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Bookends: Reviews of Young Adult Literature

BY ED SPICER

The books featured in this review range from picture books appropriate for teens to historical fiction, nonfiction, and books marketed for adults that will have plenty of teen crossover interest. Most of these books have been nominated for Best Books for Young Adults (BBYA) and seem to me—as a committee member—to be a sure bet to make the list.

These reviews begin with picture books and end with the horror, fantasy, and science fiction books—books that are ALWAYS the most popular books among teens. In the middle are some of my personal favorites, including *A Room On Lorelei Street*. Enjoy!

Picture Books for Teens

Every so often, a picture book that defies classification arrives on my doorstep. I am firmly convinced that David Weisner's books (for example, *The Three Pigs* and *Sector 7*) are perfect for middle school and high school students. So far this year I have read three picture books that will appeal to a wide variety of age groups. The first, *Michael Rosen's Sad Book*, was reviewed in the spring 2005 *Michigan Reading Journal* Window Seat column by Linda Pavonetti. However, this is the kind of book that bears revisiting.

Rosen, Michael. (2005) *Michael Rosen's Sad Book*. (Ill. by Quentin Blake)
Cambridge, MA: Candlewick. 32 pp. ISBN: 0-7636-2597-3 (Hard Cover);
\$16.99.

Michael Rosen's smiling face greets us on page 1. We expect smiles in picture books. His smile, however, does not seem to fit the text that describes a very big kind of sad. Closer inspection of the illustration, however, reveals a forced smile. We see that this smile is superficial and the text makes it clear that Rosen smiles because we expect the people we like to behave in this way.

Rosen discloses that his son Eddie is dead, and his *Sad Book* is gut-wrenchingly honest. In one sequence we see Eddie as a baby, as a young boy, then as a teen. The final frame is blank because Eddie is dead. Rosen exhibits his anger and hints at a dark rage, "*Sometimes because I'm sad I do bad things. I can't tell you what they are. They're too bad. And it's not fair to the cat.*"

Little things like doing one thing to be proud of each day or realizing the difference between "sad" and "bad" begin to make a difference for Rosen. He remembers rainy days with his mum, Eddie laughing, and birthday parties with cakes and candles. The words are perfect in their force; what is acknowledged and what is unstated.

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The last pages of the book show Rosen in front of a single candle that implies both secular and spiritual light. The gray is greatly reduced and we see hints that tomorrow will be much brighter. Quentin Blake has done a superb job illustrating the text.

Woodson, Jacqueline. (2005). *Show Way*. (Ill. by Hudson Talbott) New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons. unpag. ISBN: 0-399-23749-6 (hardcover); \$16.99.

Students often tell me that, "History bores me." Perhaps some of the reason for this is their inability to knit a connection between historical events and personal history. Jacqueline Woodson's *Show Way* weaves together both personal history and historical events seamlessly.

From the quilted cover that illustrates a young girl with a shining candle and images of other slave scenes stitched on muslin, we journey with Woodson's family as if we were on the underground railroad or at a segregated school. The language of the story echoes with sounds from an oral storytelling tradition. Using Woodson's family as the fabric, we are wrapped in a quilt that protects us from slave catchers, whips, and dogs so that the most abiding memory is one of feeling loved: "*Loved that baby up so. Yes, she loved that baby up.*"

Teachers will use this book to discuss freedom quilts, escapes from slavery, and how words and symbols can convey distinctly different meanings. Careful inspection of these pages will reveal Harriet Tubman, Langston Hughes, Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King and many more, including a very realistic illustration of Woodson and her daughter Toshi. I hope this book finds a home in both elementary and secondary classrooms. *Show Way* is another exemplary example of *broom jumping* words and illustrations, which is to say words that are perfectly wed to the illustrations.

Nelson, Marilyn. (2005). *A Wreath For Emmett Till*. (Ill. by Philippe Lardy) Boston: Houghton Mifflin. unpag. ISBN: 0-618-39752-3 (hardcover); \$17.00.

Over the years I've attempted to write several sonnets with varying degrees of success. Generously speaking, I have two sonnets worthy of sharing. Nelson has written a heroic crown of sonnets to tell the story of Emmett Till. Just try writing one of these! Not only does she use the classic 14-line iambic pentameter Petrarchan form for each poem, but she also creates a "crown," linking each sonnet thematically by repeating the last line of one sonnet as the (somewhat altered) first line of the next. The 15th sonnet is composed of the first line of the previous 14 sonnets. Additionally, the first letter from each of the lines in the 15th sonnet spells out the phrase, "R.I.P. Emmett L. Till."

The form is excruciatingly exact, classical, and formal; it describes, perhaps, the most despicable act of violence in our country's history. The juxtaposition of exacting form and unspeakable cruelty produces a book that needs not apologize to those who (mistakenly) view YA literature as "lit lite." The illustrations employ blood red trees and Janus-like crows that speak of both death and deliverance and reinforce the poems' themes in ways that words cannot.

Far too few students know about the person Emmett Till. Here is a book brimming with literary quality and a message that is concurrently beautiful and horrific. Put this book into the hands of every high school advanced placement teacher for both literature and history. Don't be surprised to find that you need a box of tissues to read this remarkable collection of sonnets.

Non-Fiction

Bartoletti, Susan Campbell. (2005). *Hitler Youth: Growing Up In Hitler's Shadow*. New York: Scholastic. 176 pp. ISBN: 0-439-35379-3 (hardcover); \$19.95.

Bartoletti asks readers to put themselves in the shoes of individuals who were young adults during the 1930s then decide how responsible young people are for Hitler's rise to power and the associated horrors of the Holocaust. In a world where far too few students understand the meaning of the First Amendment and far too many students are willing to give away freedom, I'd love to ask students to write or tell me why they would or would not have joined the Hitler Youth movement. *Hitler Youth* combines poignant prose and paralyzing photographs in a fascinating nonfiction narrative that commands readers' attention. This book includes a bibliography, reading list, index, and a biographical update on the 12 individuals whose stories frame this stunning but chilling history.

Realistic Fiction

Levithan, David. (2005). *Are We There Yet?* New York: Knopf. 216 pp. ISBN: 0-375-82846-X (hardcover); \$15.95.

David Levithan continues to develop as one of the finest, most versatile authors writing today. *Are We There Yet?* explores the emotional distance and the psychic connections between two brothers, Elijah and Danny.

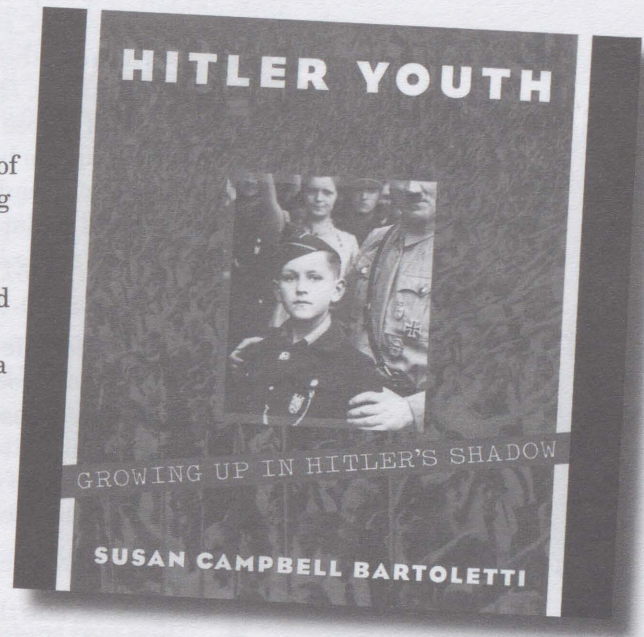
The brothers are manipulated into a trip to Italy by their parents. Elijah and Danny do not have much in common. In fact, they don't much like each other. Danny thinks Elijah is lazy: "The moment shifts; Elijah is still happy, but it's a different happiness. A daylight happiness, a lightbulb happiness" (p. 5). Elijah knows that Danny is a snob: "People at work pay attention to Danny Silver because he single-thoughtedly saved the Miss Jane's Homemade Petite Snack Cakes account" (p. 7).

They begin as tourists together—"We are like freshmen, Elijah thinks. The incoming class of tourists He wants encounters instead of plans—the magic of appearance rather than the architecture of destination" (p. 50)—and learn to become travelers. "It takes a traveler, not a tourist, to search for something deeper. Travelers want to find the wavelength on which they and the city connect" (p. 62). Danny and Elijah reflect on their relationship guided by Elijah's magic and Danny's architecture. Eventually they find through memories and experiences something deeper. Their relationship is no longer touristy; they are travelers.

Like *A Room on Lorelei Street*, this book is filled with luscious language and a mood so palpable that we swear we smell the pasta cooking. Another must-read for those who love language that sings.

Krovatin, Chris. (2005) *Heavy Metal and You*. New York: Scholastic/Push. 186 pp. ISBN: 0-439-73648-X (read in galleys) \$16.95.

Metal head, *not Goth*. Sam likes his life LOUD until a very different, straightedge girl starts whispering to him. Melissa tempts Sammy away from drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, but can she turn down the VOLUME?



The form of this book, with its pause, rewind, forward, fast-forward, and stop button icons screams loudly right along with the metal music language. The book explores the timeless dilemma of the balance between love, sex, and friendships in an entirely unique way. Especially important is the way this book grants permission to boys—even head-bangin', mosh pittin', metal-pierced boys—to feel good about sharing feelings with each other. Teens familiar with Slayer and other metal bands will enjoy feeling like guides. *Heavy Metal and You* should be required reading material for school personnel whose teens are fans of this sort of music. Fortunately the book is written well enough to be purchased for sheer pleasure by any school that enjoys carefully crafted books and fine writing. This book is one of my top 10 of the more than 150 books read to date.

Pearson, Mary E. (2005). *A Room On Lorelei Street*. New York: Henry Holt 266 pp. ISBN: 0-8050-7667-0 (hardcover); \$16.95.

Zo—eeeeee has an alcoholic mother who forgets a lot of little details, like paying rent. “A real room with real floors and walls. A room for sleeping and reading and dancing and ... in her imaginations she has pictured the room, but she has never seen herself in it” (p. 22). Zoe is forced to assume the adult role and tend to details. She pays the bills. She takes care of the car registration. She negotiates with the people who haven't been paid. And she is tired of being the adult.

When Zoe decides to rent a room of her own:

She pauses, startled, but absorbed in the simple sensation of her feet on a smooth, clean floor. She looks around the room. Is it really hers? Clean. Empty of past. She sits on the window seat and props her feet on a lavender pillow. Before laundry, before anything, she needs to sit. She needs to be. Just be. She closes her eyes, leaning back against the alcove. Zoe. Zoe listening to evening chirps through an open window. Zoe fingering a golden tassel. Zoe tasting space. Zoe owning the room. (p. 113)

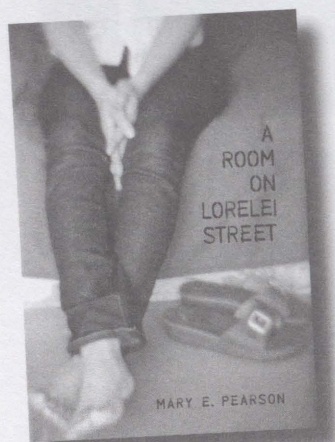
Zoe quickly discovers, however, that distancing herself physically from her family does NOT distance her emotionally, and now she has rent to pay on top of all her emotional luggage. Pearson's book sings. Its exquisite language paints rooms and characters with vivid three-dimensional colors making it difficult to believe that we are reading fiction. *A Room on Lorelei Street* is a must read for sophisticated high school readers and one of my early favorites for Printz consideration.

Fantasy and Science Fiction Novels

Every year, publishers usher into print dozens of new dark fantasy, horror, and science fiction titles for older teens. This year is no exception. Of the titles nominated for BBYA, the following books are my favorites, including one title, *Gil's All Fright Diner*, which is published for adults but will surely attract teen attention and intense discussion.

Black, Holly. (2005). *Valiant: A Modern Tale of Faerie*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 314 pp. ISBN: 0-689-86822-7 (hardcover); \$16.95.

When Val invites her boyfriend, Tom, to a hockey game, Ruth jokes that she might be able to make a boy of him yet. Val has had a tough time in school as well as in her social life: she was kicked off the lacrosse team because “Princess Badass of Badassia” does not tolerate bullies making lesbian jokes about her and Ruth. Val's mother is also interested in Tom—but unfortunately, Val is the last to know that her mother and her boyfriend are having an affair.



Val runs. She is not really running away, just running. Eventually she finds herself in the company of Lolli, Dave, and Luis then makes a "delivery" to a woman who has hooves instead of feet. Shortly after, Val meets Ravus the troll whose drugs alleviate metal poison symptoms for the fairies, but have magical, hallucinogenic properties for Val and her homeless human crew. Ravus presses Val into his service and teaches her how to sword fight. When the murders of Ravus's customers are linked with his deliveries, Val must fight for both of their lives as she slowly sinks into addiction.

While this book is definitely a fantasy, lovers of contemporary realistic fiction will adopt this book as one for them too. Adult situations are depicted obliquely. The ultimate message of fidelity and the meaning of beauty make this book appropriate for older teens.

Jeapes, Ben. (2005). *New World Order*. New York: Random House/David Fickling Books. 435 pp. ISBN: 0-385-75013-7 (hardcover); \$15.95.

Jeapes has written a book that will require a genre footnote; I don't know that there is an historical science fiction category! It is 1645. Oliver Cromwell's influence is on the rise. King Charles I is embroiled in a civil war. John Donder (pronounced Dhon Do in his native Holekhor) is a general and with the discovery of a new portal, he has returned to annex England for his Lord the Domon'el of Golekh.

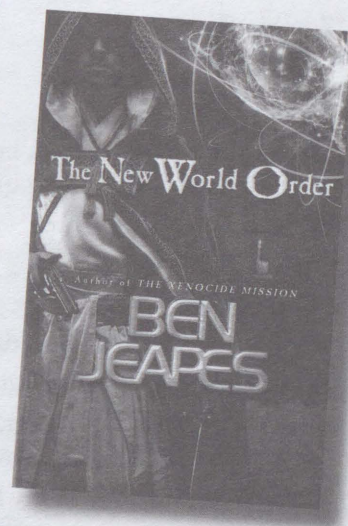
Dhon Do has machine guns and he commands a fleet of airships that will annihilate the English. Cromwell has his wits and the help of Mistress Connolly, who hates the Golekhi for the crimes visited upon her people in the Holekhor world. Wild cards include Dhon Do's miraculous son (no one believed the Golekhi and the English could produce children) and the Wise whose abilities are centered in the geophysical alignment of the lines of power.

Despite the seeming anachronisms and improbabilities in this short summary, the events described feel historical, and we get swept into believing that King Charles or Cromwell could very well have spoken and acted as presented. Jeapes places us firmly in the mid 1600s with language that will challenge and not discourage teen readers. The book includes a postscript explaining (and inventing) the mix of history and fiction. You have to read this one to believe it. It is a significant literary accomplishment.

Martinez, A. Lee. (2005). *Gil's All Fright Diner*. New York: Tor. 372 pp. ISBN: 0-765-31471-1 (Paperback); \$12.95.

On the opposite end of the age spectrum from Jacquelyn Woodson's *Show Way*, is *Gil's All Fright Diner*, published as an adult book. Both books earn the distinction as "teen" books, despite having very different intended audiences, by virtue of the ways they mix quality writing with teen appeal. *Gil's All Fright Diner*, however, is NOT a book to place in the hands of readers easily offended by cursing and, to a lesser degree, sexual situations and descriptions.

Earl the vampire and Duke the werewolf are traveling companions, redneck traveling companions who like guzzling beer and don't mind fighting zombies if pressed into service. When they stop at Gil's Diner so Duke can eat, which annoys Earl, readers already have a very clear picture of their relationship. They sound like an old bickering married couple, well versed in the habits and foibles of each.



"You could'a got a sandwich. That's your problem. You never think ahead. You're always living in the now. You've got one of them there reactive minds."

Duke cursed the day Earl had gotten his hands on a dog-eared copy of *Dianetics* (p. 12).

In addition to paying hefty, bulk-rate fees for zombie disposal, Lorreta, the diner owner, needs to install a gas line for her stove. A couple of hundred bucks, some free gas for their truck, and two free pieces of pie clinch the deal for Earl and Duke, and they settle down in the diner's storeroom. Zombies are only the beginning of Duke and Earl's problems. Tammy, AKA Mistress Lilith, Queen of the Night, and all one (1) of her current followers, Chad, have designs on the diner. Earl and Duke confront zombie cows, ghosts, and evil Magic 8 Balls, and it's all in a day's work.

"Thanks. So you wanna tell me what happened to your fingers."

"Zombie Cow."

"Longhorn?"

"Jersey."

Earl winced. "That's gotta be embarrassing. I mean, a big, badass werewolf like yourself getting his ass kicked by Bossie the milk cow."

"Funny."

"Or was it Bessie?"

Duke cracked his knuckles one at a time. Earl knew that to be a sign of dangerous annoyance but couldn't help himself.

He snapped his fingers. "I got it. It had to be a Clarabell. Am I right?"

Duke's arm moved in a blur. Earl felt the sting of the spoon imbedded in his gut before he actually saw it.

"Damn it, Duke. This is my favorite shirt." (p. 59)

Readers will find themselves annoying those nearby by virtually continuous laughter and the compulsion to read page after page of sidesplitting one-liners to anything with ears. This book is the most hilarious work I've read this year. Duke and Earl are characters that I hope to meet again in books to come.

Meyer, Stephanie. (2005). *Twilight*. New York: Little Brown. 499 pp. ISBN: 0-316-16017-2 (read in galleys); \$17.99.

Twilight is another vampire book and it has a most interesting premise: Edward and his family work diligently to shed the vampire stereotype that has plagued their kind for generations. Edward's father is a doctor. Daily encounters with blood are a normal part of his routine. Edward's brother and sister are fine students and much admired despite being extremely aloof. The family carefully studies the environment and sates their blood needs in an ecologically sound fashion, culling a deer here or an elk, but bear hunting is the preferred way to procure a meal. These are normal, conscientious, good citizen vampires and they just want to get along.

When Isabella Swan moves to town, she pieces together the truth about Edward and his family. Much to his family's dismay, Edward becomes closer and closer friends with Bella. He tries to assure her that she is safe with him, but her neck, oh her neck, is looking sweeter and sweeter every minute. When a street-wise, feral gang

of vampires come to town, the problems of Bella and Edward elevate to dangerous levels. This book is appropriate for middle school readers and of interest to the full range young adult readers.

Wooding, Chris. (2005). *Poison*. New York: Scholastic,/Orchard Books. 273 pp.
ISBN: 0-439-75570-0 (read in galleys); \$16.99.

In *The Haunting of Alaiabel Cray* (2004), Wooding proved that he is a master of mood by creating a sense of place so darkly disturbing that readers turn on lights before sitting down with his book. *Poison* continues that masterful trend while also improving characterization and plot structure.

Poison will say "no" if anyone says "yes." *Poison* chose her name to spite her step-mother.

"You'll never do as I tell you! Never! You'll never be as a good girl should. Always full of questions, never accepting things as they are. Always full of spite for me! You'll never make your father happy, never marry a strong young man. You're poison to this family, poison!"

And so she became. (p.3)

So when the Pharie Lord kidnaps Azalea, her sister, everyone considers it to be "the way of things." Except for *Poison* who journeys to the pharie realm to reclaim her sister. Along the way she encounters several memorable characters including the wraith-catcher, Lamprey, and, my favorite, the bone witch and her hounds.

In true pharie fashion, the Pharie Lord will not simply hand Azalea back to *Poison* until *Poison* completes a quest. The fate of humanity rests in her hands—and a whole new set of characters and dangers beset her. The description of Asinastra, the spider woman is among my favorites:

The woman was on the ceiling. Her emaciated fingers and toes clutched the stone and held up there as easily as if she was crawling along the floor But the veil had slipped, and *Poison* could see her eyes now: black, blank pearls, like the eyes of the changeling *Poison* had left back in Gull. She felt the terrible weight of that gaze, and it froze her in place.

The woman dropped, suddenly releasing herself and plummeting down towards *Poison*. *Poison's* instincts cried out, telling her to throw herself aside or at least put her hands up in front of her face. But nothing moved. Her muscles seemed empty of life. The woman landed lightly on her fingertips and toes, foursquare over the prone body of *Poison*, her face inches from *Poison's* own, her swollen belly pressing into *Poison's*. The marsh girl trembled in terror, but she could not tear herself away from those black, empty eyes, could not break the contact that paralysed her. (pp. 155-156)

Deceit and deception abound. *Poison* is not the perfect savior; she makes mistakes. The concept of time is twisted in this pharie land, which makes the end a part of the beginning—something readers will have to read to understand. The back cover of the galley states, "*Poison* is a gripping and malevolent tale from master storyteller Chris Wooding." I could not agree more. This is another book that works well for a very large audience, including this 51-year-old teen.