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* Asterisks denote books of special distinction.
R Recommended.
Ad Additional book of acceptable quality for collections needing more material in the area.
M Marginal book that is so slight in content or has so many weaknesses in style or format that it should be given careful consideration before purchase.
NR Not recommended.
SpC Subject matter or treatment will tend to limit the book to specialized collections.
SpR A book that will have appeal for the unusual reader only. Recommended for the special few who will read it.

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The Squire's Tale
by Gerald Morris

Tales of Arthur and Camelot have an appeal that crosses genders, genres, and age levels. Librarians are forever being approached by young readers who want stories of knights jousting, castles besieged, and enchantresses ensorcelling, and sometimes we are hard-pressed to come up with a title to suit the need. Available variations on the Arthurian theme include dense but wonderful Sutclifffian sagas, accessible but not always successful San Soucian picture books, and faithful retellings that require a degree in medieval studies to follow. Who will help fill this literary need?

Enter our champion with plumes flying—Gerald Morris, author-knight, with the token of his ladylove, Humor, fastened firmly to his funnybone. Forget the ponderous pace of Paterson's *Parzival* and the stateliness of Pyle's *Knights of the Round Table*—if your readers are looking for some notable swashing and buckling with a little chivalrous slapstick thrown in, this retelling of Arthurian legend is the book for you.

The focus here is on the adventures of King Arthur's nephew Gawain, or to be more precise, the adventures of Gawain and his inexperienced but pluckily game squire, Terence. Morris' Sir Gawain is the pre-Malory goodly knight, gentle and courteous, but with a limit to his patience; his squire is Terence (a nontraditional character created by the author) raised by a holy hermit and fey with faerie blood. Readers follow Gawain and Terence as they go questing, picking up Sir Tor and Sir Marhault along the way. Encounters with knights without honor, damsels in (sometimes self-inflicted) distress, enchantresses, sorcerers, poisonous eels, and (happily) unrequited lovers are related in stylish prose that surprises with its unexpected humor. Readers get a taste of what's to come at the end of Chapter One, when Gawain defeats an obnoxious knight with the aid of an empty stewpot: "Sir Hautubris flashed his sword from his scabbard and chopped down mightily at Gawain's head. Gawain stepped quickly to one side, and the sword buried itself in the dirt next to him. Gawain rapped Sir Hautubris's helm with the stewpot. The visor flapped down, and a loud clang rang out."

Morris' setting is a terrain imbued with an ever-present sense of magic both wonderful and terrifying, a terrain that his characters inhabit with lively vigor. More than cardboard heroes, Morris' players in this Arthurian adventure have tremendous heart; they are not one-dimensional glory seekers but questioning as well as questing individuals with conflicts of both conscience and desire. The female characters (who, admittedly, play minor if catalytic roles in this particular version of the tale) are at least interesting, from Gawain's enchantress aunt Morgan le Fay and mother Morgause to the Three Questing Ladies (maiden, mother, and crone) who travel with and educate questing knights. True, Guinevere doesn't
really shine in Morris' Camelot (he seems to agree with Tennyson that she wasn’t exactly an asset to the king), but Morris’ handling of the story of Gawain and the Loathly Lady is very nicely turned indeed.

The dialogue sidesteps expected formality with colloquial humor that positively begs for reading aloud, as when Sir Tor, despite entreaties by a vengeful woman, exasperatedly refuses to kill a knight who has already yielded to him: “‘Madam, I tell you, he’s already yielded to me,’ Tor said. ‘What difference does that make?’ the lady demanded. ‘This is Sir Abelleus!’ ‘Well, good for him,’ Tor said impatiently. . . . [Tor] looked at the kneeling Abelleus. ‘Do you promise not to be so naughty anymore and to stop striking down good knights?’ ‘Oh, yes,’ Abelleus said, nodding emphatically. . . . ‘And do you apologize for killing this lady’s brother?’ ‘Oh yes. Very sorry, madam.’”

Although this subtly irreverent take on Arthurian legend pokes deliberate fun at noble knights and fair ladies who take themselves entirely too seriously, Morris avoids the obvious Monty Pythonesque possibilities, balancing between noble sentiment and the cheap shot with witty grace. Terence and Gawain do finally settle down to the serious business of saving Arthur and Camelot from an evil sorceress and discovering the identity of Terence’s father, but that’s just the rousingly satisfying conclusion to an Arthurian road trip that will have readers wondering why there aren’t more books like this one and hoping that Morris will do it again. (Imprint information appears on p. 406.)

Janice M. Del Negro, Editor

NEW BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE


One reason that Hans Christian Andersen’s tales have become classics is their exquisitely complex writing style, which goes far to compensate for heavily misogynistic themes. Now, of course, Disney has changed all that, and “The Little Mermaid” has been injected with another century of life based on visual images of singing sea life. For Disney-imprinted preschoolers, Isadora’s picture-book version—whose text reads like Cliff Notes of Andersen’s, true to plot but not form—offers graphics emphasizing childlike merfolk, pastel sunsets, balletic scenes of the prince with his adoring mermaid, and underwater interiors foaming like bubble bath. It’s so light-filtered and lovely that listeners may not even wonder
why those cherubic babies, the “children of the air,” have to work for three hundred years to earn a soul. Isadora’s vision is neither ironic like Andersen’s nor hyperactive like Disney’s, but tranquil and placid, lacking the emotional conflict and tragic impact that makes the original effective. Her impressionistic full-page watercolors in green, blue, and gold face short blocks of text embedded in squares of color that reflect various shades of sea and sky. If one simply must have a watered-down “Mermaid” for this age group, this quiet variant may be useful. BH


How can a puppy get any shut-eye with this distracting “Meow!”-ing in his ears? As he pursues the sound around house and yard, he encounters a rooster, mouse, fish, frog, and others, all of whom protest their innocence. Meanwhile, rascal cat hides in the scenery, carrying on its mischievous campaign, doubtless to the delight of the lap-sitting audience. The story (also retold in Maria Polushkin’s 1988 version, illustrated by Ellen Weiss), based on the 1955 animated film *Who Said Meow?*, remains faithful to its cartoon pedigree with springy animal figures, thickly and shaggily outlined, romping across improbably striped backgrounds as dirt flies, water splashes and drips, and hapless Puppy is doomed by a concluding “Mooo!” to another bout of sleeplessness. With frisky animals, lots of sounds for mimicking, and a search-and-find challenge, how can you go wrong? EB


Buoy (yes, a buoy, you know, the kind that rings bells and flashes lights to keep boats from bumping into it) floats out in the middle of the sea, far from land. He isn’t lonely, though—his friends Gull and Seal are there to keep him company, to chat with him and ponder the secrets of the sea, the universe, and life. Along with Seal and Gull, there are visits from Porpoise, Shark, Whale, and Wind, with the occasional encounter with humans in various stages of sailing distress thrown in for good measure. Buoy’s daily conversations and contemplations on the meaning of life are reminiscent of an ocean-going Jonathan Livingston Seagull or a salty Freddie the Leaf, with exchanges such as the following setting the tone: “‘Ship coming,’ said Buoy. No one moved. ‘Ship coming,’ Buoy said again, and rang his bell. ‘Oh.’ said Seal. ‘So . . . ?’ said Gull. ‘Don’t you care?’ asked Buoy. ‘No,’ said Seal.” Colón’s illustrations, both full color and black and white, effectively evoke a sense of being out to sea, but even his intense sunsets and menacing shark will not keep readers from drowning in teeny print and platitudes. The gifty design of the book itself is handsome, with lower-case chapter titles, big white borders, and artsily placed pictures. The sixteen brief chapters should be able to float a narrative theme or plot, but this title has more handsome packaging than substance. JMD


In this baker’s dozen of silly superlatives, each spread offers an imaginative extreme in text (“the wiggliest thing in the world is a snake ice-skating”) opposite an invigorated depiction of the example (long curly loops of black-and-yellow serpent whizzing across the ice on a single skate with scarlet scarf flying). Examples of
excess include the silliest, the quietest, the jumpiest, the stickiest, and so on, excelling in the imagery (yes, a skunk convention would be pretty darn smelly) if not always in the logic (why is a Tyrannosaurus rex heavier when he weighs himself than at any other time?). Nickle’s acrylic paintings have a high-gloss weirdness that emphasizes the bizarreness of the extremes; his additional pictorial details (a pair of polar bears eye the “hottest” fire-breathing dragon, who desperately attempts to cool himself with a hand-held fan) enhance the conceits’ pleasurable absurdity. Tailor-made for language arts usage, this even has a fill-in-the-blanks last page that prompts kids to create their own “most” tropes. DS


African-American high school juniors T.J. Nucci and Tyron are at Full Court, a basketball camp for star players, their coaches, and their agents. Tyron is there because he has star potential and T.J. is there because he’s Tyron’s friend and keeper. And Tyron does need keeping—though a gifted player, he is academically slow, and T.J. is there to keep him motivated and focused. While exploring Full Court grounds, T.J. meets Ruth Ann, or LuAnn as she was called before she was saved. Ruth Ann is from a fundamentalist Bible camp across the wooden bridge from Full Court. She and T.J. meet on the bridge just a few times, but he is moved by her, and their conversations about faith, God, and choices are more than just casual talk. T.J. is a complex, thinking character who changes as a result of events that occur in the course of the novel. He recognizes that everyone is out to get what he can, and yet he still seeks the moral high ground without ever becoming some kind of noble stereotype. Bennett’s plot evolves gently, never condescending to characters or reader, and never taking the easy way out. Unpleasant truths are left unvarnished, and the players are seen through the wise-before-his-time T.J.’s eyes. T.J. is a fine friend and a loving son, and when at the book’s conclusion his mother tells him, “You are a good boy, T.J.,” readers will agree wholeheartedly. This will be an easy sell to those readers just back from seeing Spike Lee’s He Got Game.  JMD


This is an unusual collection of twenty-two vibrant tales about “little people” and their role in the lives and stories of American Indians. Called halologue by the Aztec, surem by the Maya, pipilizizin by the Pipil of El Salvador, and deetkatoo by the Tillamook, the little people are helper figures that often bring food, rain, and good luck to the big people who treat them with kindness and respect. These short retellings have a winning combination of elements: magic, humor, and inherent morals that reinforce the values of being respectful to elders, being generous to the unfortunate, and keeping promises. The tales are brief but elegantly delivered. In his informative introduction, Bierhorst describes them as being somewhere between the memorate (“a direct account of someone’s experience with the supernatural”) and the traditional structured folktale; they have the immediacy of personal narrative, and that gives them a delightful vigor. Full-page pictographic black-and-white illustrations simply depict the most unlikely events. Bierhorst lets the stories speak for themselves but includes a very brief guide to tribes and cultures, a
short section on little people lore, extensive notes, and references for further reading. Tales of the little people exist in many American Indian cultures, yet they have not previously been compiled in any systematic way. Bierhorst has done the genre of folklore for youth a great service with this collection. JMD


The carcass of a whale is passing through Johnstown, Illinois on a flatbed car attached to a train engine, and all the townspeople turn out to get a look at it “for educational purposes.” Tommy, the narrator, and his friend Ben are going too, Tommy because he knows a lot about whales and this may be his only chance to see one, and Ben because he wants to get himself “a chunk of whale.” The boys join the throng crowding eagerly to pay their money and take their look, despite the smell of the iced but still rapidly decomposing beast. When the locomotive breaks down, the townspeople bury the whale, and the next year Tommy sees wildflowers growing profusely in the shape of a whale over the place where the cetacean was laid to rest: “The whale didn’t know land. But its death made this land rich. Once the whale had been beautiful. It is beautiful again.” The plot exposition is a bit contrived—Tommy won’t help his friend cut off a piece of whale, he stands up for the whale and that’s the same as standing up for himself, and he gets a new (better) best friend as a result—but Menchin’s mixed-media illustrations combine collage and painting to create a montage of distinctive characters, train, and townsfolk in compositions that reflect and add to the story’s overall impact. Although the sense is one of historical fiction based on a real episode (there actually was a frozen whale on exhibit in Chicago’s Exposition Hall in 1880 that was taken on just such a train ride), no historical notes are included. JMD


This isn’t Laura’s first trip to the remains of the Manzanar War Relocation Center, but the infamous World War II site makes her uneasy: “I should be used to this place, but I’m not. I shouldn’t be nervous, but I am.” Her father brings the family to visit the grave of his father, who died in the camp; on this particular visit, Laura’s younger brother Thomas is old enough to understand his father’s childhood reminiscences of the relocation, and his sister’s anger and hurt at an injustice she never personally experienced. Bunting does a creditable job of negotiating the delicate matter of blame, as the family’s dialogue points out that in a war there is plenty of that commodity to go around. Soentpiet’s richly detailed paintings switch from full color in family scenes to a film noir-ish black and white for the war years, a device which makes it easier for children with little knowledge of these events to sort out action from memory. There is a contemporary look and sound to this account, and careful attention to the concluding note (or some timely adult intervention) may be necessary to adjust reader’s understanding of the dates of the war and the fictional family’s memorial visit in 1972. Team this with Mochizuki’s *Baseball Saved Us* (BCCB 9/97) for readers who aren’t quite ready for Jerry Stanley’s *I Am an American* (BCCB 11/94). EB
When he was twelve, Joey Finney went missing; two years later he reappears with no memory of the intervening time and no sign of having grown any older in the interim. Joey’s plagued not only by this temporal dislocation (his younger brother is now bigger than he is, he’s got a baby sister he’s never seen before, and his old best friend has become a teenager and doesn’t want to know him) but also by seizures from a head injury, which when x-rayed suggests that something has been implanted in Joey’s skull. Alien abduction stories this earnest and devoid of camp are rare in children’s literature, and this goes through its paces with diligence and awareness, capably counterpointing the larger horror with the smaller one of Joey’s dislocation from his earthly role. The characters and concepts are televisually shallow, however, and much of the story is coincidence-driven and predictable. Skeptics won’t find much to convince or entice them here, but this will be eagerly absorbed by youngsters sure that the truth is out there somewhere.


Little Frog is having a birthday party, and he receives a menagerie of colorful visitors—Red Fox, Purple Butterfly, Orange Cat, and so on. The twist here is that the animals originally appear in their complementary colors (which explains the bright green fox on the cover), and Little Frog’s mother keeps thinking that her son has mistaken his guests. The illustrations may not disprove her view entirely, but they also support his. After an introduction (in which Carle explains and gives instruction in the creation of afterimages), each spread revealing an arriving friend provides a strongly contrasting complementary-colored figure on the left and white space on the right, so that the viewer “creates” the illustration that suits Little Frog’s description (matching the refrain “and, indeed, Little Frog was right!”). It’s an entertaining trick, sort of pre-tech Magic Eye effect, and kids will get a kick out of both the gimmick and the little frog who knows better than his mom. The images are awfully vague and evanescent (there’s also occasionally interference from the bright colors on the verso, which show through in the white space) and the game goes on a bit too long, however, which not only drags down the slender plot but also starts taking a toll on the eyes. Carle’s spring-garden colors tend to make their counterparts pale by comparison, though the softer hue works niftily on the final joke (“And Little Frog blushed”). There’s more gimmick than story here, but youngsters who gravitate to visual puzzles will want to cast an eye in the direction of this book. A note on Goethe’s color theories and a sample color wheel are included. DS


John Stetson was a consumptive eastern hatmaker when he decided to go West in 1859, joining an expedition to Colorado. He used his hatmaker’s felting skills to make a tent and then a funny-looking but immensely useful and durable felt hat. When Stetson returned back East, he decided to market that hat, which he called
"The Boss of the Plains." The rest is, as they say, history, since the hat we now know as the Stetson became the cowboy's reliable friend and an icon of the West. Carlson resists the temptation to be cute, but she's clearly appreciative of this chapeau chapter of history: her brief description of the felting process is simple and lucid, and her enumeration of the many uses for a Stetson ("It shielded a cowpoke's eyes from blinding sun and caught the rain before it trickled down his back . . . Or came in handy when the sweetest huckleberries were ready to be picked") is quietly picturesque. Meade's mixed-media illustrations use cut paper to give the earth-toned scenes an immediacy and grounded gaiety often missing from images of the past, but her careful employment of colored-pencil shading and watercolor highlights gives the spreads more subtlety, unity, and textural blending than pure collage sometimes displays. As well as being an enjoyable story of an American symbol, this is a compact demonstration of the lesser-sung role of entrepreneurship in westward expansion. A brief followup and bibliography cap things off. DS

CHORAO, KAY  **Little Farm by the Sea;** written and illus. by Kay Chorao. Holt, 1998 [32p]  ISBN 0-8050-5053-1 $15.95
Reviewed from galleys

As children meander through this book, they can gather snippets of information about a seasonal year of rural activity. Better yet, they can get a feel for life in the country, because in this idyllic look at a little farm near Long Island, the hustle and bustle of urban life is kept solidly outside the farm gates. Delicate paintings, rendered in gouache and softly detailed in pen and ink, reveal all the goings on at Smallholdings farm: planting the fields, gathering the eggs, milking cows, picking the strawberries, feeding the animals, and mingling with customers. Especially attractive are the double-page spreads of the barn porch, where farm cats and other creatures relax amidst a seasonal panoply of earth's bounty that spills from tables, carts, and makeshift shelves; it's easy to conclude that this would be a fine place to spend a weekend. The hijinks of some escaped piggies cause the only disturbance in the agrarian tranquillity of this little homestead, which may bother those who like their farms a little less perfect, but young city dwellers needing a break from life's busyness won't have any trouble slowing down for this pastoral fantasy. PM


"Everything had been easy until sixth grade. That was when Marybelle moved into our neighborhood," begins this story of an insidious troublemaker's effect on the lives of Gretchen Griswald and her friends. Marybelle is an outsider who desperately wants to be an insider, and her attempts to gain attention range from slicing off a chunk of Susan November's curly locks (in what was supposed to be a pretend hair-cutting demonstration) to being the important carrier of secret and damaging information about others—in what initially seems to be delicious gossip and what eventually proves to be largely lies. When Marybelle ruins Gretchen's reputation with her sly stories, Gretchen struggles to find a way to restore the undermined social fabric of what had formerly been known in school as "a nice class." DeClements has a good feel for middle-school social rhythms and keeps the situation realistically complicated: moved by pity, need, and convenience, Gretchen socializes with Marybelle despite the joylessness of the association, and the girl Gretchen turns to when others shunned her fully expects to be dropped
when the situation rights itself. The dénouement (a sort of intervention, where Marybelle’s lies are brought to light in front of everybody) is contrived, and the book lets Marybelle’s credulous listeners off awfully easily, but there’s truth enough in both the portrayal of the yearning and spiteful newcomer and in the havoc the change of dynamics can wreak. Readers who aren’t quite ready for the take-no-prisoners truth of Fine’s *The Tulip Touch* (BCCB 9/97) will appreciate this more circumscribed but far from simplistic social saga. DS


Crocodile Bill and his symbiotic buddy, plover Pete, now go up the Mississippi pursuing The Bad Guy’s Big Bad Brother, a black-marketeer trading in endangered animals, who has captured Bill’s cousin Little Jane Allison. Donning their backpacks and leaving a note for Bill’s mother, the pair board the steamer Cleopatra and track The Bad Guy’s Big Bad Brother to the Louisiana bayous. Assisted by friendly ’gators, Bill not only rescues Little Jane but is also reunited with Pete, who had been temporarily waylaid by the Rich Lady, who in turn proves to be their benefactress. This outing is a bit overdrawn in both plot and illustration; in fact, five consecutive spreads (in which Bill also finds his father, who is happily not a suitcase) are nearly identical. Reference to Pete as a “toothbrush” is unexplained, and although the Garden District and French Quarter are mentioned, New Orleans is never named. Still, Bill and Pete are endearing pals, and dePaola parleys search-and-rescue drama into a scenario accessible to quite young listeners. EB


An inventor (the Sorcerer) in a workshop decides to create a robot to perform his domestic labor; once created, his robot (the Apprentice) avails himself of the same technology to build himself a robot helper, and so on, and so on, “until all the tubes and wires and gears were used up.” Then the robots erupt in a frenzy of destructive vacuuming that threatens to destroy the original Apprentice until the Sorcerer puts an end to the matter (by blowing them all, save the Apprentice, up). The heavy-metal workshop action and the ever-increasing number of robots clearly headed towards chaos will hold the interest of many youngsters, and though the Sorcerer’s smithereens solution suffers from severe dramatic convenience, young block-tower-smashers will adore it. This interpretation of Goethe’s tale makes some of the story’s aspects inexplicable—why is the mess the fault of the robot who made the robots rather than the human who started it all, and what makes the first robot special while the other ones are dispensable? Dewan’s line-and-watercolor art has a rawboned *Mad* magazine exaggeration to it, and the cumbersome and homely marvels of the elaborate machines will make contemporary net-surfing youngsters giggle. The visuals get in their own way, however, with obtrusive text blocks and monochrome drawings that skew the compositions’ focus, resulting too often in a haphazard jumble rather than in the glorious mess of the more successful spreads. This isn’t going to displace the *Fantasia* sequence, but the unusual appeal of the subject and the time-honored motif might well boot up a storytime. The back jacket flap provides some source information. DS
Trade ed. ISBN 0-8027-8613-8 $15.95  Ad 4-7 yrs

The Dilley sextuplets may have recently been outnumbered by the McCaughey septuplets, but six is still a passel of active little kids in a very busy household. This photoessay introduces the children individually and shows them as a pack. The details and logistics are daunting and intriguing, ranging from three cribs with two babies apiece in infancy to the floor-to-ceiling steel gates keeping the toddlers in their section of the house and out of trouble. The text is bland and flat and the information and chronology are sometimes confusingly scattered; however, we never hear the date the babies were born, they're referred to as three long before we see their third birthday, and it takes several pages to clarify everybody's gender. There's also a disappointing absence of contrast between these children's existence and the life most young viewers lead, since no other children ever appear in the book. The photographs often seem posed, but they reveal a photogenic sextet of distinct and disparate personalities; trying to match names to faces in the group shots will provide an additional entertainment. This missed a lot of opportunities to make itself really appealing to youngsters, but it's still an attractive baby book with a difference. DS


Here's a toothsome baker's dozen from popular young-adult authors for readers willing to chew over the many possibilities of claustrophobia—from smothering relationships to mythical labyrinths, from broken marriages to broken minds. Among the more notable offerings, Rob Thomas's "Sheep" features a high school protagonist who cannot comprehend the entrapment of the residents in a shelter for battered women where he volunteers. In "The Box," Francesca Lia Block's Alicia struggles to combat both anorexia and loss of identity in an all-consuming affair now on the wane. Gregory Maguire darkly twists the story of Theseus and the Minotaur, robbing "The Athlete" of his victory. Walter Dean Myers' "The Escape" features parallel monologues of a hospitalized abuse victim's session with his psychiatrist, in which his verbalized and internalized thoughts are presented. And just when it seems this collection can't get much heavier, along comes Joan Bauer's yeasty "Pancakes," a study in comic pandemonium in which a fanatically organized teen waitress faces the Sunday rush in a pancake restaurant without help. Mature readers looking for more daring material than Fraustino's *Dirty Laundry* (reviewed below) could break this one open. EB


Nearly thirty years have passed since Eckert published his Newbery honor awardee *Incident at Hawk's Hill*, but protagonist Ben MacDonald has aged only a single year since his encounter with the badger, making it now 1871. Eckert has amended his style drastically, however, and he plunges directly into the action of this sur-
vival sequel, which finds seven-year-old Ben drifting toward Lake Winnipeg in his father's rowboat, eluding the trapper, Burton. Ben is rescued by a Metis (Cree) youth, who brings him to his village; while Ben amazes his hosts with his gift for animal communication, his family launches yet another frantic search. Mr. MacDonald and eldest son John draw closer together as they comb the shores of Red River for any sign of Ben, and Esther MacDonald is captured by Burton, who has metamorphosed from a sleazy menace into a villain of the first water. Although fauna and woodlands remain important here, the close nature observations which distinguished Eckert's previous work are absent—a fact which will come as a disappointment to the outdoorsy set, but a boon to readers who never quite made it as far as the action of Incident. With its workmanlike and accessible plotting, Return is bound to appeal to a wider audience, many of whom may then be lured back to its more challenging predecessor. EB

ENGLAND, LINDA The Old Cotton Blues; illus. by Teresa Flavin. McElderry, 1998 26p ISBN 0-689-81074-1 $16.00 R 4-7 yrs

Dexter loves the sound of old Johnny Cotton's clarinet (“That clarinet could make Dexter feel the blue-down blues, and the deep-down-shaking, slow-laughing feel-goods”) and wants one of his own, but Mama reminds him that “our money's for rent and the pork chops you love.” Johnny Cotton offers Dexter another option in the form of his deceased daddy's “Mississippi harp,” and before long little Dexter is “coaxing songs from his silver harmonica.” This simple little story is carried along by rhythmic, toe-tapping prose, which captures the longing of a boy who has music in his soul. Both the text, with its simple economy of words, and the facing illustrations, spackled gouache paintings in a range of deep pastels on tinted paper, capably capture the nuances of the relationship between the African-American characters of Dexter and his sympathetic mentor. As Johnny reminisces about his daddy, brown-toned scenes of his father beaming from the glory assure us that the passing of the harmonica to Dexter meets with Daddy's approval. The elation of Dexter and Johnny as they finally play the Old Cotton Blues side by side should also elicit approval from kids, especially aspiring musicians. PM


An intricately imagined and constructed tale within a tale, this first-person narrative reveals thirteen-year-old Marjan’s efforts to help Shahrazad, of Arabian Nights fame, find stories to entertain the Sultan lest he kill her as he has so many other wives. Marjan’s quest for one particular story becomes dangerous when she must escape the harem to seek it. The plot is complex and suspenseful, but not to the neglect of characterization. The large cast features a vivid array of personalities ranging from an elderly pigeon keeper to Shahrazad’s headstrong younger sister and the bitter Sultan himself. Buried deep in the book’s heart is the moving secret of Marjan’s painfully crippled leg and her mother’s death. Marjan’s development is credible, her adventures engrossing, and her story frame (brief “Lessons for Life and Storytelling” opening each chapter) a clever device not unlike Shahrazad’s own subtle messages to the man she loves as well as fears. Greet readers of Donna Jo Napoli’s Zel (BCCB 7/96), Robin McKinley’s Beauty (12/78), and other fairy-tale fiction with this new winner. BH

In his elegant and cleanly formatted volumes, Florian has versified on behalf of mammals (*beast feast*, BCCB 7/94), birds (*On the Wing*, 4/96), and fish (*In the Swim*, 5/97), and he now turns his attention to the world of insects (as well as their common-law cousins, the arachnids). Subjects range from weevils ("We are ruinous./ We are rotten./ We drill holes/ In bolls of cotton") to the monarch butterfly ("He is a monarch./ He is a duke./ Swallows that swallow him/ Frequently puke") to the mayfly ("A mayfly flies/ In May or June./ Its life is over/ Far too soon"), and forms vary subtly from couplets to ballad meter to concrete poetry. While some of the verses scan better than they conceptualize, they’re always neat and often quite witty indeed. Florian’s artistic style (each spread includes a full-page portrait opposite a poem) has changed somewhat; working on brown paper, he has added collage to his watercolors, which sometimes ends up diffusing the energy of the illustration but also provides an opportunity for visual humor and some vivid and subject-appropriate teeming. Those who have relished the other poetic bestiaries will want to buzz on over to this one. DS


Don’t let the daunting sobriety of the cover art or the sheer heft of this volume chase prospective readers away from Fradin’s smoothly readable and often delightfully personal biography of the consummate strategist who kept the demand for independence simmering on colonial Massachusetts’ back burner until revolution finally came to a boil. The price of Adams’ indefatigable passion for independence is never far from sight—the failed careers that kept him steadily impoverished, his neglected family, his notoriety for using his dearest friends to further the cause. As Adams played (or was at least reputed to have played) a role in nearly every famous textbook event from the Boston Tea Party to the adoption of the Constitution, the account of the man necessarily becomes a history of the era. Fradin steadily reminds his readers that revolution was never a foregone conclusion and that Adams’ incendiary rhetoric and often sly maneuverings tipped a scale that was not always weighted in favor of separation from England. Period cartoons and engravings, portraits and later historical paintings, letters, and even beer labels illustrate the text; a bibliography, index, and an afterword on Fradin’s quest to track down Adams sites and artifacts round out the volume. EB


Fraustino presents eleven short stories by young adult authors that invite readers to indulge in a little recreational voyeurism. Leading off is an ostensibly provocative, but ultimately tepid, entry by Bruce Coville, in which a teenager first meets his Uncle George—soon to be Aunt Gladys—on the eve of his sex-change operation. Without the luxury of the novel format in which to develop the relationship (à la Koertge’s *The Arizona Kid*), the tale devolves into self-conscious preachiness.
Several stories fare little better—Dian Curtis Regan's lifeless take on a suicide attempt with a rosy ending; M. E. Kerr's shiverless account of a revenant; Fraustino's own offering of a girl who most improbably learns of a mentally ill family member when she visits a mental hospital to read "The Yellow Wall-Paper" to some elderly patients. However, the anthology is brightened by Rita Garcia-Williams' simple and poignant depiction of a beloved brother's slide into mental illness and Laurie Halse Anderson's wickedly sharp and funny teen narrator, who describes life between the two households of his newly divorced parents. A portion of this title's proceeds will be donated to the National Coalition Against Censorship, but ironically, Lois Duncan's anthology Trapped (reviewed above) is a riskier, more challenging offering. EB


Love, and then marriage. If that's the assumption made by young mainstream American readers, it's in for a big challenge here, as Gelber demonstrates that marriage, and then possibly love, has been the norm for most cultures over time and across continents. Following an opening chapter on the genesis of the institution of marriage, she surveys various cultures regarding kinship pre- and proscriptions for selecting a mate, the role of matchmakers, dowry and bridewealth payments, marriage rites, and the roles of co-spouses and in-laws. Myriad examples do tend to run on a bit, but each chapter is tightly and clearly focused on an individual theme. Rituals cited vary from the startling ("As the [rural Egyptian] girl arrives at her husband's house, his mother stands in the doorway and blocks the entrance with a raised leg. The bride must crawl into her new home") to the comic ("To punish the bride for stealing their nephew, the [Hopi] groom's aunts attacked his house with water and mud in a mock battle"). Despite several full-page color photos, which provide welcome breaks in the dense text, this title's plain pipe-racks design is far less enticing than its subject matter. Still, the What's-love-got-to-do-with-it approach should be an intriguing eye-opener for many readers. There are no notes, but a list for further reading and an index are included. EB


Reviewed from galleys Ad Gr. 1-3

Focusing on life in the Old West, Gibbons offers a concise précis of the cowboy existence. She helpfully enumerates the traditional accoutrements of your basic range rider and some of the standard tasks and terminology; maps of famous cattle-drive trails and descriptions of the various jobs on a drive are a particularly useful addition. The illustrations are disappointingly awkward, however, with confusing components (the picture of cowtown life seems mainly to feature yoked oxen, which look distractingly like the cattle the cowboys just got rid of) and a lack of research evident in the details (the art wrongly shows rodeo bareback broncs ridden with halters, for instance). A gallery of "Famous Cowboys and Cowgirls" interprets the definition a bit differently than the rest of the book but includes some of the classics; a page of factual miscellanea is sometimes intriguing but some-
times frustratingly vague. Cody's *The Cowboy's Handbook* (BCCB 3/96) is a livelier and more effective introduction to life amid the sagebrush, but this will jangle the jinglebobs of youngsters not yet up to that level. DS


Nine short stories are thematically linked by the depiction of adolescents facing moments of truth in their young lives. Each story focuses on one character in crisis—Laura waits for her deadbeat father to make good on his promises, Seth is set-up for a fall by an old friend, Paige considers a sexual relationship with her boyfriend—and each achieves an epiphany of sorts based on their moral choices. Gifaldi has an appealingly easy style, an attractive flair for detail, and an ear for authentic teen language. Although the stories have a tonal sameness when taken collectively, individually they have humor and impact. The final story, "And Angels Too," in which two lonely individuals find themselves drawn together by ice cream cones and a poem one hot summer night, has all the promise of young adults just waiting to discover the world. This would be an interesting, non-condescending choice for reading aloud to junior high students facing moral dilemmas of their own. JMD

**Godwin, Laura** *Little White Dog;* illus. by Dan Yaccarino. Hyperion, 1998 28p

In each spread, a brief verse asks a question ("Little White Dog/ in the snow,/ snow's so white/ where did you go?") while the artwork plays the hide-and-seek game the poem hints at. After the dog, several other creatures also seemingly disappear into their background settings, until finally they all go off to find one another in a culminating burst of cumulation. This is a deftly turned entry-level puzzle of perception, visually simpler (and therefore conceptually a bit more complicated) than some of Tana Hoban’s photographic guessing games. Yaccarino’s gouache illustrations retain their retro flair, but instead of his usual high-sheen near-acrylic rotundity he’s used flat planes of color in construction-paper hues, resulting in a cut-paper effect. The soaring color borders appropriately dominate the compositions, with part of every creature clearly delineated (this isn’t a book out to stump the toddlers) and part undifferentiated from the background, only to allow the complete creatures to pop out in full contrast later on in the book. There’s no particular reason why turning on the light should result in finding the other critters as well as the "Little Black Cat in the night," but an audience deep in the cozily circumscribed hidden-picture game won’t notice. Quite a few conceptual riffs might be spun out of this, but lots of lapsitters will be plenty happy just successfully demonstrating their detective prowess and watching the menagerie romp. DS

**Goodman, Joan Elizabeth** *Hope’s Crossing.* Houghton, 1998 212p ISBN 0-395-86195-0 $15.00 Ad Gr. 6-8

In the middle of the night twelve-year-old Hope, her mother, and her brother and sisters are roused out of their beds by Tories, the house is sacked and burned, and Hope is kidnapped. She is taken by Noah Thomas, the raid leader, who, foiled in
his plot to seize her rebel father, plans to ransom her instead. His wife, Elspeth, is thrilled at the stolen family heirlooms he brings her, but his mother is shocked by his kidnapping of Hope and quickly conceives a plan to return the girl to her family. Hope and the old woman flee to New York City, planning on seeking help from Mother Thomas' cousins in Connecticut, but the plan goes awry when Mother Thomas dies of smallpox and Hope is taken in by a self-serving British general's wife. Ultimately, all ends well with Hope being returned to her family by the irascible Pruitt Jones, old love and old friend of Mother Thomas. Hope is a well-realized protagonist set among other colorfully drawn characters. Although the somewhat contrived plot elements—Mother Thomas' roundabout plan to get Hope home, their stay in a boarding house as they seek transportation through rebel lines, their relocation to the pox house with its taciturn but kindly nurse, and even Hope's being taken in by the general's lady—do not stand up to close scrutiny, they still contribute to an overall sense of adventure. An historical note is included. JMD

HADDAD, CHARLES  
ISBN 0-385-32518-5  $14.95
Reviewed from galleys  Ad  Gr. 4-6

In an attention-grabbing opener, nine-year-old Calliope loses her favorite pair of pink plastic fangs to the very person she's fantasized about biting in the neck—her teacher, who confiscates them into a desk drawer. The rest of the book is dedicated to an effort at retrieving this Draculonian treasure, starting with Calliope's escape from the after-school program and developing into a scheme involving her rabbit Mortimer, who hisses, two policemen, who are onto Calliope's habit of coming home early while her mother is at work and her older brothers are somewhere unspecified (her father is dead), and an elderly neighbor, Mrs. Blatherhorn, who has reported both Mortimer and Calliope to the authorities. The tone is obstreperous, the pace frantic, the focus scattered, and the humor calculated for kid appeal; Pica's cartoony illustrations have a *Rugrats* flavor that marks them as seriously contemporary. Authorial asides—"Guess what?" and "Oh, don't worry" and "Not bad, huh?"—give the third-person narration a self-conscious confidentiality while shifting attention from the protagonist's viewpoint, but young readers will forgive anything for slapstick scenes such as Calliope's attempt to vacuum an ant out of Mrs. Blatherhorn's nose. BH

HANSEN, JOYCE  
ISBN 0-8050-5012-4  $17.95  R  Gr. 6-10

In 1991, an archeological team evaluating the New York City site of a new federal office building uncovered the African Burial Ground, which, dating from the eighteenth century, is the oldest known cemetery for people of African descent in the United States. Both the story of the discovery of the cemetery and the stories of those buried there are pieced together in this intriguing volume. Hansen and McGowan (who is the head conservator of the team studying the Burial Ground) interweave past and present, going back and forth between the written history of Africans, both enslaved and free, in New York in colonial times and the light shed
on their daily lives by the analysis of skeletons and artifacts uncovered in the African Burial Ground today. There is a great deal of speculation here—perhaps the female skeleton with the bullet in her ribcage died in a slave uprising, perhaps the little girl with earbobs was part American Indian, perhaps the male skeleton with the brass buttons was a sailor—but it is speculation based on available evidence, and, combined with known history, it makes enlightening reading. Black and white photographs of the site and period illustrations are poorly reproduced but still enliven the dense but accessible text; notes on each chapter, a bibliography, and an index are included. JMD

HANSON, MARY ELIZABETH Snug; illus. by Cheryl Munro Taylor. Simon, 1998 [32p]
ISBN 0-689-81164-0 $15.00
Reviewed from galleys

Like any normal kid, the bear cub, Snug, wants to play. "No," says Mother. "Time for a lesson." Mother wants him to dig up bulbs; Snug hops after a frog. Mother leads him to an anthill; Snug scampers after a chipmunk, getting his head stuck in a hollow log. Mother tries to teach him to fish; Snug dives in the water ("He is brave. He is daring. He is . . . going too fast") and nearly goes over a waterfall. Eventually Mother relents and joins Snug for "wrestling and rumbling and playing." The rough-and-tumble text is accompanied by handmade, hand-cut, and hand-colored papers, which form earthen-toned forest collages. The lumbering brown shapes of mother and son predominate the various textures of woodland and water detailing. Snug's rambunctious machismo is humorously portrayed in both the text and the art, and kids will appreciate his aptitude for getting into tight spots as well as Mother's role in easing the toddler tension by quickly coming to Snug's rescue. The final mother-son frolic against a background of the sun's emanating rays may incite some local rumble-tumble activity, so either join in or get out of the way. PM

HILL, DONNA Shipwreck Season. Clarion, 1998 215p
ISBN 0-395-86614-6 $15.00

Daniel Stafford enters into a new and uncomfortable relationship with his respected Uncle Elisha, the keeper of a Cape Cod life-saving station, when Daniel is sent to spend some months away from the questionable influence of his friends. The teenager is expected to offer his uncle the same unquestioning obedience as the highly disciplined team of men who staff the station; although his mocking comments and pampered ways do not instantly endear him to his new comrades, the men are more than willing to train him and in fact encourage his natural strength and athleticism in the service of safeguarding the coast. Hill details the drills, patrols, work rotations, and daily domestic duties of the 1880s maritime rescue teams, clearly conveying the long stretches of monotonous routine broken by periods of intense activity. Daniel's personal development, though, is predictable and mechanically presented, and despite scenes of a shipwreck's tragic aftermath and a heroic rescue mission, the nonfictional elements of the novel are more involving than the prosaic coming-of-age plot. Readers bumming the summer away on the beach might want to give this a look, however, and consider that their pleasant vacation comes courtesy of the Coast Guard and its forerunners. EB
ISBN 0-06-023519-5  $14.95  Ad  Gr. 9-12

Stephanie Holt used to be a model and an actress in television commercials, but the eighteen-year-old hasn't worked in awhile. She missed a year of high school when she had a nervous breakdown, a breakdown that was triggered by a repressed "sense memory" of sexual abuse recalled in a method acting class. Stephanie, feeling isolated and lost, is just barely managing to get herself through class and therapy sessions when she is befriended by the sarcastic but compassionate Dahlia, who is just what the fragile Stephanie needs—a nonjudgmental, sympathetic ally. The interaction between the two girls has solid appeal as each becomes the friend the other seeks. The action of the novel is built around the revelation of Stephanie's recovered memory of her being sexually abused by a nanny when Stephanie was five, which in turn is the catalyst that helps her save Dahlia from an attempted rape, which leads to Stephanie's realization that sexual assault is never the victim's fault. While Stephanie's recovery from her breakdown and her mixed feelings about rejecting commercials and pursuing serious acting are sensitively evoked, the textbook therapy sessions and the overly simplistic end-tying don't do either subject justice. For the first two-thirds of this novel Hoban moves her characters through their relationships (with parents and each other) and their New York City environment with assuredness, only coming to real grief in the programmatic final third, when she turns from character development to bibliotherapy.  JMD

IGUS, TOYOMI  *I See the Rhythm*; illus. by Michele Wood. Children's Book Press, 1998 [32p]
ISBN 0-89239-151-0  $15.95  Reviewed from galleys  Ad  Gr. 4-8

As Igus implies in her introductory notes, the themes within this "look at the history of African American music through the eyes of an artist" are set by illustrations rather than by text, as Wood's gallery visually defines and contrasts the rhythms of the developing stages of popular music (no mention is made of black contributions to classical composition). Wood opens with African "Origins," a mixed-media composition in which the drum beat is represented by centrally placed, repetitive images in both kente-cloth patterns and the cramped figures of a slave ship diagram. Page turns then bring visual surprises and even a few psychic jolts, as the sensuous curves and midnight hues of "Jazz Women" give way to the brassy, angular spread "BeBop," or the formal, vertical lines of New Orleans architecture in "Jazz Beginnings" are followed by the tangled swirl of dancers and musicians in "Sounds of Swing." Unfortunately, Igus's text—which shares equal space with Wood's work—can't keep up with Wood's key changes. There is little variation in the steady, stiff thump of her free verse: "I see the rhythm of the blues/ in the hardship of our times—/ in the calls and chants on the railroad lines"; "I see the rhythm of cool jazz/ in the music of young musicians/ crying out for freedom of expression." Crowding the text is a minuscule but informative timeline of social, political, and musical events, which subtly shape Wood's visual celebration of sound into a composite lesson in racial oppression and civil rights victories. The inclusion of the occasional song lyric will make readers long for more—pop in a few CDs and settle back for a good long look at the pictures.  EB
"He approaches the plate,/ ponderous,/ swinging smoothly/ in slow motion/ knowing his choice is simple:/ swing or/not." The batter may be the star on the field, but he shares the glory in this collection with everyone from the peanut vendors "ignoring the battle/ being waged/ on the field of flawless green," to the aching catcher whose "knees sing the blues/ They sing 'em when I stoop and bend," to the nuns in the stands, "settled in a row/ behind the first-base dugout/ straight as piano keys." Most of the entries are free verse—rich in imagery but slight of rhythm—the sameness of which is delightfully relieved by the singability of "Catcher Sings the Blues," the wry humor of the prescriptive "How to Spit," and the unexpected poignancy of the old woman in "Section 7, Row 1, Seat 3," who "measures life/ in baseball time:/ born the year Yankee Stadium opened;/ . . . alone since the Yankee's last pennant." Each poem is accompanied by a full-page illustration in thickly applied pastels of dusty lavender and mauve, picked out with startling patches of crimson and yellow and glaring white; Katchen's muscular lines and rock-solid figures boast a self-assurance befitting the cockiness of the pitcher and the unflappable faith of the fans. EB


Willie is elated that his "first best friend," Kyle, is moving back to town; his best friend since Kyle's departure, Lucy, is less enthused by this challenge to her status. The two best friends jostle for position with Willie caught in the middle, but the three become a team in order to investigate the haunting of Kyle's new house. Joosse capably combines the mundane (the friend-hierarchy dilemma) with the exaggerated (a singing telegram, the ghost hunt, the kids' plan for a detective agency), and her writing has an understated and offhanded wit that gives the book a zest a great many easy readers lack. Readers may guess before the characters do that the phantom presence in Kyle's house is really a very-much-alive talking parrot, but that makes the ghost-hunting sequences all the funnier ("'Ghost slime!' I screamed, pointing my flashlight to the white, goopy stuff on the floor"). Pages are chock-full of Truesdell's black-and-white cartoons; the rumbustious line-and-wash pictures of googly-eyed kids add an extra joke by making Kyle and Lucy nearly identical. Young readers in search of a short and sweet literary adventure will revel in this; it could also make a prime choice for those kids to read aloud to their younger schoolmates. DS


Mr. Ape (short for Archibald Peregrine Edmund) Spring-Russell is a rich Englishman left alone by his not-so-loving wife in the ancestral manse, Penny Royal. He is happily converting the dining room into a hen house and sleeping in the kitchen when he meets Joe and his son Jake, Gypsies whose caravan is camped nearby. Joe takes over Penny Royal's neglected landscaping and Jake takes over the animals
(which increase to include rabbits, canaries, guinea pigs, a dog, and a donkey), much to everyone's content. When a spark from a Guy Fawkes' fire burns down Penny Royal (don't worry—the animals get out safely), local inhabitants leap to blame the Gypsies, who decide to leave. Mr. Ape, bereft of home and hearth, buys himself a caravan, hooks it up to his Rolls Royce, and drives off into the sunset. The plot may reach a bit, but the characters are solidly drawn, especially Mr. Ape and Jake, whose shared passion for animals of any kind quickly cements their friendship. The scenes wherein Mr. Ape converts the formal rooms of the mansion into roosts and hutches are described in hilarious detail, and Mr. Ape himself appears destined to take his place alongside King-Smith's other eccentric senior citizens. Roth's full-page, black-and-white pencil illustrations feature a handsome assortment of animal and human characters drawn with a cheerful mien that is the visual counterpart to King-Smith's easy style and language. This will make a good chapter readaloud, but you'll have to stash it away to keep listeners from finishing it on their own. JMD


"It was the roses that told me she'd gone. She kept a bed of purple roses and every single bush was bare. Mama had gone through and cut away each flower. The stems themselves cluttered the ground around the bushes. She'd harvested the petals."

"Thus begins the period in 1934 when eleven-year-old Nissa Bergen chronicles her mother's abandonment of the family, her father's courtship and remarriage, and her own reactions that alternate between self-destruction and tentative acceptance of a new kind of stability represented by her soon-to-be stepmother. Most of all, she mourns her mother and her mother's spirited imagination, which Mama has passed on to Nissa. Nissa's repetitive self-questioning is authentic to the character but eventually wearing to the reader and perhaps tonally psychoanalytic for the period. However, there are a number of moving scenes, and their eventual accumulation is convincing. The small-town, deep-south ambiance is clearly depicted, especially in the ambiguous portrayal of neighbors who can be at once intolerant and supportive within a closed community that scorns anyone different or, of course, black. This is not as concisely subtle as Kimberly Holt's *My Louisiana Sky* (BCCB 6/98)—also a first novel dealing with pre-adolescent family loss in rural Louisiana—but the voice is strong and the experience enveloping despite the expository narrative. BH


This brief account of Twain's early life (pre-Twain Twain, if you will) focuses especially on his active boyhood and his Mississippi and Western adventures, which provided source material for his later fiction. Lasky capably evokes the rough-and-ready milieu in which the young Clemens took such delight, and she makes it clear that Twain was a storyteller from early on. It's unfortunate, then, that the author doesn't include any sources, so that we have no idea how she differentiated between Twain's inflated yarns and the biographical facts; the wordiness of the account (its picture-book-sized pages are densely packed with text) also means that many kids ready to read this could tackle more complete biographies such as Clinton.
Cox's (BCCB 9/95) or Richard Lyttle's (2/95). It's still a flavorful introductory biography, however, and Moser's watercolor rogues' gallery of young Twain and his colorful acquaintances allows art on just about every spread to enliven the pages (though some of the faces suffer from grotesque stiffness). This might also be an effective entree to a middle-grades history of the West as well as a chronicle for younger readers—or even listeners—of a great writer's early life. DS


This collection of two dozen buggy poems versifies about rhinoceros beetles and mayflies, termites and ladybugs. Lewis' tone ranges from playful to contemplative, and there's a variety of poetic and musical verse forms represented. While a few of the poems depend overmuch on forced scansion, concept, or wordplay, most of them are zingy and effective. "Them!" is comic in its role reversal ("But Silverfish, beware of Them! they stumble in at 2 A.M."). "The Pond Glider" ("On wings of veins / minutely shattered windowpanes") has a precise yet lacy lyricism appropriate to its damselfly subject, and readers will immediately recognize the behavior of "The Almost Indestructible Last Horsefly of Summer," who "wipes his feet/ on my pack of/ NutraSweet." If anyone is born to draw personified insects, it's Victoria Chess, who generously supplies any number of extra legs with eerily human hands and even accoutrements (shoes are apparently all the rage in the bug world); her subjects' smirking faces are characterful yet still disconcertingly alien. Even bouncier than Florian's Insectlopedia, reviewed above, and certainly sillier than the classic Joyful Noise (BCCB 2/88), this would make a lively buzzing readaloud as well as a readalone—especially in an attempt to divert class attention from one of the ubiquitous classroom flies. DS

MCCAUGHREAN, GERALDINE, ad. The Bronze Cauldron: Myths and Legends of the World; illus. by Bee Willey. McElderry, 1998 130p ISBN 0-689-81758-4 $19.95 R Gr. 4-6

"Taru took his lightning in one hand and his thunderbolt in the other and went out to fight the dragon Illuyankas. From Aleppo to Kayseri it lay, a mountain range of a monster, armored with scales as large as oven doors, and green as the mold that grows on graves." Although the conflict in this Hittite myth is basic, the styling is as eloquent as in tales found in this title's companion volumes, The Golden Hoard (BCCB 7/96) and The Silver Treasure (6/97), and the cultural scope as wide-ranging, including Viking, Inuit, Hindu, Rwandan, and Romany peoples. Some tales are triumphant, others tragic; some gentle, others violent. There are twenty-seven in all, including the quintessential Welsh shape-changing legend from which Lloyd Alexander and other fantasy writers have drawn their cauldron image: "Three paces from the door, three paces from the window, three paces from where Boy Gwion slept on the floor, stood the witch's bronze cauldron on three bronze legs." Notes on the cultures of origin do not include print sources of the stories themselves, so that it would be difficult to check on changes, adaptations, and oddities such as the reference to a "hogan" (Navajo) in a Mandan myth. Willey's illustrations, dominated by deep blues and greens that are lit with an occasional
coppery red, have an eerie sheen; the human figures hint at humor leavened by respect for the often momentous tone of such ancient tales. BH

**McPhail, David**  *Tinker and Tom and the Star Baby*; written and illus. by David McPhail. Little, 1998 32p ISBN 0-316-56349-8 $14.95  R 4-7 yrs

Tinker (a boy) and Tom (a bear) follow the trail of a shooting star into their backyard and discover a lost Star Baby in a mini-rocket ship looking for its mother. The Star Baby (in a baby bunting and star bonnet) takes an immediate liking to fuzzy-faced Tom, and the trio go into the kitchen to bang the dents out of the rocket and concoct some rocket fuel out of handy kitchen goods. The Star Baby snacks on cat food, floats things around the room with the point of a gravity-defying finger, and observes the proceedings. When the mini-rocket is fueled and ready, the Star Baby takes off gurgling gleefully and finds its mother, and Tom and Tinker go back to bed. As nighttime fantasies go, this is a pretty good one: a young protagonist with a big bear friend gets to rescue a Star Baby, play with rockets, and make a mess in the kitchen, all without fear of reprisal, and the tiny bit of pathos in the sad farewell is just enough to keep this from being too frothy. McPhail's watercolors capture the magic in a nighttime palette of blues and purples, with touches of red (Tinker's pajamas), yellow (Star Baby's star bonnet), and green (the rocket). The characters are expressive and cheerfully mischievous, and the kitchen scene, wherein a variety of utensils, appliances, and food float weightlessly around the room, is sure to please young would-be insomniacs and Star Baby rescuers. JMD

**Matas, Carol**  *Greater Than Angels*. Simon, 1998 133p ISBN 0-689-81353-8 $16.00  R Gr. 6-9

It is 1940 when Anna Hirsch and her family are rounded up by the Nazis and sent to Gurs, a camp in the south of France for Jewish deportees. Conditions are inhumane, the inmates die of dysentery and other diseases with great regularity, and the fear that they will be transferred to a death camp like Auschwitz or Dachau fills their days. When the opportunity arises for the children to be sent to Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a town that has agreed to shelter the younger refugees, their parents leap at the chance to send them to safety. Anna goes to the small town with her friends Klara, Peter, and Rudi and adjusts quickly to a semi-normalcy that includes regular meals, school, and delivering forged papers to escaping Jews. But the war cannot be kept at bay indefinitely, and when the Nazi threat gets closer, the friends attempt to escape to Switzerland. Anna has a vigorous adolescent voice that never fails to communicate the complexity of her situation. Her resistance to despair, her sorrow over the loss of her grandmother, and her determination to seek restitution through working with the Resistance all resonate truly for this character. Matas does not avoid unpleasantness but concentrates instead on the sheer appetite for life that keeps Anna from defeat. The scene at the train station when Anna realizes she will never see her mother again is agonizing, yet Anna's promise to her mother—to stay safe, to find her brother and sister in England and America, to be a family—is hopeful and sustaining. There is a cheekiness to Anna's narration that will hold readers despite the occasional bumps in the plot; an author's note describing her research into the heroic role Le Chambon-sur-Lignon played in resisting the Nazis is included. JMD
MATCHECK, DIANE  *The Sacrifice.*  Farrar, 1998  198p  
ISBN 0-374-36378-1  $16.00  Ad  Gr. 5-9

Weak-one is certain that it is she, not her deceased twin, who was prophesied to become a notable Apsaalooka leader, the Great-one. Determined to prove her mettle in battle, she surreptitiously follows a war party, only to fall captive to a band of Pawnee. At first, Weak-one cannot fathom her role among the Pawnee—she is not claimed as either a daughter or a wife, but closely watched and respectfully treated by the community and befriended by a young man whom she dubs Wolfstar. Months later, though, she discovers that she is intended as a sacrificial victim in a seasonal Pawnee rite. Throughout the book, improbable dialogues strike false notes. In a climax of cinematic scale, Wolfstar rescues Weak-one from death and is mortally wounded by his father’s arrow but nonetheless spouts paragraphs of melodramatic regrets and justifications for his actions: “Are Pawnee dreams more important than Apsaalooka dreams? Are our gods more important than your gods? All I know is I could not bear to deliver you to your death.” Weak-one’s verbal defiance of her father suggests a teenager crusading for mall money rather than a young woman destined for greatness. Matcheck provides endnotes which comment on the Pawnee Morning Star ceremony, but her blood-and-thunder tale seems to require a bit stronger verification of Weak-one’s Apsaalooka prospects than “although it was rare for Crow girls to become warriors, it was not forbidden.” Despite these flaws, readers drawn to star-crossed lovers will find much to sigh over here. EB

ISBN 0-525-45643 $24.99  Reviewed from galleys  Ad  Gr. 5-10

This historical gallery features a half-score of memorable women ranging from Esther and Cleopatra to more recent monarchs such as Maria Theresa of Austria and Catherine the Great of Russia. In the ten to fifteen pages on each subject’s life, Meltzer often packs in some personal and political evaluation in addition to major historical and/or legendary high points, providing a neat and individual overview of his biographees. The writing, however, is a frustrating blend of strengths and weaknesses—Meltzer’s lively engagement with his subjects is undercut by error (“Nearly two thousand years have passed since she died in 30 B.C.,” the book says of Cleopatra, and it wrongly implicates Eleanor of Aquitaine’s son John, rather than his brother Geoffrey, in revolt against his father), and by awkward or confusing phraseology and explanations (Isabel of Spain’s standing in the order of succession seems to skip a step, it’s never mentioned that Christina of Sweden attempted to reclaim her crown after the death of her successor, and terms such as “papal bull” and “regent” appear without gloss). The book is undeniably beautiful, with gracefully formatted airy white pages; Andersen’s full-page oil-on-gesso illustrations have a textured luminescence that makes the queens seem borne on the winds of the past, and smaller insets add color and atmosphere (though they’re sometimes not as illustrative as their blandly factual captions suggest), while maps are extremely helpful in locating the action. The volume’s elegance and the power of queenly legend will nonetheless lure readers, and the accounts may well spark further research. A brief note on historiography, a bibliography divided by chapter, and an index are included. DS

See this month's Big Picture, p. 385, for review.

MULFORD, PHILIPPA GREENE  *The Holly Sisters on Their Own.*  Cavendish, 1998  158p  ISBN 0-7614-5022-X  $14.95  R  Gr. 5-8

Charmaine is dreading her glamorous older half-sister's summer visit: Cissa is perfect, well-dressed, and elegant where Charmaine is dumpy, pimply, and mouthy. After initial prickles, however, the girls become close, bonding together in the face of New York excitements and, more threateningly, a visit from Cissa's demanding mother, who wants her daughter to leave early. Some of the events are a bit tossed in, and the revelation of Charmaine's parents' separation at the end undermines the sisterly drama, but the girls' relationship remains compelling. Charmaine's narration has a preadolescent smartmouthedness reminiscent of a less intense Harriet Welsch, but she's also authentically dorky in her wit and perception. Though the larger family issues play their part in the book, the enjoyment here lies in watching two young women roaming the Big Apple and discovering important family connections when they really need them. Most readers will just want to trade their own siblings in for the characters, but a few may even be moved to a little sisterly appreciation of their own.  DS


Andrew's loose tooth hurts so much he can't eat his breakfast of shiny red apples. The valiant efforts of mother, father, dentist, and motorcycle-riding tooth fairy prove unsuccessful; it is only when his best friend Louis sprinkles pepper up Andrew's nose that Andrew sneezes "that tooth all the way across town." The exaggeratedly silly text is easily matched by Martchenko's lively watercolors, which feature comical characters with varying expressions of amazement, bemusement, and frustration. Munsch's flair for the slapstick does not desert him here as the long-suffering Andrew puts up with his mother yanking on his tooth with both hands, his father using a giant pliers, the visiting dentist (in his siren-equipped emergency vehicle with a giant bicuspid on top that reads "555-TOOTH") tying one end of a rope to the tooth and the other end to his bumper, and the hammer-wielding of the leather-jacketed, tooth-necklace-bedecked Tooth Fairy. Looking for a snortingly funny lost-tooth/loose-tooth/tooth-fairy title? Look no further than this easy-listening picture book, wherein Munsch's Evel Knievel-like Tooth Fairy leaps her motorcycle over traffic as she chases that sneeze-propelled tooth with a butterfly net.  JMD


The snake bands in Snake Alley "Shhh-BOOM Shhh-BOOM Shhh-BOOM" until winter sets in, leaving the smallest member hibernating under a log. Snake awakens in the spring looking for the snake band to find only Cricket ("Chew-up chew-
up”), Frog (“Cha-BOP cha-BOP cha-BOP”), Fish (“POP-POP-DOO-WOP”), Bird (“Tweet-tweedle-dee-deet”), and Turtle (“TA-TOOM TA-TOOM TOOM”). “Stop that racket!” shouted Snake. “I said snake band, not sky-skipping, hip-hopping, splish-splashing, flip-flapping, stamp-stomping turtle band.” Snake wriggles away and finds his snake band buddies, but after a night of Shh-BOOMing, a bored Snake realizes the Snake Band’s limitations and suggests they add some other creature sounds, resulting in Snake being ss-ss-shunned by the other snakes. Not to worry, though—the sky-skipping, hip-hopping, splish-splashing, flip-flipping, stamp-stomping, wig-wagging Snake Alley band wants him back. Watercolors with a light touch offer cartoonish creatures with lots of scribbly black lines detailing the action, serving to extend the lightness of this jazzy title. Passing a test run with local first graders, who reveled in taking on the assorted roles in the Snake Alley band, this combination of a cumulative text, zany creatures, and silly sounds should add up to loads of irresistible toe-tapping, finger-snapping, tongue-wagging fun for your local storytime attendees as well. PM

PAULSEN, GARY

The Transall Saga.

Delacorte, 1998 248p
ISBN 0-385-32196-1 $15.95
Ad Gr. 6-10

Fourteen-year-old Mark is out camping by himself in a remote part of the desert when he is transported by a column of light to what he believes to be a distant planet. His fascination with survival lore serves him well as he learns to forage for food and to create weapons in order to hunt. His discovery of a friendly tribe alleviates his loneliness, but his relief is short-lived; the more sophisticated Tsook people attack and defeat Mark’s new friends, taking the survivors, Mark among them, as slaves. During an escape attempt, Mark saves the Tsook from marauding cannibals; as a reward, he is set free and trained to be a Tsook warrior. Mark’s search for the column of light leads him to the truth about the world of the Tsooks—it is the Earth of the future after a devastating plague and nuclear holocaust. Just as randomly as he left it, Mark is transported back to his own time, where he becomes a doctor researching a cure for the plague to come. That the plot is derivative, the prose choppy, and the conclusion illogical may not bother sci-fi/adventure fans. The fast action will draw in reluctant readers as Mark, a somewhat soft adolescent, becomes an almost mythical warrior figure, all the while seeking his way home. JMD

PINKNEY, ANDREA DAVIS

Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra; illus. by Brian Pinkney. Hyperion, 1998 32p
Trade ed. ISBN 0-7868-0178-6 $15.95

In a text as playful and sassy as a swing riff, Pinkney traces Ellington’s career from his boyhood boredom with piano lessons to his triumphant 1943 Carnegie Hall debut of the symphonic length opus Black, Brown, and Beige. Focusing particular attention on his career-launching engagement at the Cotton Club, Pinkney captures Ellington’s innovative practice of highlighting the individual skills of his band members, instead of settling for the more unified sound of contemporary swing bands: “One by one, each cat took the floor and wiped it clean with his own special way of playing”; “Bubber turned out a growl from way down in his throat. His gutbucket tunes put a spell on the room.” Brian Pinkney’s signature scratchboard illustrations sport an airy lightness here, with bright yellow and hot pink backgrounds for interiors and jewel-toned blues and teals and limes that shimmer.
under marquee lights. Although the Pinkneys somewhat surprisingly omit any reference to the Cotton Club’s exclusively white clientele and neglect to provide an introductory discography of Ellington’s work, they successfully deliver kid-friendly information with “hot-buttered bop” worthy of the jazz master himself. EB

**Pinkwater, Daniel**  *The Education of Robert Nifkin.* Farrar, 1998 168p ISBN 0-374-31969-3  $16.00  R Gr. 7 up

In a story that smacks of thinly veiled autobiography, Robert Nifkin tells of his high-school experiences in 1950s Chicago. Robert is initially afflicted with attendance at Riverview High School, where the conspiracy theorists, anti-Semites, and nutcases who comprise the faculty teach the students by making them silently copy large chunks of arcane material off of the blackboards and into their notebooks. Eventually, however, a connection with a girl he met at a diner leads him to the Wheaton School, a before-its-time alternative school where education is optional but at least possible, where intellectual curiosity and people worth being curious about are actually present, and where Robert makes himself into a candidate for college attendance (the book is written in the form of his college-application essay). Many adults will enjoy this book, and they’re the only ones who will get some of the jokes (the Clifton Fadiman reference, for instance, will fly over most teenagers’ heads), but Pinkwater’s sardonic evocation of the incomprehensible world of high school will strike a chord with contemporary inmates of the institution. Jean Shepherd edged with Damon Runyon, he effectively conveys the bizarreness of—well—everybody, ranging from the Rhinoceros Milk Man (who hangs out at the intellectual bookstore flogging his patent remedy) to terrible English teacher Mrs. Kukla (whom Pinkwater mercilessly pillories in her own ungrammatical and illogical speech) to Robert’s own father (a “son-of-a-bitch from eastern Europe” who greets the news of his son’s entry into ROTC with “Goot. Dey’ll kick your ass, and make you from a man, fet little sissy”). Pinkwater’s recollection of place and time is particularly vivid (Chicago-area kids will enjoy recognizing landmarks), but most rewarding to readers will be his firm conviction that they’re not crazy and that they’re correct in thinking that none of this makes sense—which doesn’t mean it’s not survivable and certainly doesn’t mean it’s not funny. DS


The town of Plotchnik is in deep, dry trouble—there has been no rain for forty days and forty nights. In the synagogue the rich and learned pray, but no rain falls. “Poor Stupid Schmuel” the shoemaker offers to pray, but “no one cared if Poor Schmuel prayed. If God ignored the town elders, why would He listen to Schmuel—who couldn’t even read the prayers?” But God does listen, the rains come, and the rich and learned pat themselves on the back. It rains for forty days and forty nights, and won’t stop until Schmuel prays, “God, please make it stop raining.” The rabbi realizes that Schmuel is one of the righteous whose prayers are heard by God, but when he tells the villagers and they rush to Schmuel’s shop, he is gone. “A few months after Schmuel left, a new cobbler came to Plotchnik. His name
was Yakov, and he was poor, but no one called him Poor Stupid Yakov. Everyone was kind to him. After all, you never know." Podwal’s gouache and colored-pencil illustrations bring Plotchnik to vivid life in a clean, unmuddy palette, showing the small town both brown and dry and blue and wet, its inhabitants rendered in a few emphatic pencil strokes. The book design indulges in some cheerful compositional whimsy, with a large typeface and a generous amount of white space among which the pictures, engagingly varied in size from spot art to double-page spreads, are effectively placed. Prose has the language and rhythms of the oral storyteller down pat, and her text is a readaloud gem. The explanatory author’s note places this tale firmly within its cultural context; a detailed source note is included. Don’t save this one for a rainy day—read it now. JMD

RADUNSKY, VLADIMIR, ad. Yucka Drucka Droni; ad. and illus. by Vladimir and Eugenia Radunsky. Scholastic, 1998 34p ISBN 0-590-09837-3 $15.95 Ad 3-6 yrs

The text (based, according to a tiny note on the copyright page, on a tongue-twister occurring in Yiddish, Russian, and Danish) tells the story of three brothers, Yuck, Yucka-Druck, and Yucka-Drucka-Droni. The boys settle down with three sisters (Zippa, Zippa-Drippa, and Zippa-Drippa-Limpomponi) and have a trio of babies (Shuck, Shuck-Schuckmut, and Shuck-Schuckmut-Shuckmoni) and all live happily together along with a slew of pets named Daisy. That may be a lot of activity for a tongue-twister, but it’s not much for a story; the book depends, therefore, on the energy of the nonsensical wordplay, which leaves a lot of room for reader-aloud creativity (rereading at increasingly faster speed comes to mind). The mixed-media art counterparts broad fields of sharply bordered colors with fabric, photographs, and textured paint elements, resulting in an electrified yet crisply clean otherworldliness. The multiracial cast is eccentrically diverse in appearance (each sibling group contains various heights, races, and fashion inclinations), and their quiet cheer in the face of all the silliness makes them perfect foils to the book’s nonsense. If you can get around the absence of plot, this might make a particularly entertaining participatory readaloud, with different kids assigned to chime in on different names until, ultimately and loudly, the proceedings have twisted everybody’s tongues. DS


More than three dozen children’s book authors and illustrators offer single page reflections on the gardens, plants, and horticultural rituals that have anchored roots in their lives. There are flowery memories—Eve Bunting missed a train while picking primroses near an English railroad embankment, and Will Hillenbrand mistakenly delivered a “daisyless bouquet” to the grandmother of his heart’s desire. There are perennial dilemmas—Denise Fleming faces off with giant zucchinis, and Erich Hoyt faces off with black bears for orchard-fresh apples. There are palate-pleasing vegetables (Reynold Ruffins reports that “acorn squash alone defeated my mom’s ability to make it unappetizing”) and winter-brightening rites (Lois Ehlert organizes annual “amaryllis races” for her friends). Each brief text entry is lavishly illustrated with artwork representative of the author/illustrator—from Michael McCurdy’s dark, etching-like farmyard scene to Amy Butler’s grin-
ning pole beans—or by Rosen for those whose medium is exclusively verbal. A potpourri of activities inspired by the texts (Amy Butler advises readers how to grow their own hideouts; Judy Sierra offers a fried mustard green recipe for the culinarily adventurous) and a list of gardening resources (for garden-minded parents and teachers) round out the volume. Let readers with too much summer on their hands open this up and get growing. EB

RUMFORD, JAMES  
*The Island-below-the-Star*; written and illus. by James Rumford. Houghton, 1998 32p
ISBN 0-395-85159-9  $15.00 R  5-8 yrs

The Polynesians first came to the Hawaiian Islands over 1,500 years ago, and this original *pourquoi* tale tells of a possible how. Five brothers—Hoku, who loved the sun, moon, and stars; Na’ale, who loved the sea; Opua, who loved the clouds; Makani, who loved the wind; and young Manu, who loved the birds—decide to sail to a far-off island under a distant star. The four older brothers plan to leave young Manu behind, but he hides in the canoe and is not discovered until they are far at sea. Each brother contributes to the navigation of the canoe with his knowledge of celestial bodies, wind, sea, and clouds, while Manu makes himself useful fishing. Young Manu proves his worth when they are blown off course by a terrible storm and he is the only one who can see a high-flying seagull they follow as it heads for shore. This unusual, lyrically written story structurally echoes traditional oral tales with its building action, repetitive language, and cumulative rhythms. Rumford not only has a beautiful way with words, he also has an impressive command of his medium; his watercolor illustrations powerfully evoke an idyllic setting where sky and sea are paramount over all. This is an adventure story for reading aloud, for those beginning readers looking for excitement, and for those educators interested in discussing the hows and whys of story and history. A concluding note gives some historical and cultural context. JMD

SAGE, JAMES  
*Sassy Gracie*; illus. by Pierre Pratt. Dutton, 1998  [26p]
ISBN 0-525-45885-9  $15.99 Reviewed from galleys R*  5-8 yrs

In this original variant on the well-known tale of “Clever Gretchen,” Sassy Gracie is the red-shoed heroine who eats the chickens prepared for an important guest and, thanks to her quick thinking, goes to bed with a full tummy, free of consequences. Sage’s heroine is the cook’s helper who tricks both Master and guest as she dances around kitchen and environs in “a pair of big red shoes with big red heels that she loved to pieces . . . CLUNKETY-CLUNK! CLUNKETY-CLUNK!” The text is readaloud friendly with repetitive phrases and opportunities for group participation abounding. Pratt’s saturated palette serves the story well as the yellow-dressed Sassy Gracie dances on the orange kitchen floor, cavorts in front of the blue kitchen counters, and frolics through the green countryside. Black outlines give the illustrations (nubbly-textured paintings that resemble pastel) a strong, clearly defined edge; that and the lively compositions, with their changing but always skewed perspectives, suit Sassy Gracie’s lively antics to a (dancing) turn. While a simple source note indicating awareness that this is a direct descendant of a traditional tale would have greatly expanded the curriculum uses for this title, this is a robust retelling with flair and style that will easily become a readaloud, tellaloud favorite. JMD
SCOTT, C. ANNE  *Old Jake's Skirts*; illus. by David Slonim. Rising Moon, 1998 [36p]
ISBN 0-87358-615-8 $15.95
Reviewed from galleys

The chest that Old Jake finds lying in the road turns out to contain an unlikely treasure that changes his lonely life: calico skirts. When no one claims them after a year, Old Jake first grabs them to soak up water in his flooded cabin, then uses one for a scarecrow outfit, another for neckerchiefs, and others for a feedbag, overall patches, a sun-scarf for his mule, and cheerful pillow covers. The last skirt goes to its rightful heir, a little girl to whose dead mother the skirts belonged. The development is leisurely for a picture book and there's quite a bit of text, but Scott's downhome storytelling style and empathetic characterizations will make fine reading aloud for an older-than-usual picture book crowd. Deepening the text's impact are Slonim's richly textured oil paintings, which alternately absorb the viewer into darkened color blends and surprise the eye with chiaroscuro contrasts. The drafting, modeling, and compositions are skilled, while humans, animals, and hilly landscapes get expressively humorous but never slapstick treatment. From both author and artist, this is an unusually fresh first book. BH

SENISI, ELLEN B.  *Just Kids: Visiting a Class for Children with Special Needs*; written and illus. with photographs by Ellen B. Senisi. Dutton, 1998 40p

Cindy's stinging cry of “Retard!” wounds Ashley, a second grader in the school's special needs program; rather than punish Cindy, teachers and principal arrange for her to spend a portion of each day in the special needs classes, learning about the children and their wide ranging disabilities. Senisi remarks in a closing section that this photoessay is based on an incident in an actual school, and she manages to disseminate vast amounts of information, while credibly presenting both girls first mutually distrustful but then cautiously open to friendship. As the lead teacher, Mrs. Monaghan, explains to Cindy the reasons for various behaviors she observes in the students (an ADHD boy needs to be helped through a tantrum; an autistic child spins and hums and fiddles with his shoelaces), readers learn not only about learning disorders, but also about the strategies used to facilitate learning. The text is involving, but dense and purposive, and Senisi's careful explanations are packaged into a format with no natural breaks. Although Mrs. Monaghan's discussions with Cindy are measured and ever respectful of her students, it seems unlikely that a special education professional would discuss individual diagnoses so candidly with an outsider of any age. Still, the text with its sharp color photographs is a particularly thorough introduction to special needs classes, and it will be of interest and use in most school collections. EB

SHANNON, MARGARET  *Gullible's Troubles*; written and illus. by Margaret Shannon. Houghton, 1998 32p
ISBN 0-395-83933-5 $15.00

Gullible Guineapig is as credulous as his name suggests, and his aunt, uncle, and cousin, whom he's visiting “all by himself,” can't resist teasing him. He attempts to become invisible (by eating carrots, as his aunt instructs him), tries unsuccessfully to wash some coal clean (on his uncle's instructions), and outwits the cellar monster by walking on his hands (cousin Lila explains the safety measure); when
he hears what's certainly the cellar monster coming up to get him, he uses his newfound knowledge to make himself invisible and escape to his nice safe home.

The book treats Gullible's experiences with sympathetic yet witty supportiveness. The earnest little guinea pig really does deserve better treatment, as the audience will surely feel, but the teasing of his relatives is funny and understandable. (Audiences are unlikely to mourn, however, when the end reveals a very real cellar monster lurking behind Gullible's aunt and uncle as Gullible runs home to renewed visibility in his mother's arms.) Shannon's line-and-watercolor illustrations feature a stocky and expressive little rodent, who sports a dapper sailor suit and the same caught-in-the-headlights mien as some of Rosemary Wells' beleaguered animal protagonists. A lighthearted but empathetic look at the frightening alienness of other people's households (even the path leading up to Gullible's relatives' house has sinister eyes peering out from the trees), this is one kids can relate to—maybe even from both viewpoints. DS


Mi Nuong, the beautiful daughter of a powerful mandarin, hears a haunting love song ("My love is like a blossom in the breeze. My love is like a moonbeam on the waves") floating up from a fishing boat on the river below her tower room. Imagining the songster to be a wealthy suitor in disguise, she pines for him, becoming ill. The mysterious singer, a poor fisherman named Truong Chi, is found and ordered to sing for Mi Nuong, and he instantly falls in love with her even as she rejects him in a burst of laughter. The lovesick fisherman dies soon after, his heart, turned to crystal, sitting atop his chest. The crystal is then set adrift in the fisherman's boat, found by the mandarin, and made into a teacup for his daughter: "On the surface of the tea was the face of Truong Chi, gazing at her with eyes filled with love." A remorseful Mi Nuong weeps ("a single tear dropped into the cup"), releasing Truong Chi's spirit and his song forever. Shepard's retelling of this legend captures all the romantic feeling in an economical use of text without forfeiting any of the haunting mood of the tale. Enhancing the story's effectiveness are elegant yet somber paintings, which emphasize the story's tragic tone. The dusky, roughly edged backgrounds contrast with the smudged but brilliant tones of red, blue, and green, which strike a regal note and strongly suggest the story's southeast Asian origin. This could provide a lovely segue into thoughtful discussion on expectations, disappointment, and reparation. An author's note regarding the story's origins and musical notation for Shepard's original song are appended. PM


In this early introduction to the concept of different daily cycles, a simple text offers rhyming couplets ("Robin hops/ Rabbit stops") on each spread, contrasting the meaning of the day to the diurnal and to the nocturnal. Singer covers a fair range of territory in her examples, involving butterflies, fish, gastropods, and plants as well as the more obvious mammals; her text is spare, precise, and brisk, so that the enumeration isn't prolonged past audience tolerance. Though the palette is
sometimes more fluorescent than subtle, Goembel's colored-pencil art has a nature-drawing literalness (though scale isn't consistent throughout the book) that will assist youngsters in identifying the subjects; the audience will be tickled to see that many pages quietly include guest appearances from stars of other page spreads. The metaphoric use of “good night” to mean “sleep well” at the end somewhat undercuts the point that sleep doesn’t mean night for everything, but this is still a neat little package that effectively makes an abstract concept clear and concrete. Couple this with Rachel Isadora’s South African Night (BCCB 4/98) for a look at action and rest around the clock. DS

SLEATOR, WILLIAM  The Boxes. Dutton, 1998 [189p]
Reviewed from galleys M Gr. 5-8

Annie’s beloved Uncle Marco leaves in her care two boxes, which he cautions her not to open, before he departs on another of his mysterious trips. Impelled by no apparent motivation other than a desire to drive Sleator’s plot along, Annie opens the boxes, unleashing in her basement a horde of crab-like creatures who build a huge cathedral-like edifice and, in her closet, a tentacled, clock-like device that controls time and demands the sacrifice of some of its terrified worshippers, the crabs. Annie serves as psychic go-between for clock and critters, when she’s not busy fending off a neighborhood takeover by snaky Crutchley Development, whose president adds stealing the clock (to rule the world, or at least the real-estate market) to his nefarious agenda. Sleator pads his shakily constructed narrative with Annie’s asides: “Was I really, seriously going to try to do this? This thing that wonderful Uncle Marco has told me so strongly not to even think about doing?” Sleator’s customary knack for deft plotting and believable character motivations, which can drag the most grotesque impossibilities effectively into prosaic daylight, is sadly lacking here. We never know where the boxes came from, why Uncle Marco had them, how he came to have a clock of his own and hang out on Victorian rooftops, why he expected Annie to open the box, why Annie and boyfriend Henry and Uncle Marco crawl into the crabs’ tower . . . Sleator followers can probably give this one a miss, and newcomers can start with Others See Us (BCCB 11/93) or his classic Interstellar Pig (BCCB 7/84). EB

Library ed. ISBN 0-7868-2315-1 $16.49
Trade ed. ISBN 0-7868-0368-1 $15.95
Reviewed from galleys M Gr. 4-6

Dylan’s mother is off to Egypt for an archaeological dig, and Dad has been acting strange ever since he got back from a hunting trip near Mount Saint Helens (you’d act strange too if you had seen Sasquatch and you thought it had saved your life). When researcher Theodore Flagg and his bunch of crazies decide to hunt Bigfoot, Dylan’s dad joins them in a secret attempt to protect Bigfoot from harm. In the meantime Dylan has met an old field biologist, Mr. Buck Johnson, who joins Dylan to shadow Flagg’s party. It’s clear we’re entering cheesy plot territory when we find out that old Buck not only hijacked a plane years ago and stashed the money away in a desperate attempt to save the life of his dying son, but while recuperating in a remote cabin near Mount St. Helens (he was injured in the parachute escape from the plane), he met a group of Sasquatch and they began to
trust him. Events multiply and credibility decreases when the Mount starts to spew hot lava, Dylan finds underground tunnels inhabited by the Sasquatch and the hidden money, Dylan's injured Dad is rescued again by Sasquatch, and Buck mysteriously disappears leaving a signed confession. If readers can remain unfazed by the superficiality and one-dimensionality of all the characters, they'll still stumble over the plot's predictability and B-movie implausibility. Reluctant readers may be champing at the bit when you tell them that Sasquatch is about the infamous and elusive Bigfoot, but those who wallow through this may be more reluctant than ever the next time.


"People always said that Ricky looked just like his mother," which Ricky considers a problem because he is a boy and he wants to be told he looks just like his father. When his kindergarten class starts rehearsing for a play to celebrate Cinco de Mayo, Ricky refuses all offered costumes until his teacher "took out a big, bushy mustache" and "something clicked." Ricky wears the mustache all day; he even sneaks it out of school. On the way home he's admired by passersby, but when he goes to show his mother he discovers that he has lost the mustache. His mustachioed Papi tries to cheer him up with a story, but Ricky cannot be consoled. How will he tell his teacher? In the morning his mother presents him with a new mustache—and his now clean-shaven Papi reminds him to "next time listen to your teacher." Ricky walks to school, carrying the mustache safely in his pocket, because "it wasn't just a bushy disguise anymore, but a gift from his Papi." Cepeda's acrylic illustrations feature an expressive cast of characters dressed in brilliant colors and set against vibrant backgrounds. His figures have an articulate body language that lends them a great deal of buoyant energy, from Ricky's classmates gesturing dramatically in the schoolroom to Ricky himself, sitting despondent on the curb after a fruitless search for the lost prop. Even while grownups wonder how Ricky's parents got that shaved mustache to stay together so neatly, Soto's tale of joy found, lost, and found again is going to resonate with a lot of young listeners.


Newbery-medal-winner Jerry Spinelli brings his senses to bear on the story of his own life, describing the sights, sounds, and smells of Norristown, Pennsylvania in the 1950s. Spinelli relates the triumphs and tragedies of growing up—the year he was the fastest runner in the neighborhood, his first girlfriend and his first kiss, the time he wrote a poem for a school assignment and was accused of plagiarism—in such an accessible voice that Spinelli fans will sigh with justifiable content. The black-and-white photographs add to the feeling of a life caught on the run, of times briefly held both on film and in print. Spinelli has a casual self-awareness that makes his descriptions of life lessons learned more palatable than preachy, and his asides about how he came to be a writer evince such natural aplomb that would-be authors will be encouraged. Short chapters and a friendly, conversational tone make this a good choice for reluctant readers, who will easily warm to these gently age-informed reminiscences.

The opening lines (“On a blustery day long ago, a weary cat crossed a bridge over the River Seine in Paris”) will rivet any group of primary-grade listeners. A ginger cat seeks a warm place to have her kittens, and she finds it in “a theater where ballet was performed.” Marmalade, as she is named by ballerinas and wardrobe mistress, has three kittens, Bijou, Bonbon, and Beau. The cats are protected from the stage manager (apparently not a cat lover) by the dancers and stage hands, and by the artist, unnamed in the text, who sketches the dancers. One night the stage manager’s fears are justified as the kittens race onto the stage during a performance to play with the ballerinas’ feet, but disaster turns to triumph when all of Paris wants to see “the kittens who danced.” Granted, the story is a tad precious, but young felinophiles and balletomanes are going to sigh with satisfaction over the homage-to-Degas pastels of kittens and ballerinas. Sweeney’s text is a straightforward if somewhat bland narrative that lends itself to reading aloud as it focuses on the kitty activities. The coy note and absence of real historical background will probably not be appreciated by art teachers and history buffs; still, those little pastel paw prints on the endpapers are pretty hard to resist. JMD


In sixteen brief poems, Turner invites her audience to examine a variety of natural settings and discover—or imagine—winged figures that hide there. In a pond, “A beaver glides through/a path of moonlight,/pulling the water/into shining wings”; in the clouds, “white mist streams/like hair and wings./I think I hear singing/far away.” The free verses offer imagery familiar enough for young listeners to grasp, and concluding annotations supplement the text with information about each setting. Ehlert’s dusky, moody collages, however, unpredictably reveal or conceal the “angels” in each spread, and viewers will find that, while some of the sprites fairly leap off the page (carefully arranged shells of the “Sea Angel”), some are frustratingly faint (the shadow figure in “Barn Angels”), and still others seem entirely imaginary (no discernible “Fire Angels” ascend from the crimson flames). Primary schoolers of a patient and introspective bent may warm to the airy musings and intricate visual compositions, but viewers expecting to ferret out celestial Waldos will have to search elsewhere. EB


Seventh-grader Sammy is secretly living with her grandmother in a senior citizens’ high-rise when, spying through the window of the seedy Heavenly Hotel, she sees a thief stealing money. Binoculars firmly fixed to her eyes, she realizes that he realizes he is being watched, and then (even she admits it was stupid) she waves to him. Thus begins a fast-paced mystery in which the somewhat down-on-her-luck Sammy is suspended from school on her first day, gets on the bad side of a disbelieving police officer, investigates local burglaries, and discovers who the bad guy
is, all without losing her smart mouth or fertile imagination. The plot may be a bit simplistic (people do have a way of being just where Sammy needs them) but this is a breezy novel with vivid characters, from the blind ice-cream man to the flashy astrologer to the junk-food-eating younger brother of Sammy’s best friend. Female protagonists who use their fists to settle their problems have been popping up quite a bit lately, and Van Draanen’s heroine doesn’t hesitate to use hers. Sammy has a hard-boiled, distinctive voice that not only suits this genre but is bound to make her a hit with young whodunnit lovers. JMD


One hot summer no rain falls on the pampas, and the grasses grow brown and dry. In despair, the worried people stop praying, and only little Topec keeps the faith. Finally he goes in search of rain. Across the pampas, through dying grass and dry dust he walks until he finds himself under the Carob Tree, “the only tree growing in the wide pampa—and its leaves were still moist and green!” The Carob Tree tells Topec that the Great Bird of the Underworld that sleeps in the tree’s branches at night is hiding the earth from the gods, who thus cannot hear the prayers or see that the pampas need rain. Topec returns with the people of his village, all bearing torches, drums, and rattles and making “such noise the earth shook.” The Great Bird flies away, the gods see the earth, hear the prayers, and send the rain. The dramatic language of this retelling has flair, as do some of Vidal’s gouache illustrations, which are at their compositional best in double-page vistas. The single-page illustrations are much less effective, however, with pedestrian compositions and drafting. Van Laan’s nicely circular conclusion brings this tale from the realm of folklore to the present, as the story concludes in modern-day Argentina, where the shade of the carob tree is said to bring good luck. A detailed source note is included. JMD


Fifth-grader Marianne comes to school one morning only to find herself locked out: “As of today, November 15, 1938, Jewish students are prohibited from attending German schools.” Already her relatives have fled from Berlin to Holland, her father has been arrested once and then forced into hiding, and her mother tries not to be noticed on her way to and from volunteer work at an orphanage. The Gestapo raid their apartment, from which the Nazi landlady shortly afterwards evicts them, and her mother desperately makes the decision to send her on a kindertransport in place of an orphan too sick to go. While the writing is flat and many such earlier incidents have been more forcefully detailed in other children’s books about the Holocaust, the separation of mother and daughter here is realistically moving, with the inevitable anger at abandonment mixed into tearful expressions of love. The ending promises safety for Marianne and leaves her parents’ fate unstated, so that no one with whom the reader strongly identifies dies in the course of the story. A Jewish baker reopens his smashed shop. A friend whom Marianne confronts because of his loyalty to Hitler bestows his most precious possession on her as a parting gift. Together with the compressed plot and easy reading level,
this unrealistic optimism may earmark the novel as an introduction for readers unready for more graphic scenes of danger or violence such as those in Pausewang's Final Journey (BCCB 12/96) or Leitner's The Big Lie (BCCB 1/93). BH -


All earthlings are doubtless familiar with the main points of the very public life and death of the Princess of Wales, but without going into the elaborate detail or axe-grinding of the adult biographies, this title gives young princess-watchers a glimpse beyond the headlines. Whitelaw covers the expected territory, cradle to early grave, discussing Diana's youthful hopes for her marriage, her personal crises, and her interest in charitable causes. The author draws on many of the adult biographies, and she makes a point of identifying speculation as such; though this is a pro-Diana biography (there's no mention, for instance, of the times she welcomed the publicity she also bemoaned), it generally eschews the adulation in which it might have indulged. Stylistically, the book is awkward, with creaky sentence construction ("Less and less frequently they pretended to get along") and paragraphs tossed in seemingly at random, but this is one teens will read for subject, not for style. It's sad that one of the main appeals of a Diana biography is its gossipy sordidness, but this one at least restrains itself from excess and gives the information in a larger context. A family tree of the Spencers, glossary of titles of the British nobility, bibliography, and endnotes are included; black-and-white photographs appear throughout; the bound book will have an index. DS


Wisniewski rips the lid off the dark secrets behind some traditional adult injunctions, such as "Drink your milk," "Don't jump on your bed," and "Don't pick your nose." Each section opens with a brief military précis of the undercover operation to find the truth and the crumpled cover sheet of the file documenting the Grown-Up Rule; then the page turns to reveal the frightening full story (drinking milk is necessary because it provides an outlet for the five super-producing radioactive cows who supply the milk for the country, jumping on the bed might awaken the living and troublesome mattress, picking your nose will make your brain deflate). The book clearly relishes its outlandish details of attack vegetables, Hell's Pinkies (roaming gangs of little fingers grown from bitten-off pieces of fingernail), and the "suckfaced survivors" of tragic blowing-bubbles-in-beverage accidents, and the text tosses in dopey corroborating detail with effective insouciance. Wisniewski's cut-paper artwork abandons its usual delicate strength for sheer unsubtle impact; the relentless inharmoniousness of the colors (clashing reds and oranges shriek alongside synthetic blues and greens) suits the book's shameless preadolescent brashness. This looks sophisticated enough without actually being so to endear itself to kids looking for major yucks with a veneer of coolness. They'll appreciate both the grossness and the breadth of reference here; they might also savor the chance to use this "information" to torment gullible younger listeners. DS
Keyed to *The Bulletin*'s alphabetical arrangement by author, this index, which appears in each issue, can be used in three ways. Entries in regular type refer to subjects; entries in **bold type** refer to curricular or other uses; entries in **ALL-CAPS** refer to genres and appeals. In the case of subject headings, the subhead "stories" refers to books for the readaloud audience; “fiction,” to those books intended for independent reading.

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**ADVENTURE STORIES:**
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**African Americans—fiction:**
- Bennett

**African Americans—stories:**
- England

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**American Indians:** Bierhorst

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- Eckert; Matcheck

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**Bears—stories:** Hanson

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**Disabilities:** Senisi

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