups and downs because Edward is a vampire who practices restraint from feasting on human blood! That doesn't mean he's not tempted by the clumsy but loveable human, Bella. This temptation proves to be too much for Edward who leaves Bella heartbroken. While it may seem that this would end the adventure, we are now introduced to a second set of characters including the handsome and affable Jacob Black who has an equally powerful secret. In order to save Edward, Bella must travel to Italy to prove that her love for him transcends pesky details—like the difference between being alive and *undead*.

In the highly anticipated *Eclipse*, Edward Cullens' family has returned to Forks where Edward and Bella's story continues with even more surprises

and complications. Bella is relentlessly hunted by the bloodthirsty Victoria, who will stop at nothing to exact revenge. As a rampage of mysterious killings terrorizes Seattle, the Cullens fear the worst. A group of brutal vampires are determined to end Bella's existence. It seems the Cullens alone are not enough to stop them leading two groups of enemies to join together in their shared concern for the heroine. Readers will turn each page in suspense as the story reaches a climax of unpredictable proportion.

Teenagers line up to beg for, borrow, or buy these books from anyone who can supply them. (Ms. Cramer's first copy of *Eclipse* disappeared from her classroom within days; it has still not been found!) Stephenie Meyer has created a series that allows readers an escape that is both realistic and fantastic. It is not uncommon to find teens on the author's Web site eager to learn what she has planned next. Currently, Meyer's is working on a new version of *Twilight* told from Edward's perspective. Clearly, this author understands that, like potato chips, you can never read just one! (KN)