

TOP SHELF FICTION

FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL READERS 2012

Libraries frequently have posters or bookmarks that declare, “Books can take you places.” Reading a book as a journey is more than visiting a place. A journey is a transformative experience that changes its journeyer, and whether it is powerfully or subtly, it is often for the better.

As we accompany characters on their travels or travails, we find ourselves changed by an author’s vision. By identifying with the voices and dialects, the stories and the tales, the themes and the motifs, we see the world in a different light. A great book not only colors the way we view the world, it also inspires and motivates us to change how we interact with it.

Follow us on this journey through the year’s best fiction. Imagine yourself in Buffalo, New York, at the start of this trek, from where this committee hails. We’ll begin in the most familiar locale: *The School House*. Then, we’ll be *Eastbound and Around*, visiting locations in the northeastern United States. From there, we’ll head *South of the Mason-Dixon*, for tales of adventure and perseverance. After, we are *Heading West*, unveiling the dramas of the rest of North America. For some international flavor, we’ll then be *Traveling Abroad*, and since our imaginations defy time and space, we’ll also take a trip to *Places Beyond*. May your reading journeys transform you as ours did us.

THE SCHOOL HOUSE

Carey, Benedict. **Poison Most Vial**. Amulet, 2012. 215p. \$16.95. 978-1-4197-0031-6. **VOYA** June 2012. **3Q 3P M**



A forensic scientist is found dead in his office at DeWitt Polytechnic Institute, located in a large eastern city, and the finger points to the custodian, the father of our heroine, Ruby. Ruby enlists the aid of two of her classmates at the Lab School to help

her prove that her father is innocent. It does not help that the murder weapons—empty poison vials—are found in her father’s locker. Ruby convinces a retired, reclusive toxicologist in her apartment building to help them. The students begin to ferret out who was where when, and how they got in and out. Even more pertinent and engaging is their look at the toxicology of the poison that killed the famed doctor; the chemistry of the poison—its absorption, its concentration—matters. A compelling mystery intertwined with the sciences of forensics and toxicology; what a great combination!

“It’s a good mystery because you had to do problem solving. You had to think about the people and the times and try to figure it out.”—Harriet, 6th grade

Korman, Gordon. **Ungifted**. Balzer + Bray, 2012. 280p. \$16.99. 978-0-06-174266-8. **VOYA** June 2012. **4Q 4P M**

Korman is at it again with this hilarious novel about a case of incredibly mistaken identity. Donovan is accidentally sent to a school for gifted students even though the only thing he can do



well is cause trouble. Hiding out from the superintendent, Donovan soon finds himself as drawn to his über-smart classmates as they are to him. Add a sick dog, a super pregnant sister, and a robot named Tin Man, and you’ve got a zany, yet memorable story. Donovan may be a bit too innocent for all his wrongdoings, but a strong supporting cast keeps the book moving and interesting. Fans of Howe’s *The Misfits*, or Sonnenblick’s *After Ever After* will find much to like here.

Palacio, R. J. **Wonder**. Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 313p. \$15.99. 978-0-375-86902-0.



Beginning fifth grade in a new school is stressful for an ordinary kid. But what about the kid who feels ordinary on the inside yet makes “other ordinary kids run away screaming . . .” Auggie is smart and funny and has had over twenty-seven surgeries since birth to reconstruct his facial features. It’s easy to spot the bullies, but can he decide who is a kind classmate and who is a true friend? Auggie’s heartbreaking journey seeking acceptance is told both by Auggie and the loving, but honest, voices of his family and classmates. Despite Auggie’s uniqueness, his story captures the humor and challenges that every middle school reader will recognize.

“I think it’s cool that he’s going to school and has a lot of friends even though the bullies are badly bullying him. I like how, during the book, different people are talking.”—Anna, 6th grade

EASTBOUND AND AROUND

Hunt, Lynda Mullaly. **One for the Murphys**. Nancy Paulsen, 2012. 224p. \$16.99. 978-0-399-25615-8. **VOYA** August 2012. **4Q 4P M J**



From Las Vegas to Connecticut, Carley Connors has seen a lot in her twelve years, growing up with a fun-loving, single mother who isn’t exactly the warm, nurturing type. When mom winds up in the hospital

in a coma, Carley must go into foster care and that’s where she meets the Murphys, her first up-close experience with a stable, happy family. Carley tries to hold herself aloof from these strangers, but that’s hard to do when two of the three Murphy boys decide she’s the best thing that’s come along in their short lives, and Mrs. Murphy reaches out to help Carley, even when Carley snaps and snarls. In this setting, Carley gradually begins to see that making connections with other people might just be something she both needs and wants.

Shank, Marilyn Sue. **Child of the Mountains**. Delacorte, 2012. 259p. \$16.99. 978-0-385-74079-1. **VOYA** February 2012. **5Q 4P M J**



Scrawled in the notebook of a smart, strong, loving girl, *Child of the Mountains* resonates with the language, culture, and hymns of 1950s Appalachia. At first glance, this book seems ridiculously tragic. She lives with a strict aunt and uncle, and deeply misses her deceased

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grandmother, her little brother who died of cystic fibrosis, and her mother who is in prison for bringing her little boy home to die rather than obeying the terms of a medical-trial contract she signed without reading. Lydia has a teacher who knows her writing talent and wants to hear her dreams, and that teacher is able to find her legal help to try to get her mother back. This book is so full of love and the narrator's voice is so strong that it is uplifting rather than depressing.

SOUTH OF THE MASON-DIXON

Hartley, A. J. **Darwen Arkwright and the Peregrine Pact.**



Razorbill, 2011. 438p. \$16.99. 978-1-59514-409-6.

Trying to adjust to a new life in Atlanta is strange enough, but for Darwen Arkwright, it is about to get much stranger. Darwen discovers that a mirror from the mysterious Mr. Peregrine is a portal to a strange land filled with wonders and more than a little danger. Although the premise is familiar, Hartley creates some cool new creatures such as Scrobblers who ride on motorbikes; Gnashers who have many teeth but no eyes; and Flittercrakes who fly like bats. Now it is up to Darwen and his friends, both interesting and imperfect, to save this strange land before its problems threaten to spill into our own. Hartley's children's debut is fun and enchanting.

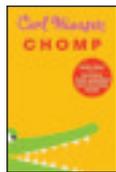
"Darwen Arkwright is an exciting book . . . [filled with] things you would only see in your dreams."—Allen, 7th grade

Herlong, M. H. **Buddy.** Viking, 2012. 296p. \$16.99. 978-0-670-01403-3.



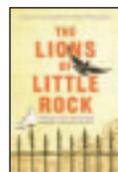
A normally uneventful ride to church one Sunday morning becomes momentous for Li'l T Roberts when his dad accidentally runs over a dog. Li'l T recognizes a golden opportunity when he sees it, and pretty soon Buddy, the three-legged dog, comes home to stay. But nobody reckoned on Hurricane Katrina blowing into New Orleans and when she does, she brings fear and tragedy into the lives of the Roberts family and a future none of them could have foreseen. This is a heartwarming story which should appeal to all middle school readers.

"Whenever a chapter ends, it leaves you at a point where you want to keep reading and find out what happens."—Mia, 6th grade
Hiaasen, Carl. **Chomp.** Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 290p. \$16.99. 978-0-375-86842-9.



Carl Hiaasen travels back to the Florida Everglades to produce this hilarious tale of an animal wrangler and his son who are hired by a reality television series to provide alligators, snakes, and any other dangerous animals who can make the series a hit. The big drawback is the star of the show who doesn't realize he can't really do all the dangerous stunts the camera records for the audience's entertainment. Teenager Wahoo Cray has his hands full trying to keep the star from getting himself killed, and keeping his dad from killing the star to protect the animals from harm. Throw in a girl classmate of Wahoo's who joins in on the adventure to get away from her own problems at home, and you have nonstop action, including a high-speed chase through the Everglades using airboats.

Levine, Kristin. **The Lions of Little Rock.** G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2012. 298p. \$16.99. 978-0-399-25644-8.



The eyes of the world are on Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1958, but it is just home to Marlee and Liz. Marlee is starting junior high. She suffers from an inability to talk in public and will certainly not talk in school. Then she meets the new girl, Liz, who takes nothing from anyone. Liz even helps Marlee do an oral presentation in school. Then, one day, Liz is gone. She was thrown out of school because she was "light-skinned colored" passing as "white." This is not acceptable since Little Rock is refusing to follow the federal mandate to integrate schools. The girls meet secretly amidst threatening phone calls, KKK members harassing people, and finding dynamite in a classmate's car. History is seamlessly woven into the story of girls who are just trying to be friends during a racially charged time.

Pearsall, Shelley. **Jump into the Sky.** Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 344p. \$16.99. 978-0-375-83699-2. VOYA October 2012. **4Q 3P MJS**



Sometimes you cannot let place define who you are. Thirteen-year-old Levi travels from Chicago to North Carolina where his father is serving during

PUBLISHERS: HOW TO NOMINATE YOUR BOOKS FOR VOYA'S NEXT TOP SHELF FICTION FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL READERS

1. Select your finest fiction published between October 2012 and September 2013. You are limited to five titles from each imprint.
2. Send five copies of each nominated title to the chair of the selection committee. See <http://www.voya.com/publishers/> for details.
3. Be sure that the committee receives your books as early as possible, but no later than August 31, 2013.
4. Winning selections will be featured in the next edition of Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers, an annotated booklist, in the February 2014 issue of VOYA.
5. Refer procedural inquiries to VOYA Editor-in-Chief RoseMary Honnold by e-mail to rhonnold@voya.com.

NOTE: Submitting a nomination does not mean that you are also submitting the title for review. Please send review copies to VOYA Review Editor, Lisa Kurdyla, 16211 Oxford Ct., Bowie, MD 20715.

SELECTION CRITERIA APPLIED FOR TOP SHELF FICTION 2012

- Themes and subject matter are of particular interest to readers aged eleven through thirteen or in grades six through eight.
- Titles have special appeal to this age group both as outstanding companions to middle school curriculum and as free reading choices.
- Fiction books published between October 2012 and September 2013 are eligible.
- The final list reflects the geographic, ethnic, racial, intellectual, and economic diversity of North American middle school readers.
- The final list reflects top quality in books for middle school readers—"best" books that stand out among the rest, that take old plots and make them new and original, and that have something different to say and say it well.
- The list is limited to thirty titles or fewer.

WWII. While changing trains in our nation's capital, he is sent to a baggage car where the sole occupant cackles, "Meet Jim Crow." Levi discovers his father has been sent on a new mission, and he joins the family of his father's friend as they travel to Oregon. There the 555th all-Negro paratroopers are training to hunt for rumored Japanese balloon bombs and to fight fires. This troop keeps their skills honed and their dignity intact despite the locals who pretend they don't exist and the mission that seems like a hoax. This novel shows that you are defined by the choices you make, not the mother who left you or the society that doesn't see the real you.

Turnage, Sheila. **Three Times Lucky**. Dial, 2012. 312p. \$16.99.



978-0-8037-3670-2. **VOYA** August 2012. **4Q 3P M J**
Moses LoBeau arrived in Tupelo Landing, North Carolina, in much the same manner as her namesake, as an infant tied to a board and drifting downstream during a storm. Since she turned out to be a girl baby, the Colonel (who found Moses in the river), and Miss Lana (who adopted her), shortened her name to Mo and raised her as their own. Mo and her adoptive parents run a small café in town where all the local characters come to socialize and trade stories. One day, a detective from Winston-Salem wanders into the café looking for clues to a murder and from there, the tale spins out into more murder, missing persons, kidnapping, and general mayhem. An amazing array of characters drives this lively story which should appeal to all.

Turner, Amber McRee. **Sway**. Hyperion, 2012. 311p. \$16.99. 978-1-4231-3477-0.



Who knew soap could be magical? In quiet Olyn, Alabama, nothing is more exciting to ten-year-old Cass than her traveling, humanitarian mother. To Cass's dismay, her mother leaves to pursue her own dreams, and now she's stuck on a road trip with the boring parent. Dad soon proves to be much livelier than believed, creating a traveling, sudsy show featuring the soap of famous people. People of all walks are inspired by washing with the renowned soap, and the heartbroken Cass begins to believe in the soaps' powers and in herself. The story is fantastical, but feels more like an odyssey than a far-fetched yarn. The famous soaps also give students a chance to learn something new about a variety of historical figures.

HEADING WEST

Bauer, Joan. **Almost Home**. Viking, 2012. 264p. \$16.99. 978-0-670-01289-3.



Travel with Sugar Mae Cole from Missouri to Chicago, from home to homeless, and ultimately to foster care, as she accompanies her mentally unstable mother. Narrated in Sugar's sweet voice, she explains, "I've got twenty-nine dollars in my pocket, a mother who's given up, and a dog who needs to pee." A beautiful tale of discovery as Sugar learns what home is.

Bell, Juliet. **Kepler's Dream**. G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2012. 242p. \$16.99. 978-0-399-25645-5.



When her mom has to go into the hospital for prolonged cancer treatment, eleven-year-old Ella must leave her California home to spend the summer with her estranged grandmother in New Mexico. Her grandmother's large house is filled with books, antiques, and furniture, and there are even live peacocks roaming the grounds. Ella knows she has to cope, but it isn't easy dealing with her very cold, very formal grandmother while worrying about her mom. Luckily, Ella has plenty to distract her: Will she learn to ride a horse? Is the antiquarian

bookseller with his no-good helpers her grandmother's friend or a con-man? And what happened to the priceless book that disappeared from her grandmother's library one dark night?

Calhoun, Dia. **Eva of the Farm**. Atheneum, 2012. 229p. \$16.99. 978-1-4424-1700-7.



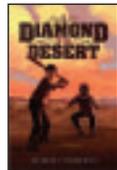
Some of Eva's story is rooted in the reality of a Washington State apple farm when she Googles the meaning of the word "foreclosed" to peer into her family's future; but ultimately, the dreamer Eva writes poetry, turns her attic room into a visionary collage, and wonders how art and her own imagination can both sustain and terrify her. This novel-in-verse alternates between two kinds of poems. The storytelling poems tell of Evangeline's battle against her fantastical fears of the Demon Snag and her very real anger at the grown-up decisions her parents must make. The poems by Eva on the farm, each a polished stone, promise her readers that our childhood homes never leave us, that deep love conquers all, that sometimes we need to be reminded to hope, and that there really are people who want to listen to our stories.

Castan, Mike. **Fighting for Dontae**. Holiday, 2012. 150p. \$16.95. 978-0-8234-2348-4.



In a fictional California town, seventh-grader Javier is the poster child for "at-risk" students. Surrounded by gangs, drugs, and other influences, Javier attempts to resist the pull of the streets. Assigned to help out a special needs class, Javier discovers a passion for helping others. Castan's style and tone keep this from being trite or out-of-touch with the realities of his characters' lives. The author's careful balancing of Javier's desire to fit in with his enjoyment of unpopular activities lends credibility to story.

Fitzmaurice, Kathryn. **A Diamond in the Desert**. Viking, 2012. 258p. \$16.99. 978-0-670-01292-3.



A group of boys playing baseball in the sunny, dry desert that is Arizona—an all-American scene, right? Not when the year is 1942 and the boys are Japanese American living in Gila River internment camp. Fitzmaurice entwines information and specific events that she learned about from interviews with former camp residents with poetic language and descriptions of everyday life for Tetsu. Several boys take the initiative to create a baseball diamond and play ball, the perfect American pastime while waiting for Tetsu's father to be transferred from another camp to his family in Gila River. The reader sees a clear representation of patience during adversity and making the best of it while living in what has come to be seen as a shameful time in our history.

"It was a good book about baseball in the worst time of the nation's history. It surprised me how the characters were able to find their liking in baseball and not be mad about what the nation had done. They moved on."—Bradley, 7th grade

Nielsen, Susin. **The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen**. Tundra, 2012. 243p. \$17.95. 978-1-77049-372-8. **VOYA** December 2012. **5Q 3P J**



Nielsen packs a wallop in this novel set in British Columbia. Henry Larsen and his father try to start a new life in a new town after Henry's older brother responds to bullying by committing a murder/suicide. Told through Henry's journal entries, we see Henry's attempts to fit in as he starts high school, deal with his past, and struggle to move on. What follows is a tale that is, at turns, hilarious and heartbreaking, or, improbably, both at the same time. Nielsen tackles this tough subject from an even tougher viewpoint: the family of the perpetrator. Henry's family reveals the real and varied reactions people might have in light of such a

traumatic event, and does so with a mix of humor and pain that is guaranteed to leave an impact.

"It's funny and sad at the same time, but mainly funny. Once you get into it, it's so good you want to read all day."—Cavan, 7th grade

TRAVELING ABROAD

Burg, Shana. **Laugh with the Moon**. Delacorte, 2012. 245p. \$16.99. 978-0-385-73471-4.



This book doesn't lecture on the history of Malawi; simply, an American father enrolls his daughter in the local school while he works in the nearby hospital. This novel is a warm, welcome description of living in a different culture. Clare deals with universal "new kid" issues such as knowing on day one who is the bully and who is destined to be her best friend. She also must navigate a world where a small child thinks Clare is a ghost because her skin is white; where her long shower might be another family's water supply for the week; where children carry home the class set of books on their heads to keep them safe overnight; and where some families don't have access to medical care. With so much to ponder, it becomes impossible for Clare to keep giving her father the silent treatment because he moved them to Africa after her mother's death. Clare's questions, anger, pride, sorrow, and joy are what make this story very real.

Deedy, Carmen Agra, and Randall Wright. **The Cheshire Cheese Cat: A Dickens of a Tale**. Peachtree, 2011. 228p. \$16.95. 978-1-56145-595-9.



The inhabitants of Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese Tavern in London have more secrets than the recipe for its famous cheese. Skilley is the only cat in Fleet Street who prefers cheese to mice. Luckily, Pip, a mouse with a fondness for words, is willing to play dead once a day so the tavern owner is satisfied with Skilley's mousing skills. But who killed Pip's family with a cleaver? Why is Pip's beloved Nell gone? Is the mysterious noise in the attic a ghost or a royal guest? The tavern's famous regular, Charles Dickens himself, is distracted by these cat-and-mouse games while he struggles to find the perfect first sentence for his new novel, **A Tale of Two Cities**.

Meloy, Maile. **The Apothecary**. G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2011. 353p. \$16.99. 978-0-399-25627-1. VOYA October 2011. **3Q 4P M J S**



In this rich blend of historical fiction and fantasy, fourteen-year-old Janie Scott begins a new school in a new country and finds herself feeling homesick for sunny California while shivering in wet, blustery London. Janie makes friends with an apothecary who owns the drug store near her family's apartment. She also meets the apothecary's son, Benjamin, and as their friendship grows, they become caught up in a conspiracy involving the use and abuse of nuclear power, as well as in a worldwide network of government agents, scientists, and apothecaries. The pace is fast, characters are vivid, and the various elixirs and transformations are riveting.

"It's by far the best book I have ever read. The story line was uncommon because not a lot of books are fantasy and also based in a historical time period. It was easy to imagine that it was real."—Lena, 7th grade

Valentine, Jenny. **Double**. Hyperion, 2012. 246p. \$16.99. 978-1-4231-4714-5. VOYA February 2012. **4Q 4P M J S**

A troubled kid in a hostel somewhere in east London, seventeen-year-old Chap is mistaken for a missing teen named Cassiel Roadnight. After being



shown "a picture of a boy with the word "MISSING" across his forehead—"a picture of me,"—Chap begins a new venture, with a new identity, in a new home, with a new family. Pretending to be Cassiel seems like the perfect plan, until he realizes that there is a real sister who loves the real Cassiel and is so happy he is back. Can he live this lie and hurt this family all over again? Was Cassiel in danger and now is he? Join Chap as he attempts to solve the mystery of what happened to the real Cassiel.

"It was well detailed. It kept me in suspense."—Saloni, 7th grade Preus, Margi. **Shadow on the Mountain**. Amulet, 2012. 304p. \$16.95. 978-1-4197-0424-6. VOYA October 2012. **4Q 3P M J**



Norway, after the Nazis invaded, developed a strong resistance, and Norwegian youth were important members of this resistance. In a well-researched and page-turning story, readers learn about fourteen-year-old Espen and his friends, who are either swept up in the resistance movement or become supporters of the Nazis. Espen becomes an important resistance member, taking part in many activities that bring him face-to-face with classmates who support the Nazis. While rooting for Espen and his fight against the Nazis, readers grudgingly feel empathy for the Norwegians who are trying to choose between being conquered by the Nazis or Soviet Russia, or are trying to make sure their elderly grandmother has food. It is hard to resist a story based on true events that shows teens in such heroic light.

PLACES BEYOND

Durst, Sarah Beth. **Vessel**. Margaret K. McElderry, 2012. 424p. \$16.99. 978-1-4424-2376-3. VOYA August 2012. **5Q 4P J S**



Under an azure sky in the middle of the desert "on the day she was to die, Liyana walked out of her family's tent to see the dawn." Every century, Bayla, the goddess of the Goat Clan, walked among them within a human body to work the necessary magic for the Goat Clan to prosper and survive. Having properly prepared for her sacrifice, Liyana dances through the night, but Bayla doesn't come. Deemed unworthy, Liyana is subsequently abandoned by her clan. After surviving a night alone through a mystical storm, she is joined by a very attractive trickster god named Korbyn, who is also Bayla's romantic interest. He assures her that she did not fail her clan; rather, someone has trapped the deities. Together Liyana and Korbyn must convince the other vessels—some devout, some rebellious—to join them in a quest to save the deities.

Mould, Chris. **Pip and the Wood Witch Curse**. Albert Whitman, 2012. 165p. \$12.99. 978-0-8075-6548-3.



Words and illustrations create a dark, sinister fantasy world inhabited by Pip, a young boy who runs away from Oakes Orphanage rather than be a cabin boy on a schooner. Scrawny Pip finds himself in a world full of evil and decay, where buildings are crooked, doors creak, and chimneys crumble. Furthermore, because the creatures that live in the surrounding woods prey on children, the town has banned children out of self-preservation. Illustrations and words ooze menace, and all ages will read with shivery anticipation.

Oliver, Lauren. **Liesl & Po**. HarperCollins, 2011. 307p. \$16.99. 978-0-06-201451-1.

Locked in a tiny attic bedroom on the Living Side, Liesl is visited by a ghost named Po from the Other Side. "Are you a girl or a boy?" Liesl asks. The ghost replies, "Neither," explaining that things are



“different” on the other side. Joined by Will, an alchemist’s apprentice, the three characters begin a magical and eventful adventure.

Rodkey, Geoff. **Deadweather and Sunrise**. G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2012. 296p. \$16.99. 978-0-399-25785-8.



If you’re born on Sunrise Island, you live on a mountain of silver and can eat jelly bread every day. If you are a boy named Egg, you’re just not that lucky. On Deadweather Island, the humid air smells of sulfur and ugly fruit is the only crop. Egg is regularly pounded by his doltish older brother and expects very little from life until his whole horrible family floats away in a hot air balloon in a bizarre attempt on their lives. Staying with the wealthy Pembrokes of Sunrise Island (including their beautiful daughter Millicent) appears heavenly, except Mr. Pembroke reveals he will adopt Egg—or murder him—to take control of a legendary treasure that may be hidden on the ugly fruit farm. Egg’s escape attempts are thwarted by pirates who wish to kill him. Almost every character in this book is deliciously awful and the dialogue is often laugh-out-loud funny. Sometimes it’s hard to be a boy with a conscience, but throughout, Egg remains upright, honest, and unintentionally brave.

“I liked that it was adventurous. It sure wasn’t boring at the beginning because Egg’s family all dies.”—Lucas, 6th grade ■

TOP SHELF SELECTION COMMITTEE 2012

Talking to middle and high school students about what they are reading is a part of committee chair **Susan Allen’s** job at the Nichols School in Buffalo, New York. Selecting books for the 550+ students in grades 5-12 is a labor of love. Add writing reviews for **VOYA** for a wide variety of genres for several years and you get the perfect blend of what this librarian loves to do.

Kimberly Conrad is a “second career” school library media specialist at Kenmore West High School, located in a first ring suburb of Buffalo, New York. Committed to maintaining a diverse collection reflective of each and every student in her building, Kim considers the promotion of reading for pleasure the most rewarding aspect of her job.

Deborah Regan Howe has taught fifth through eighth grade English at Nichols Middle School in Buffalo, New York, for the past twenty-three years. Always one to check out a stack of new books from her school library, being a reviewer for Top Shelf seemed like a natural fit. Despite the exhausting pace, it was fascinating to see the voices different publishers cultivate, and the trends and themes in young adult literature over the span of two years.

David Ricchiazzi is the elementary librarian at Nardin Academy in Buffalo, New York. He’s a fantasy geek and allergic to classic literature. David is also a hardcore gamer.

Patricia E. Smith is a middle school librarian in the Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda School District, which is a suburb of Buffalo, New York. She has over twenty years of experience as a school librarian and thoroughly enjoys her work. She sometimes worries that the multitudinous alternative attractions to reading are interfering with the literary development of kids today, but if authors will keep those great stories coming, we librarians will keep talking about them and hope for the best.

VOYA's TOP OF THE TOP SHELF

The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen



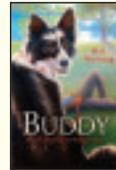
This book serves as a reminder of just how great YA books can be. **The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen** has a unique perspective on a tragic, yet sadly not unheard of, event which grabbed me before I even realized it. Henry was so real to me that I never once had to question the authenticity of the author’s voice, something which I constantly do with teenage boy characters. Henry broke my heart but made me laugh about it. I can think of no greater compliment.—David Ricchiazzi

Wonder

Just as Jack Gantos so accurately depicted the emotions and personal struggles of a child with ADHD in the *Joey Pigza* series, Raquel Jaramillo (written under pen name R.J. Palacio) portrays the struggles of a fifth-grade boy, nicknamed Auggie, with physical deformities. This story should be required reading for everyone. Plus, I always love a happy ending!—Kimberly Conrad



Buddy



Buddy has all kinds of appeal to tug at the heartstrings: There’s the boy and his dog; swift and unexpected danger; an intact family, where the author includes that rare character, a loving mother (although mom gets pretty darn cranky with her unruly kids at times); and courage from all the characters to face and overcome true disaster. Their house is all but demolished by Katrina’s fury, and yet they return to their city to rebuild their home as a family. Almost an afterthought, a young man must make a painful, adult choice which he recognizes and makes. It’s a keeper.—Patricia E. Smith

The Apothecary

As someone who loves historical fiction, I appreciated how **The Apothecary** recreates the paranoia of the Cold War era. Yet, there is much to hook everyone because it’s both a Cold War spy thriller and a fantasy novel. I also found Janie’s relationships very satisfying: Her friendship with Ben has awkwardness and affection, and just the right touch of romantic possibilities. Janie’s parents are smart and loving (how often do we see that in YA fiction?), and just busy enough to miss when their daughter starts off on a magical adventure, but worry terribly when she doesn’t come home on time.—Deborah Regan Howe



Pip and the Wood Witch Curse



Pip and the Wood Witch Curse is different. This is what first struck me as I began to read. It is beautifully lyrical with quirky characters and quirky illustrations. The language supports the eerie atmosphere evoked by the story and illustrations: “Dark and dreadful they were, of beasts and ogres and strange lands where the wild winds blew and thunder bellowed through the mountains.” I was enthralled with the fantasy world that was created, and I am not usually one for fantasy. Everyone will enjoy this little gem!—Susan Allen

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