“This is truly a Mother Goose for young children growing up in a new century.”
—Starred Review / The Horn Book

NINA CREWS

The Neighborhood MOTHER GOOSE

“*The 41 rhymes range from the most familiar . . . to a few that may be new to readers . . . . It is the smart, digitally manipulated photographic compositions that give this book its snap . . . . a fresh and welcome contribution.”
—Starred Review / School Library Journal

“This gathering of common and not-so-common rhymes will be a hit with young readers and pre-readers in any setting, urban or otherwise.”
—Starred Review / Kirkus Review

“Preschoolers will enjoy seeing kids like themselves in pictures that make the familiar rhymes part of imaginative fun on the city sidewalk.”
—Starred Review / Booklist

“Provides a freshness without being overly contemporary.”
—Starred Review / Publishers Weekly
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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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Cover illustration by Chris Wormell from The Big Ugly Monster and the Little Stone Rabbit ©2004. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
The Big Ugly Monster and the Little Stone Rabbit
written and illus. by Chris Wormell

There are a lot of picture books that try to tug at hearts and perhaps even elicit a cathartic tear or two. Most such, however, find it hard to resist obvious sentimentality or clichéd elements (pets arriving at the end of their lives being a particularly popular device), and as for humor, you'll just have to look elsewhere. Yet the stories that turn out to be most moving and memorable reject the formulas and make their own way, and so it is with *The Big Ugly Monster and the Little Stone Rabbit.*

If you think your life is tough, consider the big ugly monster, who is "so ugly that all the animals and birds ran and flew away as soon as they saw him" (in fact, his ugliness is such that "if he stepped into a pond for a swim, it would instantly dry up, with a hiss of steam"). Big Ugly is, as a consequence, understandably lonely, but even his attempts to create his own friends out of stone are doomed by his fearsome physique ("... when he smiled, the stone animals cracked and shattered and he was left with a pile of rubble"). Fortunately, he finds an exception in the stone rabbit, who becomes the monster's silent and constant companion to the end of the monster's days.

This is at heart a remarkably poignant little tale, and tenderhearted kids will likely grieve for the poor monster and consider that he deserves better than his inanimate if staunch companion. Wormell lifts the story with an appealing narrative voice that combines direct address with witty, age-appropriate, and sometimes rueful humor (the monster's sculpting of animal heads isn't very good, but "the back ends were better; that was the bit he usually saw as the animals ran away") and clever self-awareness ("Of course, this is only a picture, so you're not getting the whole effect. You're not getting the ugliness at full strength"). The "he's so ugly" routine will strike a chord of playground-savvy recognition, while the repetition of the ugliness jokes and of the monster's eventual satisfaction ("He was happy nonetheless") adds a satisfying oral lilt to the story. Audiences may not automatically know what to make of the end, wherein the stony desolate ground blooms into loveliness around the stone rabbit after the ogre's death. Cynics will likely consider the landscaping boom to be a response to the ogre's absence, while gentler souls will likely plump for a locale made beautiful by an unusual friendship; either way, it'll make an interesting talking point as well as an aesthetically agreeable resolution.

In a story this visual, it's the illustrations that are key, and Wormell has departed from his familiar woodblock-print style to create an ugly watercolor monster of gratifyingly repellent aspect. All bristling hairs, grooved skin, and pointy nails, he's nonetheless a figure that elicits considerable empathy: the drooping of...
those triangular ears conveys a truly pitiable sadness, his gleeful gambols with—or sort of with—his rabbit pal look hugely enjoyable, and his pinky-brown tones make him a most pettable monstrosity. Next to the ogre’s overactive visuals, the stone rabbit seems quietly serene rather than blankly inanimate, and he’s credible both as a construction and a longtime companion.

In its low-key homeliness, the story recalls near-fables of attachment such as *The Red Balloon*. And while some listeners may wish for a more overt transformation, à la *The Velveteen Rabbit*, of inanimate bunny into flesh-and-blood friend, others will appreciate the tacit acknowledgment of the comradeship even the apparently undemonstrative can provide. Strange, touching, and strangely touching, this will engage viewers’ considerable sympathy as well as encouraging them to treasure their own friendships, of all kinds. (Imprint information appears on p. 47.)

Deborah Stevenson, Editor

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**NEW BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**


Ahlberg frames this tale of pignapping with an introduction and conclusion about the process of storytelling. In direct address to the reader, he includes a list of words, some illustrated, that might appear in the story as well as a list of characters, all divided according to type. The story proper then proceeds apace, with a bad guy, Mr. Harbottle, who has gotten half a pig in a divorce settlement, aiming to collect in order to satisfy his love for sausages. Mrs. Harbottle, however, loves the pig, Esmeralda, for her personality rather than her flavor, and refuses to let him have her. When the Swiggins Brothers (and Sisters) kidnap the unfortunate Esmeralda, a chase ensues, with neighbors Rose and Billy following the pignappers on their bikes, and overhearing their nefarious plot to mince the poor porker in order to divvy her up. Esmeralda escapes, and all comes right in the end after a reasonable amount of characteristic Ahlberg chaos. Meanwhile, both storyteller Allan and daughter Jessica Ahlberg, the illustrator, have quite a bit of fun with language play. Jessica alternates between literal depictions of words, schematic illustrations of potential action and weather changes, and a more straightforward illustration of the action. Her pin-dot eyes and thinly outlined watercolor caricatures have a familiar quality to them, a family resemblance, as it were, that Ahlberg fans will welcome. Ahlberg senior intrudes in the narrative to point out the various uses of the word “pen,” for instance, and the ways in which sticking to the truth sometimes interferes with a good joke. Finally, he apologizes for not using all of the words he promised to use and issues a challenge for readers to use them in their own stories. Though some may not find such play to their taste, the text, illustrations, and metatextual elements offer rich humor for readers who appreciate the ironic treatment of story and the concrete nature of language itself. KC
Trade ed. ISBN 0-439-41660-4  $16.95

A trip up to the wilds of Vermont to visit an eccentric not-quite-uncle sounds like adventure enough to Gregory and his best friend, Brian, but once the boys arrive they find that’s only the beginning. Not only does Uncle Max insist on fidelity to turn-of-the-century costume and mores (and, often enough, diction), there’s a mysterious old board game, *The Game of Sunken Places*, that captures their interest, and when they embark on a round, they discover it becomes a real-life experience. This isn’t just *Jumanji*, however: aside from the drama of the boys’ negotiation of their way past trolls and giants, there’s a greater stake here, since the game’s outcome determines the return of the exiled People of Norumbega to the realm overtaken by the Thusser Hordes (or the continued sway of the Thusser over the land). The atmosphere suggests H. Rider Haggard period adventure (a style reflected in the *Ripping Yarns* cover and even the old-fashioned font) while the plotting recalls the narrative computer games of the 1980s such as *Zork*, with dramatic episodes strung together, requiring occasional returns to earlier stages to acquire pieces of equipment that have suddenly proven vital. Anderson’s trademark wit flashes through the narrative and, more especially, the dialogue, and there are some divertingly quirky characters (the obliging and companionable troll—“You want any squirrel in the cider?” he asks the boys hospitably. “Just one? Gray?”—is the best of the lot). What’s missing is a sense of a driving narrative force, since most of the game’s steps could be played in any order and function as effectively within the plot, or an involving character, since Gregory and Brian are little more than functionaries (despite Brian’s modest development of an individual will). The novel therefore offers more of the intellectual, pragmatic pleasures of the computer game than the literary pleasures of Anderson’s previous novels (*Feed*, *BCCB* 11/02, etc.), but lovers of games and of adventure for its own sake will probably wish to take a turn.  DS

Trade ed. ISBN 0-375-82499-5  $15.95  Ad  Gr. 7-10

In this anthology, music provides a backdrop for stories about the Palestinian conflict, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the rounding up of Gypsies in Nazi Germany, and the American Civil War; it provides an occasion for domestic stories about a boy’s responsibility to his sick mother, another boy’s need to forgive his alcoholic father and accept his Native heritage, a girl’s experience of synesthesia, and various degrees of sibling tension. Readers encounter a boy’s longing for another boy who will love him and his music, the various personality types that make up a high-school band, and a girl’s desire to succeed through arduous practice against her rivals’ throwaway attitudes toward their superior talent. For the most part, the writers adopt a tell-don’t-show approach to the music itself—there is little sense of the immediacy of song in the rhythms of the prose, and the descriptions of the music and how it moves the characters are disappointingly pedestrian and dispassionate (Bruchac’s piece proving an exception here). Authors’ notes reveal that very few of the writers are themselves practicing musicians, which perhaps accounts for the fact that the music itself is backgrounded, rather than foregrounded,
in many of the stories. Rock 'n' roll gets short shrift, and there are no nods at all toward the kinds of music that speak to so many contemporary teens—punk, rap, freestyles, or even just the popular top-forty that sees young people through dateless Saturday nights. This will likely limit audience appeal to seriously engaged band and orchestra performers and to well-meaning adults who want kids to consider “other” kinds of music than that toward which they naturally gravitate; still, the format might encourage students to explore the power of music in their own lives. KC

Arnold adapts a popular camp song into a silly tale of the enormously named Catalina. The lyric tells of Catalina's odd appearance (“She had two eyes that were quite a sight;/ One looked left and the other looked right”), her unusual abilities (“She had two holes in the bottom of her nose—/ One for her fingers... //... and one for her toes”), and her particular aroma (“Some folks say her breath smells sweet;/ But me, I’d rather smell her feet”). Each stanza concludes with the refrain “Catalina Magdalena Hoopensteiner Wallendiner/ Hogan Logan Bogan Was Her Name,” providing participatory possibilities. The song itself is a bawling paean to the exaggerated physical characteristics of the title character, but Arnold’s visuals turn each oddity into an advantage: unusual teeth make dental history, big feet are particularly good for dancing, etc. An energetic enthusiasm is reflected in the popeyed, cartoony characters with their elastic limbs, as well as in the oddly turned perspectives and freewheeling compositions. (Alert viewers will enjoy finding Catalina’s dad taking photos of his favorite daughter throughout.) For those without a camp history with this particular song, Arnold includes a page with variations on the name, along with musical notation and chording. JMD


“Older history books claim that religious tolerance was a founding theme of America. It would be more accurate to say that religious toleration was an idea that arose from the same forces that led to the creation of some of the American colonies.” Here Aronson examines how the “hot Protestantism” of sixteenth-century Britain provided the impulse for both Puritan migration to the New World and civil war in the Old, and opened the floodgates for a plethora of radical ideas—from religious tolerance to governance “from the bottom up”—that would shape the views of America’s founders two centuries later. Although this title is promoted as second in a trilogy that began with Sir Walter Ralegh and the Quest for El Dorado (BCCB 7/00), this is presented as a discourse on impassioned ideas rather than hope-filled exploration, and Aronson calls on readers to suspend contemporary cynicism and view history through the eyes of men and women who fervently believed the end time was close at hand. The carefully balanced, dual focus on religious leader John Winthrop in the colonies and military cum political leader Oliver Cromwell in England puts human faces on the issues and demonstrates that, at this period, Protestant dissidents on both sides of the ocean embraced the
common cause of perfecting their world for the Second Coming. Aronson delivers
his arguments in the style of a demanding but entertaining teacher, peppering his
text with flashes of humor, apt analogies drawn from the sweep of U.S. history,
scrupulous references to interpretations in and out of current fashion, and even a
thumping good battle scene. Although teen demand for intellectual history may
be neither broad nor clamorous, readers of a particularly thoughtful bent (as well
as those preparing for AP history tests) will find Aronson to be an engaging and
enthusiastic guide through the early colonial period. EB

BATH, K. P.  The Secret of Castle Cant: Being an Account of the Remarkable Adven-
tures of Lucy Wickwright, Maidervant and Spy; illus. by David Christiana. Little,
2004  [304p]
Reviewed from galleys R Gr. 6-8

Lucy Wickwright, illegitimate daughter of the Baron of Cant, works as a servant in
the castle where her father rules. Since she is ignorant of her true identity and
birthright (Cantish law decrees that all heirs are equal, whether their parents were
married or not), Lucy serves cheerfully, looking after the Baron’s legitimate younger
daughter, Pauline. On his deathbed, the Baron calls both girls to him and reveals
his secret to them but dies before he can dictate a statement in front of witnesses.
Unfortunately for Lucy, the Baron’s surreptitious behavior has placed her squarely
in the political spotlight, and she finds herself in danger of cooptation by rebels
and imprisonment by loyalists. The story, which begins with a rather deceptively
lighthearted hurling of underwear from the battlements and includes characters
named Sauersop, Stomata, Retsch, and Lemonjello, gradually deepens into a full-
blown tale of murder, mystery, and intrigue involving nicely developed characters
of all ages but never faltering from Lucy’s preteen perspective. A spurious author’s
note and acknowledgments page assert that the Barony of Cant indeed exists and
that this account is merely an historical chronicle thereof, and that it is under no
circumstances to be derogatorily referred to as “a novel.” This and other marks of
spoofery (including occasional puns and facetious footnotes) belie the rounded
nature of the narrative but serve to prepare readers for the unusual ending. A map
and an appendix explaining the basics of heraldry are included. TC

Trade ed. ISBN 0-06-055735-4  $15.99 Ad Gr. 5-7

Fern knows that she is a disappointment to her dull parents, the Drudgers, so it is
with some relief that she discovers that, due to an inadvertent baby switch at the
hospital, she’s not their daughter at all. She is the daughter of the Bone, a profes-
sional Anybody who can not only be anybody (or anything, apparently), but who
can also help others “become better versions of themselves.” Fern adapts with
remarkable swiftness to life with the Bone, and while the discovery that her real
mother, an Anybody of great talent, is dead, grieves the girl, she recovers to engi-
neer the scheme that will reconcile her father with his great enemy, the Miser. The
search for her mother’s lost book, The Art of Being Anybody, leads Fern and her
father to the home of her book-obsessed maternal grandmother, who helps Fern
realize her magical literary potential (Fern has a talent for shaking characters and
other things from between the pages of books). The plotting is both convenient and convoluted, but the characters, especially Fern, offer considerable compensation. The girl's yearning for a place to belong is palpable, and her easy acceptance of the magical events that pepper her life has a matter-of-fact pragmatism that makes it easy for readers to accept those events as well. Unfortunately, frequent and often lengthy authorial asides tip the prose into the precious with clockwork regularity, and the self-conscious reliance on literary allusions is often offputting. Still, there is a piquant charm to Fern's quest for love and home, and patient readers will willingly follow her down that emotional road. Ferguson's sleek black-and-white illustrations have a fizzy humor that infuses the pages with energy. JMD


While many young readers will be familiar with some of the names (Faith Ringgold, Romare Bearden) in this overview of African-American art history, there is bound to be a plethora of revelations both about individual artists and about artistic heritage and tradition. Bolden breaks her examination into three sections, the first dealing with the era prior to the twentieth century, the second addressing the artistic developments through World War II, and the third describing the work of postwar and contemporary artists. The text is sometimes uneven: it would be useful to have a bit more explanation of the context of some artists' experience (since it's not always clear whether negative response was due to racial bigotry or artistic innovation), and there's a considerable contrast in density between the erudite captions, which will prove hard going for some readers, and the more accessible main text. Artists are well chosen, however, and many readers will revel in finding new visual pleasures, such as Henry Ossawa Tanner's haunting biblical studies or Alma Thomas' vibrantly colored contemporary abstracts (Bolden also includes several naive and folk artists in her discussion, which makes for a refreshingly large artistic tent). She also provides some eye-opening discussion of the influences and sponsorship within the African-American art community, which subtly underlines the importance of trailblazers, sponsors, and mentors. Reproductions vary in quality, most probably due to difficulties of access to the original, and there are a few images hampered by the challenge of the gutter or compression to page size; most, however, are shown to good advantage and counterpointed with well-chosen photographs of their creators. Even readers unwilling to page through the text will find plenty of images worth browsing here, and those who do pursue the narrative will find their artistic and historical understanding enriched both visually and conceptually. Extensive end matter includes a glossary, endnotes, a bibliography (of adult books) and list of further suggested reading (works for young readers), and an index. DS


Bruchac supplies the backstory to one of America's great all 'round athletes, who began most inauspiciously as a poor student and a boarding-school runaway. Explaining to his six-year-old sons that "you need white man's knowledge to survive," Jim's father (of the Sac and Fox nations) sent Jim and his twin brother,
Charlie, to the Indian Agency reservation boarding school, where less athletic Charlie for the first time took the lead in academics. Charlie's death and subsequent family crises undermined Jim's tenure at two more schools, but his track skills at Haskell Institute eventually brought Jim to the attention of recruiters from the Carlisle Indian School where, under coach Pop Warner, the young man excelled at track and football ("He was carrying not just a football, but the hopes and dreams of his family, his people, and all the Indians who had been told they could never compete with the white man"). In this account, Thorpe's "bright path" dead-ends at Carlisle, and just beyond the main text lie two pages of double-columned endnotes that detail Thorpe's athletic accomplishments, particularly his 1912 Olympic medals and their revocation, Thorpe's professional baseball career, the posthumous reawarding of his Olympic medals—in short, all the highlights that probably led the audience to this title in the first place. Small inset action shots and family photos that appear throughout the notes and the appended timeline are more involving than Nelson's stiff and ungainly acrylic paintings that lock characters in mannered poses at epic moments of triumph and pathos. Young sports fans intrigued by the handsome sprinter on the back cover will probably urge adult readers to skip right to the end matter. EB


Like many others, Zoe's dad has lost his job at the university. He can't get work in town that will support his family, and the landlord has decided to sell their house. The family's only option is to store their furniture with a friend and drive in their van up the coast to Oregon, where Zoe's dad finds a teaching job, then live out of the van until they can save enough to rent a home. Though the strain of living for six months in an old van with parents and little brother would make anyone's life a misery, it's the loss of her identity, formed through her relationships with friends and places, that Zoe minds the most. In Oregon, she has become the outsider, the weirdo whose mom scrubs the neighbors' floors. In an ironic twist, her lack of a house threatens her growing friendship with Aliya, a second-generation Pakistani-American, since Zoe refuses to invite her to visit Zoe's (nonexistent) house, and Aliya views that exclusion as rejection based on her Muslim religion. Unobtrusive foils are provided by Aliya's immigrant grandmother and Aliya's own reminiscences about Julia, a recently deceased local girl; the grandmother's pining for the land of her nativity mirrors Zoe's homesickness, and Julia's death underscores the transitory beauty of life in the here and now. Zoe's use of her rich imagination and unstoppable internal drive to overcome the pressure generated by the danger and shame of homelessness will entice readers into turning pages long after bedtime, while the author's startling, provocative imagery galvanizes the text and crafts the description of Zoe's challenges and growth into an intimate personal experience for the reader. TC

CHEN, CHIH-YUAN  Guji Guji; written and illus. by Chih-Yuan Chen.  Kane/ Miller, 2004  32p  ISBN 1-929132-67-0 $15.95  R  4-7 yrs

Mother Duck doesn't notice that a very unducklike egg has rolled itself into her carefully laid clutch, and when all four eggs hatch, she loves Guji Guji, the interloping egg's former inhabitant, the same as her other three ducklings. Viewers will doubtless notice that Guji Guji is in fact a crocodile, but Mother Duck simply
rejoices in her offspring's strength and size (and "no matter how quick they were, or what they looked like, Mother Duck loved all her ducklings the same"). When a trio of bad crocodiles breaks the news to Guji—not only is he not a duck, his species eats ducks—and tries to get him to lead his family into their reptilian jaws, Guji Guji turns trickster to defend his family. Flap copy on this import from Taiwan suggests that the story is inspired by the challenges of interracial adoption; the correlation founders somewhat (since birth relatives rarely attempt to eat adoptive families) and the ending flags a little, but the plot successfully makes its own independent point about loyalty and influence. The writing relies on simple, declarative sentences imbued with dry humor ("I am not a bad crocodile," Guji Guji concludes. "Of course, I'm not exactly a duck either"), and folktlorically inspired structures—including Guji Guji's deliciously repetitive name—provide narrative shaping. Chen's inventive art takes what could have been a drab palette—a twillight world of slate and dove gray, pale cocoa, and deep black-brown, with occasional touches of teal and orange—and makes it into a subtle and comic, if occasionally slightly menacing, world. Rumply penciled textures add a homey touch, while the "crocoduck's" benevolent snaggletoothed mien anchors each spread and provides a contrast to the cunning and cunningly portrayed reptilian predators with their narrow yellow eyes and tendency to abuse toys and bite trees in half. Whether he's a crocodile or duck won't really matter to audiences—they'll just relish this story of a little kid who cleverly saves the day. DS


Charlie and Lola (from I Will Never Not Ever Eat a Tomato) are now facing the first day of school, as Lola, who is "still really quite small," advances all kinds of arguments why school is unnecessary for her ("I don't need to learn up to one hundred. I already know up to ten, and that is plenty"), while older brother Charlie attempts to convince her otherwise ("But Lola, . . . what if eleven eager elephants all wanted a treat? How would you count up how many treats that would be?"). Charlie's reasoning shakes Lola from each of her hard-line stands (the best is when he suggests that Santa Claus might bring her nothing but an old sock if she can't write a Christmas letter), and even persuades her to take pity on her imaginary friend, Soren Lorenson, who is afraid to go to school alone. Personality radiates from the jumbled fonts and mixed-media illustrations; the children's innocent yet devious characters are reflected in their untidy outlines, heart-shaped faces, and sly glances as each tries to outsmart the other. Argument proofs are presented with underhanded humor, slipping in private jokes and irony to supplement the narrative line. Watch for the quasi-invisible Soren Lorenson, outlined in spot lamination throughout the last pages of the book, and snicker with Lola as she explains in complete seriousness to the mystified Charlie that "I was not worried. It was Soren Lorenson who was nervous, not me. I was fine." TC


Cosmo Hill, fourteen-year-old orphan, escapes from the Clarissa Frayne Institute for Parentally Challenged Boys when a bus crash frees him from a sadistic guard.
The boy is rescued by a strange trio—Stefan, Mona, and Ditto—who take Cosmo in after realizing that he is a Spotter, one of few who can see the blue Parasites that suck the life force from injured humans. Led by the enigmatic Stefan, the small band of self-named Supernaturalists roam Satellite City looking for Parasites in order to destroy them. Colfer (author of the Artemis Fowl series, BCCB 7/01, etc.) tries his hand here at some futuristic science fiction, creating a world in which orphans are used as experimental lab rats and corporations gain profit by any means necessary. Colfer’s decaying urban streets glitter with Gotham City-like allure, and the pseudo-militaristic action will certainly appeal to hardware-focused readers. Characterizations are paper-thin, however, and the backstory just doesn’t hold up to even the most cursory scrutiny. The plot careens out of control early and subsequently relies on labored convenience and far-fetched (even for science fiction) chase-and-escape sequences to move the characters toward the final, anticlimactic revelation. Those seeking the nuanced thrill of fictional science should look to classic Card or newly minted Anderson (Feed, BCCB 11/02). JMD

COOPER, MICHAEL L. Dust to Eat: Drought and Depression in the 1930s. Clarion, 2004 81p illus. with photographs ISBN 0-618-15449-3 $15.00 R Gr. 6-9

Although the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression are often presented or studied as separate disasters, Cooper focuses on their interrelationship. He opens well into the dual crises with the “Okies” flocking to California and being greeted by the “bum blockades” of a state already suffering from high unemployment, and then backtracks to the causes of the dust storms of 1935 and the deplorable timing of nature’s attack amid the worst years following the stock market crash of 1929. Cooper is particularly adept at balancing the miseries of the displaced with the broad social and economic forces that drove them from their farms and small towns to seek employment as migrant laborers, and although California appears as a hotbed of prejudice and paranoia in this drama, the reasons for the inhospitable reaction to the newcomers are clearly laid out. John Steinbeck, Woody Guthrie, and tenacious farmer Caroline Henderson are frequently quoted, opening windows to a variety of experiences, and each page turn brings a well-chosen period photograph (many by Dorothea Lange), historic poster, or map. Cooper provides source notes for his own research, a list of books and other media of interest to readers, and an index. Even a casual flip through the illustrations should pique adolescents’ curiosity about this bleak period, and stop adults from grousing about their Social Security deductions. EB


Twelve-year-old Billy Clikk’s workaholic parents are the founders of the most successful insect-extermination service in Piffling, Indiana—or so Billy thinks. Then one night while his parents are away, Billy sees them on late-night television in a parade in the Philippines. Stunned, Billy searches the house and finds foreign-language books between the covers of his mother’s romance novels and receipts from places like Alaska in their garbage can. When he finds a high-tech business card for a company called AFMEC, however, he knows what to do: he calls the 1-
800 number and impersonates his father. AFMEC turns out to be the Allied Forces for the Management of Extraterritorial Creatches, Billy's parents turn out to be secret agents who battle creatches (i.e., monsters), and Billy turns out to be in big, big trouble. Luckily, rather than being arrested, Billy is allowed to accompany his parents on their next mission, thus starting him off on a wild career path. Crilley has tapped into a popular fantasy life for young readers, and Billy is a realistic and appropriately flawed hero. Unfortunately, the writing, with its preponderance of ellipses and overstatement of the obvious, lacks tension, while Billy's efforts to prove himself (and drive the plot forward) are sometimes unbelievably foolish. Though Crilley is following trails well-worn by others—AFMEC's operations and alternative world history (a history that includes things like the World Creatch Accord) recall Men in Black, while Billy's discoveries suggest Spy Kids—there is enough novelty in the futuristic, high-tech world of AFMEC and enough grossness in the details of various creatches to capture most kids who enjoy action and danger or just plain wish their parents were cooler underneath. KH

**DATLOW, ELLEN, ed.**  *The Faery Reel: Tales from the Twilight Realm*; ed. by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling; illus. by Charles Vess. Viking, 2004  [544p]  
Reviewed from galleys  
R* Gr. 7-12  

The latest collection by Datlow and Windling gathers together seventeen stories and three poems (only one of which was previously published) that explore the seductive, slippery, savage world of faery. Lest you think faeries are all tiny females with shimmering wings living in tulips, the authors in this anthology have news for you: faeries manifest themselves differently in the folklore of every culture, and they aren't all like Tinkerbell. All the vagaries of faery are represented here, from the hungry, horrible tengu in Japan to the insect-like, parasitic faeries that prey on human dreams. The settings range all over, from Brazil to Boston to Australia to L.A., and while a few stories take a more traditional approach, many divorce faeries from their natural element to show how well, or how poorly, they've adapted to this overpopulated, technologically advanced, environmentally unstable world. In many of these stories, the faery world exists as a poignant statement about how much we've changed: in Patricia A. McKillip's "Undine," a water faery attempts to capture her first human male only to wind up beached on a polluted lake; in Emma Bull's "De La Tierra," the L.A. faeries would rather kill their rural brethren, who are streaming into the city after the destruction of their natural homes, rather than share resources. If, however, you miss Tinkerbell amid the unfamiliar faery hordes, look no further than Bruce Glassco's "Never Never," the existential retelling of Captain Hook and his crew, doomed by faery magic to forever lose to Peter Pan even as the possibility of winning appears endlessly on the horizon. Consistently strong writing, imaginative creations, and relevant themes mark all of the stories and poems in this collection, and with the addition of a fascinating, in-depth essay on the historical background of faery and a section on further reading, Datlow and Windling have put together another must-have anthology. KH

**DAVIDSON, DANA** *Jason & Kyra.* Jump at the Sun/Hyperion, 2004  330p  
R Gr. 7-12  

Kyra Evans is none too pleased when she has to team up with jock Jason Vincent
to work on an AP English project. Far from carrying him on the assignment, however, she realizes that, besides being poetry on a basketball court, he also has quite a bit of poetry in his soul. Their relationship develops slowly and carefully, despite their separately growing physical and emotional attraction to each other, because Jason has a girlfriend and Kyra can’t imagine being desired by such an extremely fine and popular boy. Finally, a kiss forces a breakup for Jason and confessions for Kyra, and the two begin an almost impossibly touching romance of shared secrets (Jason’s father is emotionally abusive) and mutual support (Kyra learns about basketball and Jason tries to understand Kyra’s award-winning science project). Alas, the course of true love never did run smoothly; Jason’s old girlfriend does not disappear gracefully, and Kyra’s inexperience with relationships of the heart threatens to sabotage their idyll. Davidson’s rather stiff and overly formal prose threatens this relationship almost as much, but it does have the effect of measuring what might otherwise have been entirely too syrupy sweet. Davidson lingers over minute details of feeling and conversation, changing focalizers sometimes even in mid-paragraph to make sure every nuance of each character’s perspective is clear to readers. The real value of this somewhat ordinary tale of first love’s bliss and angst is that it offers us characters we haven’t met very often—the very wealthy, very smart, very privileged black students at a school modeled after Cass Tech in Detroit. Sure to have regional appeal, the book will also provide an alternative to those who are tired of the narrow stereotypical boxes of anger, poverty, and oppression into which black teen experience is too often placed. KC

DAVIS, MICHELE IVY  
_Evangeline Brown and the Cadillac Motel._ Dutton, 2004 181p  
ISBN 0-525-47221-5  $16.99  Ad  Gr. 4-8

Evangeline, better known as Eddie, is deeply embarrassed by living in a motel with a huge pink Cadillac butt sticking out of the wall (it’ll draw customers, Pa figures), but she’s even more embarrassed by Pa’s drinking, which starts every afternoon when Pa’s old friend Jesse shows up. Eddie helps Ruby, the housekeeper, clean the rooms, and she buries herself in books until she finally meets Farrell, Jesse’s son. Farrell is full of secrets about his past in and out of foster homes, which he eventually shares with Eddie. When their teacher starts making home visits and decides that Social Services needs to intervene in their family situations, Eddie and Farrell hatch a plot to run away, since Farrell has vowed never to be placed in foster care again. Eddie, however, decides that she can’t be a quitter, and her example leads Farrell back to his dad, who agrees to join Eddie’s dad in rehab. This is rather frequently traversed territory in children’s fiction, with its pair of dead mothers and its stock characters including Ruby, the overweight housekeeper, Angelique, the heavily made-up woman who lives at the hotel and just wants a shot at being a cosmetologist, and Miss Rose, the beautiful, crusading teacher. Eddie is characteristically spunky and self-assured, and Davis keeps us firmly within her naive perspective on events while allowing a knowing reader to fill in the gaps—of, for instance, Angelique’s nocturnal profession as an exotic dancer, of Ruby’s “accidentally” showing up when Miss Rose comes for her home visit to cover for Pa who is dead drunk, and finally, of Eddie’s own giftedness in academics and in music, of which she is unaware. Though not innovative, all of these elements put the reader on solidly familiar ground, and the message of hope among the imperfect rings true. KC
THE BULLETIN
DE LA CRUZ, MELISSA  The Au Pairs. Simon, 2004  294p  
ISBN 0-689-87066-3  $14.95  R  Gr. 10-12

If there is such a thing as chicken soup for the teenage soul, this novel is definitely cotton candy. Three girls—a dispossessed Manhattanite whose father has run afoul of some tax law or other, a homey girl from Sturbridge trying to earn money for college and a used Camry, and a lovesick Brazilian in search of a boy she met at home with only the clue that he summers in the Hamptons (guess what? She finds him on her first night out!)—answer an ad for au pairs with a fabulously wealthy family on holiday in the Hamptons. Of course, all three girls are fabulously leggy and flawless (as in the Abercrombie and Fitch-like cover art), which aids in their real quest for men and mayhem among the rich and famous. Garnering coveted invitations to parties where people like Brad and Jen are on the guest list, the girls drink, tan, and date their way through the summer, while managing, not too evenly, to care for the children, find true love, and become best friends along the way. Sound frothy? It is, but it’s also witty, knowing, and oh so chic. Each girl even learns an Important Lesson about Love along the way: for Eliza, it doesn’t pay to be a snob when the gardener is a total hottie, for Mara, the heir to the manor really can fall for the help if she becomes a Hampton It girl, and for Jacqui, perhaps the Brazilian saying that “the best way to get over somebody is to get under someone else” might not be the wisest course of action. Oh, well, it’s summertime and the reading is sleazy—expect this to come back with sand and sunscreen between the pages. KC

EHRlich, Fred  Does a Duck Have a Daddy?: illus. by Emily Bolam.  Blue Apple/Handprint, 2004  32p  (Early Experiences)  ISBN 1-59354-032-9  $10.95  R  3-6 yrs

Does a Mouse Have a Mommy?: illus. by Emily Bolam.  Blue Apple/Handprint, 2004  32p  (Early Experiences)  ISBN 1-59354-034-5  $10.95  R  3-6 yrs

Traditional toddler questions (“Does a butterfly have a daddy? Does a bug?”) launch the listener into detailed yet brief explanations of how certain animals deal with the everyday challenges of life. Examples begin with those animals whose habits are least like ours and progress to the primates and then to us, pointing out the fact that human children enjoy adult care for a comparatively long time. Each informational nugget is carefully sized for its audience, the course of the total narration guided smoothly from the familiar to the new and back again, a strategy which allows the author to matter-of-factly represent the dispassionate details of animal behaviors and then all-out celebrate the unique aspects of human practice. Paintbrushed portraits of human and animal families pretty up the pages, their familiar groupings intensifying the comparison between the viewer’s lived experience and the often dissimilar lives of nonhumans. Bubble-gum pinks and pale aquas set off the butterscotch yellows and soft whites of the title animals, which gaze earnestly from each front cover and scamper engagingly through the endpapers, wrapping the books in a visual sugar coating consistent with the tiny-tot bits of brain candy inside. These will provide preschoolers an eye-opening glimpse of life in the animal world, where parenting is a short-term job and tooth-brushing is unknown. TC
EMBERLEY, MICHAEL  Ruby and the Sniffs; written and illus. by Michael Emberley. Little, 2004  32p
ISBN 0-316-23664-0  $15.95  R  4-7 yrs

In this nod to “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” Ruby, a spunky little mouse in red overalls and a green cap, hears thumps and bumps in the apartment upstairs, which can mean only one thing—burglars. Outwitting her canine babysitter, Ruby sneaks upstairs, only to find that the majority of the bumps and thumps are coming from a loutish family of pigs who are moving in to the apartment. Ruby is appalled, especially since they insist that she is, variously, a gerbil, a rat, and a boy, but it turns out she was right about one thing: there is a burglar. As the pigs sit down to dinner, they notice that someone has been eating their pickled potato peels, slippery gristle, and sticky fish heads. Ruby unwittingly opens the closet door to reveal the cat burglar, and chaos threatens until Mrs. Mastiff, Ruby’s babysitter, turns up to save the day. Porcine puns and gastronomical grotesqueries enliven the prose while the cartooned menagerie generates its own guffaws. The pigs are Bubbafied buffoons, while Mrs. Mastiff maintains an air of genteel dignity even when she is unceremoniously buried under a cat burglar. Ruby herself remains at center stage, with Emberley’s serial treatment of her progress seeming nearly animated—one can imagine eyebrows, whiskers, and tail all twitching alternately with fear, indignation, and orneriness, depending on her mood. Those who remember Ruby from her initial adventure, Ruby, will be glad to see her back—it’s been too long. KC

FINDLAY, JAMIESON  The Blue Roan Child. Chicken House/Scholastic, 2004  252p
ISBN 0-439-62752-4  $16.95  R  Gr. 6-9

Syeira has worked in the king’s stables in Haysele, “land of horses,” since she can remember. Though she has vague memories of her mother, Syeira’s family has long been the horses she tends to as a stable orphan; her respect for horses helps her get close to them where force has failed others. Her favorites are the regal Arva horses, a mare and her two colts, captured wild by the king’s handlers but resistant to taming. When Lord Ran of Stormsythe, ruler of a northern empire and subject of many horror stories, takes the two Arva colts along with his yearly purchase of horses, Syeira is determined to reunite them with their mother. Syeira and the mare Arwin set off for Stormsythe with nothing except each other and a vague notion of rescue and revenge. The journey, though begun with haste, seems to founder in place rather than race forward as Syeira spends too much time learning the elaborate life stories of the strange characters met on the way; however, once they arrive in Stormsythe, the pace quickens considerably, galloping with mad energy until the final gasping breaths of the finale. Syeira is an understandably naïve but instinctive hero, and her bond with Arwin, based on the mutual need for freedom, is realistically hard won. Findlay’s silvery prose suits his myth-laden land of legendary horses and haunted people, and his attention to the way horses communicate—through scent and breath—creates a rich sensory experience. Findlay’s horses are not familiar friends or willing servants, but fierce, primal beasts that accept only those who they deem worthy—and trample the rest. Recommend this to fantasy and horse lovers who will appreciate this antidote to Disneyesque anthropomorphism. KH
Columbus Day, Presidents Day, Veterans Day may all require some explaining, but every primary-grader instinctively understands what 100th Day means: that we’ve been in school for a heckuva long time already this year. Teachers who budget a poem a day from Franco’s collection into their lesson plans can keep students focused on the upcoming milestone and cull ideas for a host of activities as well. While Calliope was probably asleep at her job for some of the clunkier entries (“You can make 100/ by yourself,/ or get your friends to help./ When it’s time to throw the snowballs,/ you can scream and run and yelp”), the range of 100-related concepts is truly inspirational. Many are, of course, mathematically oriented—grouping five-lettered student names to make 100, counting backwards by 10s, performing an easy subtraction word problem, balancing various weights against 100 pennies, estimating what a hundred of different monetary denominations would buy (realistically allowing for inflation). Franco also approaches 100 from other avenues as well, offering mnemonic devices for learning coin values, a recipe for a gorp-type snack, a suggestion for nibbling pretzels into number shapes, a word puzzle, and even an observation of words derived from the root “cent.” Salerno supplies a gouache vignette for each poem, and the supple-wristed energy in his dashing brushstrokes (don’t neglect to count all hundred hounds in the stretch limo on day fifteen) should make the picture of the day as welcome as its literary companion. EB

FRIEDMAN, LAURIE  Back to School, Mallory; illus. by Tamar Schmitz. Carolrhoda, 2004  175p
Library ed. ISBN 1-57505-658-5 $15.95  R  Gr. 2-4

Mallory McDonald, age eight and three-quarters, has a crisis on her hands: she’s about to start third grade at a new school, and her mom is the new music teacher. The first months at Fern Falls Elementary are punctuated with a variety of dilemmas, from the appearance of “purple glitter pox” when Mallory falls asleep with wet fingernail polish to her getting cast as the eggplant in the third-grade musical, not to mention dealing with the embarrassment of having your mom at school every day. The in-your-face first-person narration of this amusing tale is Ramona-esque in its over dramatization; Mallory has a similar flair for explanatory speeches as well as a bent towards getting herself into mischief, and readers will laugh out loud as they watch her fall deeply in and squirm successfully out of quandary after quandary. Subtly woven into the tale is the frustration Mallory feels with having to share her mom, climaxed in Mallory’s intentionally ruining the musical and resolving in a warm fuzzy makeup lunch at—where else for a young McDonald?—McDonald’s. Though the humor is more successful than the serious moments, readers are likely to forgive occasional lapses for sake of the laughs present throughout the narrative. Schmitz’s comics-like black-and-white illustrations offer a perfect counterpoint to the text, both illustrating the story and capturing images of Mallory’s internal thoughts, and the faces are remarkably expressive in their simple line composition. The comedy and tragedy of third grade narrated herein are well suited to an audience of students just beginning to tackle chapter books. HM
It’s one thing to inquire about a person’s religious denomination (or lack thereof), but quite another matter to probe what they actually believe. Gaskins follows her notable collection of interviews with mixed-race teens (What Are You?, BCCB 10/99) with this foray into an equally sensitive theme, and again she elicits responses that are heartfelt, candid, and articulate. Scope may be limited to the three major religions within the United States, which “share many of the same sacred texts and stories,” but since most interviewees discuss the nature of their experience rather than specific doctrinal tenets, most readers of faith—as well as those whose faith has lapsed—will glimpse at least their own partial reflection somewhere among these testimonies of certainty and doubt. Moreover, since Gaskins is generously inclusive in her editing, there’s enough raw outspokenness to unsettle the most contented souls and keep the reading lively: “You don’t desire to do good until you become a Christian”; “If Israel kicked the Palestinians out, who’s going to take them? Nobody wants them”; “They [my parish] don’t deal with any of that crap—like doctrines of the church. So it’s not one of the cardinal’s favorite churches in Chicago.” Although the interviews are divided into seven broadly themed chapters, Gaskins often prefers to let the interviews unfold as a dialogue rather than an exhaustive exploration of a spiritual topic. One young man observes, “In the world today, religion is such a roll-your-eyes type thing.” Clearly, the one trait this diverse group of young adults shares is acuity of vision.


Aliki’s Mummies Made in Egypt (BCCB 2/80) would probably be voted Most Likely Suggestion for Primary Grade Egyptophiles, and now Gibbons offers not a replacement but a complement to that trusty workhorse. Aliki delves more deeply into Egyptian preparations for the afterlife, but Gibbons focuses half her work on the concerns of earthly life, touching (albeit very briefly) on social organization, types of labor, housing, clothing, medicine, and religious belief and rituals, distinguishing frequently between royal and common classes. Whereas Aliki’s description of interment revolves around a mastaba burial, Gibbons lays her unnamed pharaoh to rest within the core of a pyramid, à la Khufu at Giza. Gibbon’s text is often clipped, even terse (“Ancient Egyptians used picture writing. The inscriptions they made on temples and tombs are now known as hieroglyphs”), and regard for chronology and terminology can be casual, to say the least. An Old Kingdom-styled pyramid, for example, is here associated with New Kingdom-styled canopic jars, and the observation that “MONARCHS were in charge of different regions of Egypt” should more precisely refer to nomarchs. Still, most children who cruise through picture-book nonfiction have come to know that Gibbons, with her plainspoken narrative and literal (and somewhat lighthearted) line-and-watercolor illustrations will take them places they want to go, and this tour of Egypt calls at several ports Aliki doesn’t visit.

EB
GREENE, CAROL  The Story of Halloween; illus. by Linda Bronson. HarperCollins, 2004 [40p]
Library ed. ISBN 0-06-029560-0  $16.89
Reviewed from galleys R Gr. 3-4

Yes, the topic's been done to death, but Greene resurrects it one more time in a smoothly written presentation that focuses narrowly on the evolution of the holiday and targets an audience at the peak of trick-or-treating enthusiasm. She begins with the Celtic observation of Samhain, or summer's end, and the role of bonfires in protecting householders from the fey world. She then introduces the Roman harvest feast of Pomona, with its offerings of apples and nuts. Finally, she discusses the advent of Christianity and how persistent folk beliefs and traditions manifest themselves in rituals which would be brought by immigrants to the United States and gradually morph into present-day customs. Greene gracefully melds her information into such a seamless continuum that her abrupt observation "it was no longer safe for young children to go trick-or-treating" will certainly come as a surprise to kids who still confidently do the door-to-door thing. Still, she does bring practices up to date with the inclusion of UNICEF money collections, school- and community-sponsored parties and parades, costume competitions, and storefront-painting contests. Since folkways dominate this title, Bronson appropriately dispenses with orange and black spooky motifs and offers instead stylized acrylic scenes of spare-shaped villagers performing their autumnal rites in tipsily skewed perspectives that underscore a world thrown temporarily out of equilibrium. EB

ISBN 0-590-28880-6  $16.95

Hamilton, an acknowledged master reteller of folktales, here puts her knowledge of traditional form and motifs to work in the creation of an original spooky tale (a version of which, "The Witch's Skinny," can be found in The Dark Way: Stories from the Spirit World, BCCB 12/90). James Lee tells his brother, Will, "I know a lot about witches. I do!", and good thing, too, because the boys' Uncle Big Anthony is in some deep witchy trouble. A "Wee Winnie" (a name James Lee's Mama Jo uses to make witches sound small) is using Uncle Big Anthony to take nighttime rides across the sky, and Uncle Big Anthony is slowly turning into Uncle Shrunken Anthony right before his nephews' eyes. The arrival of the indomitable Mama Granny puts a permanent stop to Wee Winnie's shenanigans, but not before James Lee gets himself a moonlit ride above the "sassy trees." The image of the witch who takes off her "skinny" and rides an unfortunate victim like a horse is a common motif in folktales, and Hamilton uses it to spooky effect. The conversational tone evokes both James Lee's fear and the thrill of his supernatural experiences, making the events just scary enough to be delicious. Moser's colored wood engravings are evocatively shadowed, the compositions tight, and the menace palpable. The book design is crisply spare, with cream-colored blocks of text opposite full-page images, all bordered with sleek black lines. The simple yet creepy image of the wicked jack-o'-lantern's visage flaming from a black background will stay with readers long after the book is closed. Hamilton has left us with a tale that
does triple duty: for storytelling, reading aloud, or reading alone, this is a “wee
winn-ing” tour de force. JMD

HARRIS, MONICA A.  Wake the Dead; illus. by Susan Estelle Kwas.  Walker, 2004 32p
Library ed. ISBN 0-8027-8923-4  $17.85
Trade ed. ISBN 0-8027-8922-6  $16.95  R  5-8 yrs

Obstreperous young Henry is having a very loud day, leading his family to admonish him to quiet down lest he wake the dead. Too late: “The dead rose from their graves. They emerged from their coffins. They pushed open their mausoleum doors,” and they’re not happy about the din. They wander through town in search of its source, pausing to push up some daisies in the park, do a dead-man’s float in the community pool, and engage in various other stops that elicit a continuous stream of grave figures of speech (the beautician says they look like death warmed over, the librarian expects dead silence, the postal clerk asks if they’re looking for the dead-letter office). When they find Henry, he helpfully attempts to get them back to sleep, throwing them a party (“Dead Folks Sleep Over”) to tucker them out until they finally nod off to the gentle readaloud strains of Goodnight, Goon. While some of the deathly expressions will be more familiar to adults than to kids, the youngsters will quickly get the punny idea in addition to enjoying the Night of the Insomniac Dead plot. Kwas has a sharp, snappy approach to her watercolor visuals, giving them an urnload of graphic impact with lots of precise hatching and an emphasis on funereal black in the corpses’ long coats; she de-emphasizes the horror by making the skulls on the walking dead into nonthreatening marshmallowy shapes that suggest the candy figures from Dia de los Muertos and carefully balancing the black with punchy autumnal oranges and reds. In addition to the obvious humorous Halloween reading, you could also use this to jumpstart some language-arts exercises that’d make them die laughing. DS

HAVILL, JUANITA  Eyes Like Willy’s; illus. by David Johnson.  HarperCollins, 2004 138p
Library ed. ISBN 0-688-13673-7  $16.89
Trade ed. ISBN 0-688-13672-9  $15.99  Ad Gr. 4-8

Parisian siblings Guy and Sarah meet Viennese boy Willy Schiller on holiday at Lake Constance in the summer of 1906. The trio forms a fast friendship, and although their parents consider them too young to travel to each other’s homes throughout the year, they meet regularly each summer at the lake. The boys pursue mutual interests in model boats and working gliders, and Sarah is welcome to tag along. As the boys mature and sneak off to meet local girls, a left-behind Sarah falls prey to understandable jealousy. The annual meetings are interrupted by the death of Willy’s mother, but when they resume the now-teenage friends are as close as ever. The arrival of World War I, Guy’s enlistment in the army, and Willy’s sudden epistolary silence seems to drive a wedge between the boys, but Sarah never loses faith in their friend. Guy returns home to recover from an injury (he is wounded saving a German soldier who reminded him of his old friend); Willy, also injured, manages to track his old friends down and, in the closing half page, becomes engaged to Sarah: “Speechless with joy, Guy stood for a moment looking at Willy and Sarah. Then he said, ‘Now we will be brothers.’” Havill
describes the blossoming friendship, and even Guy’s war involvement, with cool, almost impersonal precision and jolts to an abrupt ending that rings with “and the moral is” rather than “and they lived happily ever after.” Readers comfortable with keeping the protagonists at emotional arm’s length may, however, accept Havill’s slim novel as an extended fable about the triumph of friendship over war.

EB


Most beginning readers have to trot off to school on their own, but not Harry. His neighbor, Mr. George Baker, goes to school too, even though “he’s a hundred years old, no kidding.” Having never learned to read, the professional drummer now attends the elementary school with Harry, the other kids, and “the grownups in room 7,” leading the way down the learning trail with effervescent humor and the constant “tappidy boom. Tappidy boom. Tappidy-boom-boom-tap” of his drumming fingers and his drums. The text echoes Mr. Baker’s drumbeat throughout, extending and varying the rhythm without hindering the flow of words or compromising the conversational tone. Harry as narrator communicates to the audience his delight and pride in his friend’s uniqueness and determination to better himself, intimating that everyone so determined shares in the esteem due his enthusiastic elder. Watercolor illustrations in a palette of browns, creams, and muted blues establish Mr. Baker as an integral part of Harry’s landscape, the lines of his frame and the hues of his clothing repeated in the houses and foliage of the neighborhood. Mr. Baker’s own warmly smiling face, his spontaneous dancing with his wife, his fame as a drummer, and his generous acceptance of Harry’s friendship make him a delightful off-to-school companion. The wary may wonder if a picture book about a friendship between an adoring white boy and a kindly black gentleman can possibly escape sentimentality; this book retains its emotional honesty by focusing more on Mr. Baker as an admirable person than on Harry as the beneficiary of the relationship. Preliterate youngsters and adults who lack local exemplars will find Mr. George Baker a gentle and encouraging kindred spirit.

TC


Hannah and Sarah, sisters who were driven from their modest but thriving London confectioners’ shop by the plague (At the Sign of the Sugared Plum, BCCB 10/03), have safely delivered the baby in their charge to its surviving relatives in the countryside, but before they can leave they face forty days confinement in a pesthouse to ensure they are not infectious. After a brief visit at their family home at Chertsey, Hannah and younger sister Anne return to the city to rebuild the business. The shop is quickly up and running, but Hannah soon learns that her sweetheart, Tom, has died in the plague. She thinks she spies him at a magician’s performance and finally finds him very much alive in a sideshow at St. Bartholomew’s Fair. They scarcely have time to declare their mutual affection when the great London fire of 1666 breaks out and threatens to separate them once more. Hooper’s previous novel wrested so much tension from the approaching plague, which never actually touched the girls, that this second historical disas-
ter, which does indeed burn out the shop, is a relative disappointment. Fully two thirds of the book passes before sparks begin to fly—between the lovers and around the city—and then Hannah spends considerable time observing the flames from a distance and reporting what readers will suspect to be highlights of Hooper’s research. Hooper admits to taking dramatic liberty with St. Bartholomew’s Fair (which wasn’t held in 1666), and since much of the plotting revolves around that event, this is hardly a negligible concern. Still, Hannah is determined to build a business and a life with Tom, and readers who are now emotionally invested in her success can expect that London’s decimation is just a temporary setback that will be remedied in a coming installment. EB


Think there’s no rhyme for hippopotamus? Think again, as a blue hippopotamus “hops a bus . . . all the way to Hippotropolis.” Horowitz plays similarly with phrased near-rhymes for monkey, giraffe (“Well . . . half a giraffe”), and monster in this short and simple offering. The spaghetti-armed (and tailed) monkey gambols and frolics in exaggerated poses drawn in sepia lines on sunny yellow endpapers, inviting viewers into the adventure. The collage art within the book is straightforwardly funny and cleanly composed, featuring the various animals nimbly teasing a moustached fellow in a derby hat. Despite the paucity of text, a spare yet gleeful story manages to develop and conclude, making this a good choice for the fidgety whose patience for laptime reading is limited. Burgeoning wordsmiths will likely come up with their own impossible rhymes to continue the fun. KC


It all starts out innocently enough: Morgan’s little sister, Josie, draws a lovely sidewalk picture and jumps inside it to pick the flowers. Morgan is distressed to see unexpected danger lurking, though (“A huge, gigantic, mean and nasty lion had leapt from the grasses and was chasing Josie toward the river”), and she raises the alarm; fortunately, the girls’ mother intervenes by drawing a boat that allows Josie to cast off into the river and away from the lion. When Josie’s headed towards another disaster (Josie’s boat is drifting towards the waterfall), Morgan finds aid again, and the sequence repeats itself in peril after peril until finally clever Morgan draws an exit for her little sister. The Mary Poppins-esque idea of slipping into the chalk sidewalk picture retains its traditional allure, and there’s an additional narrative charm in the ever-lengthening sequence of adults called in to help. This isn’t, however, going to make Harold and the Purple Crayon look to its laurels: the repetition and kid-resonant descriptions of the first travails give way to more bland and straightforward recitals, and the cumulative possibilities of the series of adventures and participants are left untapped. The illustrations are a bit on the bland side as well, and the page layouts are somewhat staid in their repeated reliance on three-quarter spread images; the springlike palette of Josie’s adventures helps keep real fears at bay, however, and the gently cartoonish nature of the drafts-
manship adds a touch of comedy to the Perils of Pauline (jeopardies of Josie?) drama. Youngsters who've already discovered the joys of sidewalk artistry will appreciate this exploration of their pastime's possibilities; those unfamiliar with the medium may be inspired to break out the chalk, especially in light of the appealing possibility of losing, even only temporarily, a younger sibling within one's creations. DS


No longer able to afford the upkeep of a six-hundred-year-old dwelling, Alex MacBuff puts his beloved Scottish castle on the market. Hiram C. Hopgood, American millionaire, thinks the castle will be just the thing to cheer his ailing daughter, so long as there are no ghosts about the place to startle her. This proviso presents a problem, as the orphaned Alex has been reared by a pack of ghouls that includes a lusty Viking, an aging vampire, a waterlogged governess, a naughty five-year-old poltergeist, and a retired hellhound. Alex attempts to relocate his ghostly family, but they can't seem to adjust to their new digs, and they return home to find that Hopgood is loading the entire castle onto the Queen Anne to be reassembled in the small Texas town where he lives. Ghosts and Alex end up in Texas, unbeknownst to each other, where they uncover and eventually thwart a fiendish plot to kidnap the delicate Miss Hopgood. Once again, Ibbotson fans will delight in the colorful cast of comic stereotypes and their humorous antics (also enjoyably rendered in Kevin Hawkes' characteristic crosshatched pen-and-inks), but this somewhat slender tale, originally published in 1987 in Britain, seems to be a prototype of Ibbotson's more polished later works such as *Dial-a-Ghost* (BCCB 9/01). The darker moments and elements (such as the villainess' obsession with Adolf Hitler) often jar with the lighthearted comic sense of the novel, and the several plot lines pull the reader in too many directions. Though these flaws mar the lively plot, young Ibbotson fans may nonetheless wish to explore the popular author's early offering. KC

James, Betsy *My Chair*; illus. by Mary Newell DePalma. Levine/Scholastic, 2004 40p ISBN 0-439-44421-7 $16.95 Ad 4-7 yrs

Most kids have a special sitting spot in their lives, and a group of children here describe the wonders of their favorite furniture. One kid likes his chair because "it keeps my ice cream higher than the dog"; another talks about her chair's nice smell; a girl remarks on her squishy chair's tendency to eat stuff; a boy describes the zooming capability of his wheelchair, and so on. While there's not much payoff here, James captures the freewheeling nature of youthful imagination in her protagonists' approach to seating, and her reliance on snug, specific details will speak to young audiences. DePalma's acrylic illustrations gather steam as the pages progress and more kids and chairs collect; her playfully drafted, big-eyed figures stand out in sharp relief against the white backgrounds. A framed image gives visual expression to the fantasy behind each speaker's more prosaic experience, with one boy sitting proudly in a howdah atop an elephant, and a boy in a tire swing fancying himself a trapeze artist. The correlations between the framed scene and the real action aren't all so successful or clearly delineated, however, and the
gathering energy of the activity doesn’t find a satisfying conclusion in the eventual appearance of a baby in a baby seat; more confusingly, it’s difficult in many spreads to identify the speaker of the text and therefore the actual nature of the chair being discussed. Williams’ *A Chair for My Mother* will still be the preferred seat, but this might work to pique youthful imaginations and elicit lively discussions of people’s favorite spots to hang out. DS

JENKINS, EMILY  *My Favorite Thing (According to Alberta)*; illus. by AnnaLaura Cantone. Schwartz/Atheneum, 2004  40p  
ISBN 0-689-84975-3  $15.95  R  5-8 yrs

As the text announces right up front, Alberta “is a girl of particular tastes,” and she helpfully itemizes these for the audience: dogs are all right as long as they’re smaller than her knee, fish are all right in the ocean but not on her plate, boats are good, cartoons are bad, stuffed owls are better than baby dolls, etc. None of these described pleasures is her favorite thing, however, which turns out to be Alberta herself. The text doesn’t really go anywhere, since there’s no particular tension in the list of assessments and no particular score in the final “favorite thing” revelation. Alberta’s authoritative pronouncements are both humorous and authentic, however (“‘Grapefruits are definitely not my favorite,’ she confides. ‘The juice is bitter. Why would I like bitter juice? I just don’t understand it’”), and the implied interview adds extra comic dignity to Alberta’s roll call of opinions. Cantone’s illustrations have the pop eyes, oversized heads, and narrowly lined features of artistic Euro-cartooning; her deliberate but slightly scrabbly lines give a childlike edge to her figures while collage elements such as cotton puffs, sweeps of background cloth, and beads transform readily into the everyday objects of Alberta’s existence. Fantastical compositions give the visuals their own strange elements (a rabbit drives a carrot van through the spread noting that Alberta’s favorite color is orange; a cat sits reading on the toilet while Alberta soaks in the tub). The wild artistic world makes this most suitable for close contemplation, but all audiences will be encouraged to contribute a detailed recitation of their own favorite things. DS

JOHNSTON, TONY  *The Worm Family*; illus. by Stacy Innerst. Harcourt, 2004  32p  
ISBN 0-15-205011-6  $16.00  R  4-7 yrs

Family pride is the cornerstone of the Worm family (that’s Mother and Father and Albert and Evangeline and Blanche and tiny Rosa and Uncle Herm), who greet one another with exclamations of joy about being Worms. Looking for a nice place to settle down, the family unfortunately keeps running into unwelcoming neighbors who, finding that the Worms aren’t effectively taunted with their own name (“We’re Worms for sure!” the Worms respond with pleased affirmation), resort to throwing things at the interlopers. Finally the Worms discover neighbors who appreciate that Worm is “an utterly Glorious Thing” and who rejoice in the neighborhood’s diversity. The message is clear (“Rejoice in who you are! Rejoice in who everyone else is!” directs the epigraph), but the story’s ebullient absurdity ensures the point never becomes preachy. Johnston, long a skilled crafter of picture-book texts, excels here with prose decorated with internal rhyme, cadenced with bouncing rhythms (“The neighbors were glossy and bossy and striped like mints. They stared at the Worms and winced”), and energized by dorky wormy
jokes (when Mother instructs her daunted family to show their spines, Evangeline points out, "We don’t have spines"), and kids will be gleefully singing along with the Worm family refrain ("We are Worms and we are proud! We are long and we are LOUD!") when they’re not rolling in the aisles. Innerst’s illustrations create a superbly surreal milieu; relying on, of course, earth tones, with warm ochres and rich browns predominating, they translate an Egielskiesque solidity into tactile three-dimensionality that gives the proceedings the lunatic reality of dreams. Compositions make the most of the Worms’ strong linearity but offer inventive contrasts to it as well (an overhead shot of the family peering out of their car and polished aluminum trailer suggests some strange seven-legged insect), and concrete details of face and accessories recall Mr. Potato Head in their wonderful plasticity. The effervescent offbeatness will appeal to readers who relished Cronin’s *Diary of a Worm* (BCCB 10/03), and the quirky expression of affirmation will ensure a happily wiggly welcome from readaloud audiences. DS


With her fuzzy red hair and penchant for thematic attire, Mrs. Brown may have graduated from the same teachers college as Miss Frizzle. Mrs. Brown has a more narrowly defined interest, however, and only takes her class on field trips to a living museum where the students can try out colonial crafts like candle dipping and butter churning, maneuver a quill pen, observe iron smithery and sheep shearing, twist hemp and weave dreamcatchers, and savor centuries-old recipes which they are allowed to select by name alone. Each experience gets its own poem and a detailed scene and/or vignette that offers insight into colonial life—and into elementary-grade field trips as well. Poesy takes a back seat to narration, with only a few entries that muster anything close to rhyme, rhythm, or imagery. Moreover, the lack of specificity regarding Native Americans represented in the museum’s crafts and “powwow” (“from Tuscarora to Navajo”) makes it difficult for fictional visitors and real-life readers alike to correlate native peoples with white settlers along the Eastern seaboard shown on the endpaper maps. Alley’s cartoony cast of boisterous tykes who want to be everywhere and do everything at once are undeniably infectious in their enthusiasm, but Kate Waters’ trusty photo excursions to Plimoth Plantation and Williamsburg (e.g., *Tapenum’s Day*, BCCB 3/96, *Mary Geddy’s Day*) still offer a better focused view of everyday life in the colonies and clearer insight into historical reenactments and living museums. EB

KOPONEN, LIBBY  *Blow Out the Moon*. Tingley/Little, 2004 209p illus. with photographs ISBN 0-316-61443-2 $16.95  Ad  Gr. 4-6

Her father’s temporary business transfer to London uproots eight-year-old Libby and her siblings who, though excited to voyage overseas, face the realities of schooling in an unfamiliar environment. Libby’s initial sojourn at St. Vincent’s School isn’t a success; the children tease her about her odd American ways and even her reasonably stalwart attitude doesn’t inoculate her from hurt. Her father discovers a school that’s a better fit—the boarding school Sibton Park—and here Libby revels in all the girly bliss that her previous anglophilic reading has promised. Readers follow Libby’s gentle adventures as she masters the etiquette of managing knife and fork
English style, takes her first riding lessons, puts on a play with friends in the "night nursery," and delights in the birthday ritual of a gift sack. An older Libby narrates these loosely cobbled episodes with considerable zest, but her school experience lacks the spice or kick that, let's say, Roald Dahl's schooldays memoirs pack, and readers who know firsthand that education is fraught with social obstacles may wonder where the other half of this story is hiding. A standard opening disclaimer insists these proceedings and characters are fictitious, but Koponen's note at the end suggest the opposite, and she even supplies photos throughout that testify to narrator Libby's veracity. Either way, children who can't get enough of the kids-away-from-home genre, and able young readers in search of a pleasant venture abroad, may want to peek through the gates of Sibton Park. EB

Lafaye, A. Worth. Simon, 2004 144p
ISBN 0-689-85730-6 $15.95  R  Gr. 5-8

Nathaniel Peale's leg has been mangled in a haying accident, and his physical pain is compounded by the knowledge he'll never make a full recovery and by the jealousy he suffers watching his father build a close relationship with John Worth, an Orphan Train boy they've taken in to help with tasks around the farm. Nathaniel's mother encourages her son's resentments with her own insistence that John be treated as a hireling, and as an inexperienced city boy, John struggles not only with farm labor, but also with memories of the fire that claimed his family's lives. Hostilities between farmers and ranchers on the Nebraska plains erupt into a series of local fence-cuttings and agricultural sabotage, and when Nathaniel and John are inadvertently thrown into a cooperative effort to identify the perpetrators, the boys turn their awkward horseback adventure into an opportunity to form a more brotherly bond. The strained family dynamic is incisively realized, and Nathaniel's narration—more acerbic than whiny—cajoles readers to take his side against John Worth, even as they realize the orphan's tale needs to be weighed as well. Middle-schoolers who enjoyed Peggy Brooke's Jake's Orphan (BCCB 4/00) should appreciate this drama, and brisk pacing and plenty of convincingly clipped dialogue should bring the title within the grasp of younger able readers as well. EB

Library ed. ISBN 0-06-058305-3 $16.89  R  Gr. 5-8

At his father's funeral, Peer Ulfsson is surprised to learn that his twin uncles, Baldur and Grim, long estranged from his father, are taking him in. It doesn't take long for the boy to discover that his miller uncles are greedy and cruel, and that their greed extends to taking his meager inheritance and then working him hard while practically starving him. Peer is without ally until he meets Hilde, the eldest daughter of a local family long at odds with Baldur and Grim. A meeting with a house Nis (sort of a brownie) reveals to Peer that his uncles—no surprise—are up to no good; they have taken him in order to give him to the sinister inhabitants of the Troll Fell as a wedding present for the daughter of the local troll king in exchange for troll treasure. Peer is an innocent soul with a generous spirit (which helps him with the house Nis) and good manners (which save him from the Granny Greenteeth that lives in the mill pond). It is Peer's good heart that causes the boy to accompany Hilde into the troll's lair to save her younger brother and sister when they are kidnapped by Peer's wicked uncles. Langrish scatters references to Scan-
dinavian myth and lore throughout this hardy and believable fantasy. Characters are nimbly developed, and even minor figures have precisely identifying elements that make them memorable; the depiction of the trolls, dangerous as they are, has a sly humor that makes them more than just archetypal villains. The challenging terrain is overlaid with a sense of natural beauty infused with folkloric magic that makes the physical atmosphere of the uncles' mountain town a strong presence throughout. This first novel has a rustic, domestic magic that may appeal to readers of historical fiction as well as to fantasy fans. JMD

LAWRENCE, IAIN *B for Buster.* Delacorte, 2004 321p
Trade ed. ISBN 0-385-73086-1 $15.95 R* Gr. 6-10

Dreams of daring aerial feats and patriotic heroics lure underage Kak into the Canadian Air Force, but his first bombing mission over Germany, in which he serves as wireless operator aboard the patched old crate *B for Buster,* plunges him into the realization that an airman’s life is one of silent, internalized dread and outright, quaking terror. Chances are it will be a short life, too: “I wasn’t a whiz at math, but I knew the odds..." If I lived as long as twenty-one ops, I was breaking all the laws of average, all the rules of numbers, that I would ever get home to Canada.” The base pigeon keeper—herself a demoted and disgraced airman—provides Kak with some degree of hope by assigning him a peculiarly swift bird that will carry home a message of the plane’s fate should the craft go down. The homing pigeon, Percy, becomes Kak’s good-luck talisman, and although both odds and omens point to a fiery end for *B for Buster* and her crew, Kak clings to the notion that Percy will somehow pull them through. Lawrence patiently and masterfully spins cycles of anxiety-filled inertia, explosively detailed bombing missions, and increasingly briefer periods of dread between flights, until the final mission in which Percy and Kak are parted over Berlin. (Sorry, I’m not telling.) Readers are apt to forget that Lawrence is the wizard behind the curtain on each flight, as they become caught up in the airmen’s good-luck rituals and superstitions of doom which point to different outcomes, drawing the plot line unnervingly taut. Send this straight to the top of the war-story aficionados’ list.

EB

LIEBERG, CAROLYN *West with Hopeless.* Dutton, 2004 [192p]
ISBN 0-525-47194-4 $15.99
Reviewed from galleys R Gr. 5-8

Carin only remembers the bad things about her older half-sister, Hope: her undependability, her selfishness, her occasional offhanded cruelty. This summer, Hope has a job interview in Reno, and that makes her Carin’s ride to Nevada for her annual visit with their divorced dad. Though she tries to resign herself to circumstances she can’t change, Carin can’t squash her fear that Hope will absent-mindedly abandon her along the way. In order to maintain a sense of control over the drive, Carin counts off mile after highway mile, anxious to arrive in Reno, where Hope’s vagaries will no longer affect her. In fact, the trip doesn’t go at all as Carin has planned, to her benefit: through a series of minor adventures, Carin’s perception of Hope changes radically during their journey. Action develops the characters of the sisters with the aid of a few well-chosen flashbacks told as memories—even Carin comes to understand that her younger self is not a reliable narra-
tor when it comes to depicting Hope as she was or predicting how she will behave in future. Carin’s toy clothesline of souvenirs (including a rotting apple core) and handmade topographical map of already-been-chewed gum solidify her age (thirteen) and the stages of the trip for the reader, while her constant route-checking underscores her need for security without resorting to counterfeit emotion. The diction reflects a teenager’s vocabulary without sacrificing narrative power to trendiness or oversharing; as a result, this novel will remain readable and pertinent for years. TC


Sonny’s daddy was often gone for days and sometimes weeks from their home in Mozier, Alabama. One night, Daddy leaves for good, and Sonny has to negotiate the task of growing up among a cast of aunts and uncles who talk a lot but say nothing that matters to Sonny. Uncle Marty, who’s not really an uncle at all, becomes a fixture around the house and eventually gives Sonny a job at the Circle of Life donut shop, where Uncle Marty dispenses lard-laden fare along with scripture to the locals. Here Sonny begins to find some answers, including some he isn’t quite ready for, like Uncle Marty’s lifelong love for his father, and his father’s reasons for abandoning his family—the love of a man in New Orleans. Lyon manages Sonny’s coming-of-age in the 1950s with a light touch despite the serious events that spur him to understanding, including Uncle Marty’s suicide and Sonny’s growing understanding of the racial divide between him and Mamby, the black housekeeper whom he loves. Sonny’s first-person narration is insightful and sometimes poetic, and his sister Loretta is always ready with an apt and often angry quip to introduce a bit of sardonic humor that offsets and disarms Sonny’s intensity. Though there is little foreshadowing, the truth about his father dawns on him slowly enough for his acceptance to ring true; Uncle Marty’s suicide is unexpected, but there has been enough suspicion and distance in their relationship for Sonny (and the reader) not to be undone by it. An unusual topic for a tale of growing up in the 1950s, the story is delicately handled and well made. KC


Julia the dog and Nigel the cat are puzzled by the changes in their household, and they’re not happy when those alterations turn out to be in service of a new baby. Bittle, as the animal pair calls the new arrival, has a tendency towards midnight cries and wakefulness and a taste for throwing her items out of the crib, and the pet pair patiently attends to her as best as they can. Eventually she grows, and she also grows on Julia and Nigel, who approve of her warm cuddly companionship for naps, her interest in the toilet, and her tendency to drop edible tidbits (“I like Bittle . . . she shares”). This doesn’t have the nippy edge of Rosen’s similarly themed Howler (BCCB 5/04), and the wishful thinking of easily resolved dethronement anxiety is more evident here. Even youngsters who think the pooh and puss softened too quickly on the new kid will find it hard to resist a household where the pets take the lion’s share of caretaking, though, and the matter-of-fact dialogue between the pets will make for comic reading aloud. Yaccarino’s traditionally
rounded figures, with their heavy shading, make the cat and dog three-dimen-
sional figures despite their cartoonish interpretation; the rest of the household,
including Bittle, tends to be flat, and the designerly compositions, with their styl-
ish retro palette, are sometimes attractive at the expense of furthering focus and
story. Kids will nonetheless relish the authoritative structure of this household,
and particularly cunning ones may parlay it into an unusually framed request for a
pet. DS

MASON, JANE B. *The Princess School: If the Shoe Fits*; by Jane B. Mason and Sarah
Hines Stephens. Scholastic, 2004 137p

This first entry in a planned paperback series introduces readers to the preadoles-
cent personas of four famed fairy-tale princesses—namely Snow White, Cinderella,
Rapunzel, and Sleeping Beauty. It is the beginning of their first year at Princess
School, and each gal brings to it her own set of issues, grounded firmly in the
familiar lore. Ella can’t seem to escape the abuse of her evil stepsisters, tomboyish
Rapunzel has little tolerance for “fancy-pants princesses,” overprotected Rose (Sleep-
ing Beauty) is living under the famed curse that promises to strike should she draw
blood, and daft and overly optimistic Snow White—well, she doesn’t have any
issues, she’s just delightfully clueless and often late as she has to pack seven lunches
each morning. The girls quickly become a foursome in this amusing story that
balances each girl’s fairy-tale attributes with typical adolescent cares and concerns,
a balance that is sure to be hugely appealing to tweens. The description of Princess
School is Hogwarts-esque, with its caricatured instructors and fantastical course
offerings, and the development of the girls’ friendship, solidified by the common
goal of getting even with Ella’s steps, is believable in its simplicity. Expect this slim
volume to circulate among similar clusters of best buddies—after all, who needs a
fairy godmother when you’ve got friends? HM

McDONALD, JOYCE *Devil on My Heels*. Delacorte, 2004 263p
Trade ed. ISBN 0-385-73107-8 $15.95 R Gr. 7-10

With “Stagger Lee” playing on the jukebox, *Some Like It Hot* at the movie theater,
and haircuts that evoke Audrey Hepburn in *Sabrina*, McDonald creates a fully
realized timescape in which to set a tense story of racial and class hatred mingled
with hope. Dove grew up in Benevolence, Florida, playing in her daddy’s orange
groves with Chase, whose daddy owned the groves next door, and Gator, a black
boy who hung around the pickers until he was old enough to become one. Then
their inappropriate friendship drops behind the scenes, but their loyalty to one
another persists as they grow older and become conscious of the injustices that
surround the relationships between blacks and whites, and between pickers and
crew bosses. As Gator seeks to organize the pickers into a slowdown to protest
crew boss Travis Waite’s exploitation of the Mexican migrant workers that he has
brought across the border, Dove learns that her father is not only a member of the
Klan but that he has long secretly known who killed the husband of Dove’s be-
loved surrogate mother, their housekeeper, Delia. Reeling from the layers of be-
trayal and remorse, Dove seeks to find ways to make things right, setting off an
explosive chain of events that leads to a tense truce and a tenuous sense of redemp-
tion. McDonald’s language is at times as intoxicating as the scent of the orange
groves she depicts, her characters are rich and fully developed, and her plot pacing flawlessly matches the events she's narrating. This is a meaty read highlighting the fireworks that explode when the laser-like moral inflexibility of a young teen encounters the nuanced complexity of systemic hatred. Further, it showcases the fact that if enough people work collectively and on their own to do the right thing, the bullies don’t always have to win. KC


So, McGhee’s little ebony-haired worrywart from Countdown to Kindergarten (BCCB 10/02) survived her school debut. Okay, it really wasn’t so bad. Well, actually it was pretty darn good. But this year really is going to be nasty because she has Mrs. Watson for first grade and Mrs. Watson is an alien who wears bone jewelry and who steals little kids’ baby teeth and who keeps an insidious “treat box” and it’s all really true because there’s a girl on the bus who told her so and she had Mrs. Watson last year so it must be true. The only thing our narrator can do is keep her mouth closed at all times—even when she wants to sing, even when she knows the right answer, even when it’s snack time. The moment of truth arrives when Mrs. Watson brings out the infamous treat box and inquires whether any child has a loose tooth; our heroine can restrain herself no longer and howls, “AAAAAAAH!” at which point her tooth flies out and she is promptly awarded the first treat of the year—a perfectly ordinary and quite delicious sucker from a kind teacher with a pearl necklace. Live and learn. Listeners who accompanied her to kindergarten in the previous title and know her anxieties are for naught won’t find as much tension in this outing, but the gentle lesson on ignoring gossip, delivered with a light touch, will be appreciated nonetheless. Again Harry Bliss crafts a school full of kids worth meeting (from the child who alights from the bus in his p.j.s, to the guy with his finger up his nose) and wall art worth examining (“Mrs. Watson’s Lost Tooth Gallery, 1990- ”; the book-fair poster selection Harry Potter and the Huge Cavity). As long as there’s opening-day dread, there’s room for one more funny book to assuage it. EB


The Casson family (from Saffy’s Angel, BCCB 5/02) is back, and their life hasn’t gotten any more organized or orthodox; this outsiderhood is now taking its toll on twelve-year-old Indigo, who’s become the target of bullies at school. The attempts at intimidation bounce him into an unexpected friendship with Tom, a disaffected American who’s also bully-bait, and who gradually becomes part of the unofficial family circle of the Cassons. Tom’s biggest Casson fan is actually Indigo’s youngest sister, Rose, who’s fiercely protective of the two older boys, and who, as an artist herself, reveres Tom’s musical ability; it also seems likely that she’s determined to hang onto every relationship she can in the face of her father’s increasing distance from the family. McKay writes ensemble drama like nobody else can, operating in the Nesbit tradition but employing her own beatifically eccentric take on the collective. She’s here tackled the challenge of depicting her usual amiably pell-mell family as it undergoes, without acknowledgment, a hard transition when
the Casson parents' separation becomes more than merely residential (Rose takes to writing her father letters describing events as horribly as possible, in the hope that he will "come storming to the rescue"), and the result is more realistic than many family dramas wherein the altered family state is carefully explained to all family members. The book's portrait of the bullies and the bullied is also original and perceptive, and the resolution—the increasingly leader-resentful bullies nobly withstand a furious attack from an enraged Rose—has psychological fidelity as well as humor. Even readers new to the Casson family will embrace this rich and affectionate narrative, and Saffy's Angel fans will be lining up for another family visit. DS


Against his wishes and better judgment, Wagner learns a secret from Lulu. While the reader and the rest of their class learn about the process of making ice cream on a school field trip, Pearl and Wagner miss all the good bits: their minds are on the pains of keeping a secret from your best friend, as Pearl tries to wheedle the secret out of him and Wagner tries to remain strong. In the two subsequent chapters, both Pearl and Wagner learn that some secrets are for sharing with your best friend. Afraid of roller coasters, Wagner doesn't want to go to Lulu's party, so Pearl takes him through a series of desensitizing exercises until he feels like he "rules the roller coaster." Pearl's secret fear doesn't become evident, even to her, until they are on approach to the ride, and Wagner returns her favor of moral support. The action is just right for a beginning reader—the repetition of words and phrases is unobtrusive but still evident enough for reinforcement, and the stories are compelling and relevant for the age level. Alley gives his watercolor child-animals (Pearl is a no-nonsense rabbit with a penchant for rather loud socks, and Wagner is a sensitive-looking mouse who prefers his shirts striped) remarkable emotional range and complexity. They are by turns fretful, angry, conspiratorial, hurt, bewildered, eager; moreover, they are snappy dressers in a kind of chunky kid-chic sort of way. Their textures and expressions animate and complement this warmly wise tale of friendship and support—oh, to have a friendship like this! Fans of Pearl and Wagner will welcome this installment, and those new to the pair will be charmed. KC

Mead, Alice  *Madame Squidley and Beanie*. Farrar, 2004 138p ISBN 0-374-34688-7  $16.00  Ad  Gr. 4-8

Beanie is a worrier by nature, so when her mother starts showing strange symptoms—intermittent fevers, constant fatigue, forgetfulness, muscle failure, etc.—Beanie assumes the worst. Mrs. Kingsley's doctor diagnoses Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and says there is little he can do. Mrs. Kingsley tries to calm Beanie's fears with humor, occasionally adopting the persona of Madame Squigley, a fortuneteller, but living with an unwell parent means Beanie has a lot more responsibility than her friends, and she takes her anger and frustration out on everyone, including her best friend, Charles, who has problems of his own. A victim of scoliosis and constantly arguing parents, Charles must negotiate between his mom, who wants him to wear his brace all the time, and his dad, who wants him to strengthen his back through playing sports. Beanie just wants a normal life—one that includes sleepovers with the Snob Squad rather than being saddled with a sick
mom and a friend with physical issues as well. In the end, she realizes that her mom and Charles are doing the best that they can, but they need her support. Though the message is certainly well meaning, the book's intentions tend to run too close to the surface, rendering the dénouement psychologically abrupt, and Beanie's and Charles' resolution to tackle their problems head-on seem a bit too much like didactic bravado. The truncated conclusion leaves the reader to assume the success of their efforts. Still, Mead offers an insightful and realistic portrait of a young girl emotionally conflicted over her deep love for her mother and her desire for her to be someone different—healthy, able, and more like her friends' moms. Many readers will see their own thought patterns replicated in Beanie's obsessing over things she can't control, and thus Beanie's epiphany may help guide them toward their own. KC


Luther may be a triceratops, but that doesn't mean he's not a scaredy-cat when it comes to Halloween. His young owner insists that he go out in costume, however, and join the other trick-or-treaters as they canvass the neighborhood. When Luther's boy learns that one dastardly Dracula is pulling tricks by stealing the other kids' treats, he grabs Luther and races to the rescue. The thieving kid is unimpressed until Luther takes off his costume and reveals his true identity. Since "nobody messes with a dinosaur," Luther manages to save the day, as Meister manages to tame the fears of Halloween with this kid-friendly fantasy. Luther cuts a dashing chartreuse figure in his swashbuckling pirate outfit, and the other would-be ghouls have a goggle-eyed charm in their guises as mummies, witches, frogs, lobsters, and even a ham. Petrone brushes thick, chunky opaque colors over a red background, leaving tiny streaks that unite landscapes and figures in the moonlit scenes and create an autumnal feeling. Drac is both gangly and goofy enough to be a convincing kid-sized thug, and Luther, our hero, never quite loses his winsome vulnerability, even when forcing Dracula to give up his booty. The brave boy bolstering his fearful dinosaur is a nice twist on a familiar theme; tykes who are still a bit weirded out by the whole Halloween thing will appreciate this chance to experience some vicarious bravado. KC


In light of her triumphant, if brief, career in the British Navy (Bloody Jack, BCCB 12/02), Jacky has reason to resent being deprived of her hard-won midshipman status (due to the trifling matter of gender) and marooned in Boston's Lawson Peabody School for Young Girls. Jacky is game to undertake any course of education that could elevate her to the more genteel rank of her beloved Jaimy, though, and she makes notable progress in music (delighting the music master with salty chanties), French (she did fight against Napoleon's forces, after all), and equestrian skills (no horse will get the better of Jacky Faber). Social skills are quite a different matter; soon she's arrested for lewd public behavior and "busted back" to work as a maid. The demotion is a blessing in disguise, since now she can sneak away to sing in the bars and earn money to buy passage home to England and be reunited with her love. Meyer has obviously been inspired with a trove of possible
adventures for his fetching heroine and seems loathe to let a single one go to waste. One would expect that shifting scrappy Jacky from deck to desk should provide ample scope for a sequel, but relatively little happens within the school setting itself. Instead, Jacky flits her ways through a disjointed set of misadventures ranging from winning a horse race (she masquerades as a jockey) to resisting attempts by a deranged descendant of Cotton Mather to claim her as legal ward. And, in sad news for readers of a romantic turn, the exchange of misdirected letters between Jacky and Jaimy is but cool compensation for the steam they once generated in their shipboard hammock. The adventure, however, is not over yet, and fans can hope for better days ahead with Jacky aboard a whaler. EB

MILLER, WILLIAM 

Narrator Sammy looks back to 1937, the year in which his boyhood dream was to be as great a boxer as Joe Louis. Lessons from his friend Ernie don’t seem to help, so his father and a local shopkeeper encourage him to look beyond Louis’s boxing skills to his even greater significance within their African-American community: “Joe’s shown the world a colored person is as good as anyone. He can be the best at anything he wants to be.” Louis’s triumph over James J. Braddock makes Sammy even more determined to be a fighter, though, and it takes some gentle but firm advice from Ernie and his father and a good measure of soul-searching before the boy admits, “Maybe I’d never be a boxer, but I could be good at something else.” Miller offers few enticing details concerning the Brown Bomber’s career or his championship bout with Braddock, and those are thoroughly pummeled by the lead-fisted message on pride and personal accomplishment. Dialogue is often preachy and forced (“‘Sammy, do you know what prejudice is?’ ‘Sure, Mr. Jake,’ I said. ‘It’s when some people don’t think other people are as good as them’”), and Sammy’s pouty introspection and abrupt epiphany are unlikely to rivet young listeners. Pate’s slightly out of focus oil paintings lend minimal visual interest, with too many scenes of heart-to-heart conversations and far too little attention to Joe Louis in the ring. For stories of athletes who overcome adversity, Krull’s Wilma Unlimited (BCCB 4/96) or Cline-Ransome’s Major Taylor (BCCB 3/2004) pack a stronger punch. EB

MYERS, WALTER DEAN 

One would hardly suspect that the triple-masted sloop Constellation has, like a cat, enjoyed a multiplicity of lives. Myers traces the illustrious history of the last all-sail ship built for the United States Navy from her 1797 birth in a Baltimore shipyard to her tranquil retirement years as a tourist attraction in a Baltimore harbor. Opening chapters describe her first missions—as a frigate fighting pirates (and recalcitrant Frenchmen) in the Mediterranean and as a “repaired” (actually, rebuilt) sloop intercepting illegal slave traders off the African coast. Myers then pauses to consider life aboard the Constellation, paying special attention to the role of young boys who served as “powder monkeys” on the warship. Then it’s on to the Civil War, where wooden sailing vessels were decisively outclassed by newfangled iron-
clad steamships and Constellation was relegated to a patrol ship and training vessel. Finally Myers discusses two major restoration efforts—one which halfheartedly transformed her back into a frigate, and the second, current reconstruction that lovingly rebuilt Constellation into her 1854 sloop iteration. Readers interested in ship building or naval engineering won't find many details here, and even those who incline toward military history may become a bit impatient with Myers' lengthy excursion into the arcana of the ship's magazine (quoted from a training manual) and the relative paucity of rousing naval engagements. Those who share Myers' enthusiasm, however, will appreciate his inclusion of a timeline, nautical glossary, and reading lists, as well as quirkier offerings such as ballad lyrics and a Will Eisner cartoon (unsourced). EB


Ruthie is visiting her grandmother, and every day they do something special: buy Ruthie's favorite foods, get her favorite books from the library, play on her favorite swing set. Every afternoon, Ruthie sees Brian, the boy next door, playing with his toys and wishes Nana had a fire truck, a motorcycle, and a train for her. As the week passes, Ruthie's envy increases, as does her dismay with the more traditional activities Nana has planned—tea parties, dress up, painting—until she finally asks if she can play at Brian's house. Initially saddened by Ruthie's rejection, Nana eventually joins Brian and Ruthie, and the three have a rollicking good time playing with Brian's toy vehicles. Although the positive depiction of imaginative play (Ruthie pretends a cardboard box is a train, a line of chairs a locomotive) is somewhat lost in the ending, wherein Nana takes Ruthie to purchase duplicates of all of Brian's toys, the real message of this somewhat lengthy text seems to be that Nana is willing to abandon her activities and instead listen to Ruthie's input. Nana is, in fact, exemplary: kindhearted, enthusiastic, and, ultimately, flexible. Ruthie, while admirable for her rambunctious energy, is somewhat selfish in her disregard for Nana's efforts, and listeners may find themselves feeling a little bit bad for the devoted grandma. Moore's illustrations are full of homey details that provide a chaotic realism to the various play stations, where clothes are strewn across the living room and dolls thrown about, and the subtly detailed watercolor compositions, simultaneously bright and soft, effectively draw attention to the toys themselves. The onomatopoeic elements used in describing each of Brian's toys (the motorcycle "goes vroom! vroom!", the train "goes chucka-chucka," etc.) provide good material for the reader aloud, and many young listeners will relate to Ruthie's preference for noisy playthings. HM


Charlie Bone (of Midnight for Charlie Bone, BCCB 5/03, and Charlie Bone and the Time Twister, 12/03) returns in this third title in the Children of the Red King series. Charlie, a nascent sorcerer of sorts, discovers that Mr. Boldova (sympathetic art teacher at Bloor Academy for the magically gifted) secretly searches for his younger brother, who has been made invisible by a magical snake. Mr. Boldova
isn’t the only person in disguise: a new student, blonde, strange-eyed, and deadly, is really the witch Yolanda come to finish off Charlie’s uncle Paton and maybe Charlie himself as well. Nimmo has abandoned her usually clear storytelling for a confusing mix of characters and action as convoluted as a cobra’s coils that unfortunately never quite synthesizes into a cohesive narrative. Familiarity with the previous titles in the series is a must, since there is little character development and less explanation of new characters; the presence of the invisibility-inducing cobra is artificially limned in a prologue instead of rising naturally from already established literary logic. Previous books presented a well-constructed and believable fantasy world, but here the author seems to have lost control of the logistics of her own creation and appears uncertain of where the series is headed. Fans of the previous two titles will be looking for this one, however, and able readers will perhaps be willing to fill in the expositional blanks. JMD

PERKINS, MITALI Monsoon Summer. Delacorte, 2004 [272p]
Trade ed. ISBN 0-385-73123-X $15.95
Reviewed from galleys R Gr. 7-10

Jasmine’s mother Sarah was adopted from the Asha Bari orphanage in Pune, India, when she was four years old. Now involved in various Bay Area social-service agencies, Sarah has secured a grant to return to the orphanage and open a clinic for pregnant women, and she’s bringing the family along for the summer. Fifteen-year-old Jasmine (known as Jazz) is reluctant to leave the business she and her friend Steve started the previous year—and even more reluctant to leave Steve, for whom she has been secretly pining for many months. Further, Jazz refuses to get involved in her mother’s service projects and wants no part of Asha Bari despite her father and brother’s willingness to contribute. Jazz is an overwhelmingly likable and understandable teen; the real treat here is that the reader realizes it long before she herself does, and it is wholly satisfying to watch her develop the awareness that she has a great deal to offer. The story provides an intriguing demonstration of the concept of getting through giving; despite her reluctance to get to know Danita, the young Indian girl who cooks for the family, Jazz finds a true friend and ally as a result of their developing friendship. The correspondence between Jazz and Steve over the summer months offers a romantically fulfilling element to the story as well as providing a narrative tool for recording how Jazz is responding to the experience of being in India for the first time. Offer this to fans of Brashares’ Traveling Pants books (BCCB 12/01, 5/03) for a similarly enjoyable take on unexpected summer adventures. HM

PIKE, CHRISTOPHER Alosa. Tor, 2004 [304p]
ISBN 0-765-31098-8 $24.95
Reviewed from galleys Ad Gr. 6-9

Thirteen-year-old Ali Warner wants to save the world, but she’d be content with saving the trees that line the mountains behind her Southern California home. Though she is past the age where she thinks she can stop the loggers from their work, she still intends to make them feel guilty. On her hike up the mountain, however, she finds the forest is populated by much more dangerous things than loggers. Chased by creatures she thinks are trolls, Ali is buried by a rock avalanche; when she escapes, she unknowingly begins the journey that will lead her all the way up the mountain, to treacherous Pete’s Peak and to her forgotten power as
Alosha, Queen of the Fairies. Elementals, angry with humans for their environmental crimes, intend to wipe out humanity, and if Ali can stop the mystical gate called the Yanti from opening, she can save the world for real. The problem is—who should she save it for? Pike leaves horror behind with this fantasy series that will undoubtedly entertain in spite of its conventional nature. Ali is a multilayered character, believably working through her flaws and false assumptions to develop into the fairy queen, but her companions are little more than foils for Ali’s growth, and thin ones at that. Furthermore, the elementals she takes with her are uninterestingly pedestrian stereotypes (the gold-obsessed, pipe-smoking, whiskey-drinking, green-skinned leprechaun Paddy O’Connell, for example). However, the backstory is compelling, the action is fast paced, the danger is real, and with some magical time- and plot-twisting, the story gains complexity and a much-needed surprise. While not breaking new ground, Pike traverses the fantasy terrain well, and the end result is sure to be a blockbuster. KH

Prue, Sally  
*The Devil’s Toenail.* Scholastic, 2004 204p
ISBN 0-439-48634-3 $16.95  
Ad Gr. 7-10

Ever since bullies at his old school poured kerosene over him and set him on fire, scarring his skin and soul, Stevie wants to be safe more than anything. The best way he can see to prevent being wounded terribly again is to make others afraid of him, so he cultivates the friendship of Daniel, the most feared and respected boy at his new school. Daniel’s gang nicks things from stores and tags buildings—small-scale stuff, but even so, Stevie feels inadequate to the task of gaining their respect. A devil’s toenail (a type of fossilized shellfish) found at the beach instigates a new chapter in Stevie’s life, one in which he imagines himself in league with the devil and, intoxicated with his new power, steals cars, sets houses on fire, and finally (in spite of his inclination to do otherwise) saves his sister’s life. The fact that the toenail is indeed possessed by an evil being lends drama, especially since Stevie’s first-person narration is intercut with comments from the incubus (which Stevie can’t hear outright but responds to) that make its intention plain: Stevie is to be corrupted and then killed, like countless others. This reverse-*Screwtape* technique is at first intriguing but then irksome, as Stevie’s innate decency extends the story past the 150-page mark before he’s seriously tempted to do real harm; young readers will tire of the demon’s gloating and Stevie’s waffling long before that point. However, Stevie’s long downward curve into depravity (and eventual upswing into self-directed positive choices) does allow for a realistic exploration of the nuances of the bully-bullied relationship, making this a likely choice for reading assignments and booklists. TC

Quattlebaum, Mary  
*Jackson Jones and Mission Greentop.* Delacorte, 2004 [112p]  
Trade ed. ISBN 0-385-73114-0 $15.95  
Reviewed from galleys R Gr. 3-7

Ten-year-old Jackson Jones (from *Jackson Jones and the Puddle of Thorns*, BCCB 3/94) has not only survived his first summer as a gardener at his Mom-given plot in the community garden, he’s actually found himself enjoying the experience. He’s withstood the taunting of the local bully, the onslaught of late summer zucchini, and his mother’s plans to return to school, but he may not be a match for developers’ plans to pave over the community plots and erect an apartment build-
The plot development will be more readily foreseen by readers than the actual development is by Jackson, but this is still a spirited tale; though there's never any real doubt that Jackson and his friends will stave off the threat of garden eradication, there's more homely reality to their attempts (a candlelight vigil that gets rained out, a bully's interference in their protest) than in many stories of youthful activism. Mostly, though, readers will relish the narrator's easygoing, everykid voice and his concise, humorous evocation of interpersonal dynamics, whether between him and his friends or him and his affectionate, hardworking mother ("Mama and I slapped skin. She didn't do it right. But she tried"). The lively accessibility will also make this a good pick for advanced primary-grades readers or a candidate for reading aloud, and any kid who enjoys gardening or has been dragged into a parent's gardening habit will appreciate Jackson's and his garden's continued growth. DS


Ever since his little sister died of leukemia two years ago, Marc has stopped praying to God and quit expecting affection from his grieving parents, whose marriage has disintegrated. His mom's new boyfriend, Floyd, has manipulated her into sending Marc to a wilderness camp for troubled boys under the care of Stoner, a militant disciplinarian. Before Marc's dad can get him discharged, a camp resident is dead as a result of Stoner's "discipline," and Marc is on the run, certain that his own frantic attempt at self-defense has killed the counselor. As he hitchhikes to Seattle to find his dad, Marc recalls piece by piece the unhappy accidents and unwise decisions that brought him to his current situation, and he eventually finds reasons to begin to pray again. Since these events have arisen more as a result of others' actions than of his own, Marc as a character has little chance to develop, and the motivation behind his renewed interest in prayer remains unclear throughout the scattered story. Still, the exploration of an experience alien to many children and uncomfortably familiar to others provides its own draw, and readers seeking faith-affirming literature with real-world overtones will appreciate this addition to the library. TC


Readers who've empathetically suffered along with the "normal" kids at Robinson's Woodrow Wilson School (most recently in The Best School Year Ever, BCCB 10/94) might wonder whether the pairing of Herdmans and Halloween is overkill, given that any occasion suggests grotesque pranksterism to that family of irrepressible brats. Rest easy, though, because Robinson retains her deft touch in following narrator Beth Bradley as she explains the setup (Principal Crabtree convinces the community to ban trick-or-treating and offers a school-sponsored party in its stead), injects the threat of Herdman chaos (they declare that they won't attend so lame an event . . . as if!), and then watches the adults' elaborate plans unravel to the students' collective delight. This outing's elements include years' worth of Herdman-pilfered Halloween candy, a missing playground slide, the mysteries of the faculty lounge, the humiliating presence of costumed parent chaperones, and insufferable Alice Wendleken's electrical wardrobe malfunction, all of which tie
together neatly in a frenetic conclusion in which the Herdmans are, once again, almost exonerated and Halloween-bashing adults are most satisfyingly confounded. For the shortest, most effective booktalk on record, one need only announce, “The Herdmans are back.” EB

ROSOFF, MEG How I Live Now. Lamb, 2004 [160p]
Trade ed. ISBN 0-385-74677-6 $16.95
Reviewed from galleys R* Gr. 9-12

After a series of terrorist strikes around the world, protagonist Daisy, a New Yorker who has been sent to England by her father to live with her late mother’s relatives, is left alone with her four cousins on their farm. With British peacekeeping forces deployed around the world, enemy forces invade England and settle into an uneasy ceasefire with the British military reserves. Newly engaged in her first sexual relationship (with her cigarette-smoking, Jeep-driving, mind-reading cousin Edmond), Daisy frankly adores the bucolic beauty of Life without Father, until the military reserves take over the property and split up the children. Getting her nine-year-old cousin Piper back to the deserted family farm takes Daisy a couple of months; getting herself back to England after her father has her forcibly removed to the States takes Daisy six more years; finding a way to reconnect with a traumatized Edmond, whose extraordinary sensitivity and caring left him unable to disengage from the wanton destruction of war, takes all the courage and brash New York stubbornness she has. The first three-quarters of Daisy’s unapologetic narration is a shockingly funny, disturbingly poignant series of observations in one-sentence, run-on paragraphs involving a believably frequent use of Capital Letters and complete disregard for the conventions of punctuation. Jumping the six years of waiting for the reestablishment of international relations, Daisy picks up the tale upon her return to England, this time using starkly perfect modern prose, a technique which heightens the sense of desperation held firmly in check. Throughout, the paradisiacal setting of the English countryside and the wretched, sometimes horrifyingly violent lives of the embattled people who live there are presented with such luxurious, terrible realism that readers will remain absorbed to the very end by this unforgettable and original story. TC

ISBN 0-938317-81-4 $16.95
Reviewed from galleys R* Gr. 9-12

Sammy Santos is a warmhearted and thoughtful young man who willingly embraces his dad in front of friends, misses his dead mother, and reads bedtime stories to his little sister. However, Sammy also sees his girlfriend Juliana murdered by her father, and he struggles to survive as friends from his New Mexico neighborhood (ironically named Hollywood) are killed in Viet Nam, viciously beaten by a homophobic gang, and destroyed by a drug overdose. Juliana provides a focal point for Sammy’s mourning for the individual people he’s lost and also for the continual crushing of all Mexicana. Sammy’s first-person narration, observant and self-aware, affords a window into a world of quiet despair and stubborn hope, set appropriately against the backdrop of late-1960s social ferment. Agile transitioning between Spanish and English eases readers into Sammy’s own hyphenated world, where rights, wrongs, and individuals cannot be easily lumped
into discrete black and white. A few triumphs lighten the gloom—Sammy organizes a successful campaign to elect a Hispanic to the student council, leads a student strike that changes the dress code, and gets accepted to all eight of the universities to which he applies. His message is one of victory through endurance rather than escape, as Sammy finds ways to define himself and maintain his loyalties while circumstances prevent him from leaving the barrio. Even readers far removed from the poverty and prejudice that define his world will see this facet of the Mexican-American experience with empathy through Sammy's eyes. TC


One of the kittens in Fatima's litter has seven toes on each paw, thus earning the name Toes from his human family, the McDonahues. Fatima dies soon after, and in her wake, Toes becomes a special favorite with the McDonahues, who quickly discover that he is unusually intelligent as well. Though his siblings shun him for being different, Toes watches television, listens to classical music, and eats dinner with the family. However, one night the kittens play a cruel prank on Toes, and he runs from the house in a panic, only to find that he is lost. He crawls into an unfamiliar basement window to escape the cold, and in that house he starts his new life with Sebastian, a young musician struggling with depression. Toes gives Sebastian someone to care for and care about; meanwhile, he encourages Sebastian to believe in himself, manipulates circumstances so that he can fulfill his dream of playing with the Philharmonic, and improves his quality of life. Though the plot lacks dramatic tension, it is a gently moving assessment of how animals can look after their human companions. A book that starts and ends with the death of a beloved cat (Toes dies once he knows that Sebastian is well off) could become overly grim, but Seidler softens Toes' death with obvious foreshadowing and a hefty dose of sentimentality. Toes is an ingenious and likable character, but his voice is too human to be wholly believable, as if Seidler occasionally moved his kitty narrator aside to tell readers the human things Toes couldn't possibly understand; the mixture of the two is subtle at best, jarring at worst. For those who demand a little more authenticity to their animal fiction, recommend *I Jack* (BCCB 4/04) instead, but those who enjoy reading about unique animals with special lives may want to curl up on the sofa with Toes. KH


As swampers, Hamp and his family couldn't care less about the issue of slavery, but they heartily resent the North's thinking they can tell the South what to do, so Pap goes to war. The war takes Pap away from Hamp in more ways than one, as Pap returns a changed man. He's lost a leg, but he's also lost a great deal of his will to provide for his family, leaving Hamp to do what he can. When he hears of a bounty for Duff, a runaway slave who has killed his master, Hamp angrily leaves his father on the porch singing sad songs and takes off into the swamp to claim the reward. Duff, however, proves more resourceful than Hamp figured and soon has Hamp in his custody, rather than the other way around. Duff wants Hamp to lead him through the swamp to Florida, but Hamp figures that he'll "lead Duff in harm's way and let the Okefenokee do what it wanted with him." The tide turns,
however, as Duff saves Hamp's life and Hamp begins to see connections between what his father was fighting for and what Duff is hoping to find. Siegelson's prose thrums and pulses with the cadences of the swamp itself; the landscapes are as vivid as the conflicting emotions that thicken the characterizations. Eschewing sentimentality, she uses carefully chosen detail to render her characters' humanity, slowly breeching the wary lines of distrust that separate them as Hamp begins to emerge as a wise, compassionate young man still limned with and agitated by the angry boy inside. Hamp's position with respect to the issues of the Civil War opens up multiple ways of conceiving that conflict, and Siegelson refuses to simplify issues that are complex and contradictory. Shades of Hatchet can be felt in the perils of the swamp adventure, and Hamp's decision to help Duff and others and to re-claim his relationship with his father make this a humane and satisfying story. KC

SIERRA, JUDY  Wild about Books; illus. by Marc Brown. Random House, 2004 [40p]
Reviewed from galleys R 4-8 yrs

"It started the summer of 2002./ When the Springfield librarian, Molly McGrew,/ By mistake drove her bookmobile into the zoo." So begins the latest poetic ven-
ture from folklorist and storyteller Judy Sierra. This uninhibited promotion of the
joys of reading recalls, in galloping rhymed couplets, what happens when the zoo
animals discover books for the first time, progressing from distant interest, as they
listen to Molly reading from The Cat in the Hat, to stampeding curiosity, racing to
the bookmobile "to learn all about this new something called reading." Though
the literary references are aimed more at adults than at the youthful audience, this
is well suited to that first story hour, when new nervous faces are assembled, wait-
ing to hear what the librarian has to say. Both verbal and visual humor are thickly
interwoven into the story, where hyenas read joke books and raccoons skim through
Garbage Tips. What's more, the values sneaked into Sierra's tribute are very, well,
valuable—that there is a book suited to each and every animal, that books must be
well treated (the bunnies have "mucked up Goodnight Moon," "the termites de-
voured The Wizard of Oz"), that reading crosses over to writing (the insect haiku
being subject to the scathing treatment of the scorpion reviewer). Marc Brown
contributes wildly spirited and carefully detailed paintings to the story, capturing
the assorted cast of zoo animals in a richly vibrant habitat. With a thick hand, he
fills each spread to the edges with creatures furry and scaly, using a wide range of
colors and textured applications and varying the time of day so as to slightly alter
the backdrop. Young listeners will definitely want to have a closer look after story-
time is over. HM

SOBOL, RICHARD  An Elephant in the Backyard; written and illus. with photo-
graphs by Richard Sobol. Dutton, 2004  32p
ISBN 0-525-47288-6  $17.99 R 6-9 yrs

In the rural Thai village of Tha Klang, "domesticated elephants roam freely, com-
ing and going as they please." This story introduces readers to Wan Pen, a four-
year-old Asian elephant born and raised in the village. Sobol, a photojournalist
who covers wildlife conservation issues in Thailand, is himself a frequent visitor to
Tha Klang, and this first-person angle contributes enormously to the narrative
tone of the telling. In comfortably informative language, he shares facts about
Wan Pen’s diet (she eats almost four hundred pounds of food a day), training (learning to balance, dance, and “shake her butt”), and livelihood (soccer is her favorite sport). In the past, Tha Klang’s elephants were raised for lumbering; due to recent deforestation, most Thai elephants are now trained to perform for tourists and “help earn a living for their families.” To this end, Wan Pen spends her days under the tutelage of a mahout, or elephant trainer, learning acrobatics for her career on the stage. Scenes from Wan Pen’s life are vividly captured in large color photographs, cleanly arranged on each page to narrate episodes in the village. Sobol’s book offers a strong example of good picture-book nonfiction and provides factual information on a seldom-covered topic in a clear and visually captivating format. Further, it touches on a range of themes, from environmental education to animal behavior to cross-cultural understanding. Effective as a readaloud or readalone, this is certain to garner the attention of both animal fans and browsers drawn to the cover photograph of children on board Wan Pen for a walk through town. A list of elephant facts is included. HM

STEWART, PAUL  The Edge Chronicles: Beyond the Deepwoods; written and illus. by Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell. Fickling, 2004 278p
Trade ed. ISBN 0-385-75068-4 $12.95  M Gr. 5-7

The Edge Chronicles: Stormchaser; written and illus. by Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell. Fickling, 2004 386p
Trade ed. ISBN 0-385-75070-6 $12.95  M Gr. 5-7

In the world of the Edge Chronicles, foundling Twig roams from quirky to quirkier bands of indigenous folk in search of his true home. Leeches that fly, bears that speak, and feminists that drink blood dog his path as he wanders through the Deepwoods. Then lawless racketeers and academics threaten the well-being of a city that only Twig can save. Unfortunately, while superficial forays into foreign cultures and compact capsules of life-threatening action abound, depth of character and emotional integrity within the narrative aren’t to be had for love or money. Of course Twig discovers that his father is the famed sky-pirate, the Cloud Wolf, and that his own destiny is to complete Dad’s quest to rescue the city of Sanctaphrax and thereby restore the family honor. Less clear is the reason behind Twig’s reverence of dear old Dad, since the old coot twice deliberately abandons Twig to probable death in the perilous Deepwoods, first ditching his newborn son at the base of a tree, and later, after discovering that the precocious young man who has helped him fix his skyship is indeed his long-lost child, sneaking off in the middle of the night. These unintentional but central motifs of foundationless adulation and phony emotional intimacy are thoroughly explored in the first volume and revisited with a vengeance in the second, defusing the magnetic power of the fantasy world’s originality and the potential for reader involvement in Twig’s varied adventures. Ever-hungry middle-grade fantasy devotees would be better served by turning to reliable stalwarts such as Vivian Vande Velde. TC

STRETE, CRAIG KEE  The Rattlesnake Who Went to School; illus. by Lynne Cravath. Putnam, 2004 32p
ISBN 0-399-23572-8 $15.99  R 4-6 yrs

Crowboy turns his first-day-of-school nervousness into aggression by imagining
himself a rattlesnake; after all, rattlesnakes make their own safety by being so scary that everyone else stays away. Unfortunately for Crowboy, nobody's scared of him, but there is one person who understands his vision: a girl who brings him "a squirming mass of wriggling worms and big-eyed bugs" to eat for lunch the next day instead of the school-provided hot dog. The richly shaded illustrations flash scenes of everyday activities in dynamic compositions, such as the whirling vortex of school bus, teacher, computer, and other objects of anxiety superimposed over a sketch of Crowboy cowering in bed, or the dangerously angular shots of a menacing rattlesnake slithering down the stairs and grinning savagely at his toothy reflection in the bathroom mirror. Pastels in acrylic medium blur and streak the pages in an appealing mix of impressionist and representational techniques, deep color blocks lending structure and depth to the pages while light smudges halo the characters, resulting in a humorous merging of the imaginary with the real. The text maintains that humorous tension by constantly contrasting Crowboy's innovative approach to the dangers of school and the ironic twist to the requisite friend-finding moment (Crowboy can't bear to eat the bugs the girl offers and instead suggests that they both be "the kind of rattlesnakes that only eat hot dogs"). Boys and girls who prefer this sinister snake to the timid characters of many school-jitters books will claim Crowboy as an ally and a role model—be ready with a snack sack of squirming bugs in case of a rattlesnake invasion on your school's first day. TC


Having staged his own death after becoming a cult figure (as documented in The Gospel According to Larry, BCCB 1/02), Josh "Larry" Swensen has been living a rootless life under various fake identities. After two years, he's found and yanked back into mainstream protest by his old friend, Beth, and her boyfriend, Simon, and a revitalized Josh decides to focus his energies on one audacious move: running for President of the United States. The Larry/Beth ticket, founded as an attempt to get issues heard rather than any real challenge to the incumbent and his Democratic challenger, gains steam and sufficient constitutional amendment to become a genuine and possible candidacy for the office—if internal sabotage doesn't take Josh out of the race first. There's clearly a deeply felt message behind this book, emphasized by the collections of depressing facts and occasional inspiring quotations interleaved with the novel. Unfortunately, the ethical view is mostly a good/evil binary, with the Powers that Be tidily and facilely villainous, even to the point of a murder attempt on Josh; the plotting also fails on the antagonistic threads, with the murder attempt (unlike Josh himself) neatly dispatched and the internal saboteur possessing a red flag that should have alerted the protagonists early on. As an exhortation to participate in the process, however, this is pretty heady stuff; the fact that the success is the book's fantasy doesn't preclude it (or at least the voter-turnout and active-youth portions) from becoming reality. The civics lessons are delivered painlessly, and the story about Josh's romantic troubles—he's been long in love with Beth, but there's another girl who may win his heart along with helping him win votes—adds some enjoyable personal drama. Readers who've moved up from Dan Gutman's The Kid Who Ran for President (BCCB 11/96) may find this a congenial as well as a provocative read despite its flaws, and perhaps it'll encourage them to become involved in the upcoming elections. Some suggestions (slightly perplexing in format) for web searches on the issues discussed are appended. DS
THOMAS, JOYCE CAROL  The Skull Talks Back and Other Haunting Tales; illus. by Leonard Jenkins. HarperCollins, 2004  [56p]
Reviewed from galleys  Ad Gr. 3-5

This collection of six tales, adapted from those recorded by Zora Neale Hurston, feature classic motifs such as talking animals (“Bill, the Talking Mule”), haunted houses (“The Haunted House”), and challenges to the Devil (“Big, Bad Sixteen”). What they don’t feature are polished beginnings, conclusive endings, setting descriptions, or developed characters. Occasional references to blood, bones, and the Devil give some support to the titular adjective, but the single-sentence paragraphs serve mostly to provide a bare-bones outline of a story waiting for a teller to flesh it out. Wraithlike paintings do supply an eerie ambience: stark blacks, grays, and sepias depict jumbled skeletons, frightened farmers, and plumb tired-out donkeys, textured for depth and morphed into startling perspectives. Readers seeking recreational thrills will be better off with collections such as Hamilton’s The Dark Way (BCCB 12/90), but this is at least an accessible introduction that may serve as a resource for students interested in learning to tell folktales. An adapter’s note is included. TC

TOWNLEY, RODERICK  Sky. Jackson/Atheneum, 2004  266p
ISBN 0-689-85712-8  $16.95  Ad Gr. 5-9

Sky is a teenager in the late 1950s whose father, Quinn, doesn’t understand him, hates his music, doesn’t think highly of his friends, and is prone to grounding him and then knowing when he sneaks out anyhow. Quinn, who is raising Sky alone, is convinced that his son’s preoccupation with the piano and his jazz combo are interfering with school and undermining his future, so he first forbids Sky from playing with the band, and when that doesn’t work, gets rid of the piano. Sky rebels by running away and crashing with his jazz hero, crotchety Art Olmedo, who takes the boy in and teaches him how to listen creatively and find his own style. Quinn tracks his son down in due time and, tacitly acknowledging love that’s stronger than their differences, the father and son reconcile; the piano makes a reappearance (Quinn only put it in storage), and Sky is on track to high-school success and probable jazz triumph. Townley tosses in enough technical jazz jargon and drops enough Beat Generation names to confound or weary younger readers with insufficient background or interest in the style or period. Moreover, Olmedo, though an endearing curmudgeon, is essentially a stock character. Still, Townley injects enough wry humor into his depiction of Sky’s all-too-common predicaments to entertain readers not quite ready for Going’s musical marvel Fat Kid Rules the World (BCCB 6/03). EB

TURNER, ANN  Pumpkin Cat; illus. by Amy June Bates. Hyperion, 2004  32p
ISBN 0-7868-0494-7  $15.99  Ad  5-8 yrs

When an exhausted stray cat finds shelter in the library’s book-return box, she lucks out: kind librarians take her in and feed her up, dub her “Pumpkin Cat,” and give her free run of the library. Pumpkin Cat appreciates the warmth and shelter and begins to find enjoyment in the young patrons’ attentions, but she still feels an absence in her life; when a little black kitten is abandoned at the library,
Pumpkin Cat adopts the young newcomer, finding fulfillment in making a place for someone else. This story lacks the spare eloquence that Turner has displayed in some of her other works; the description mostly pads the slender plot, and the chronology is somewhat confusing (was Pumpkin Cat, who arrived shortly before Halloween, at the library only a few days when little Halloween Cat arrived, or did Halloween Cat’s arrival occur in a subsequent year?). The text does usually opt for evocative specifics rather than sentimentalizing, however, while retaining the ineradicable charm of the library-pet idea. The illustrative emphasis on Pumpkin Cat’s limpid eyes and smiling or frowning expression somewhat oversweetens the Pumpkin Cat pie, but there are some interestingly grainy elements and unexpectedly textured washes in the art that enrich its effects. While this will be an easy readaloud sell, libraries without cats are just asking for cat-leave trouble by using this for a Halloween storytime; those gifted with resident felines, however, can take this opportunity for self-congratulation and the relating of their own library-cat tales. DS

VIZZINI, NED  
Be More Chill. Miramax/Hyperion, 2004  287p
ISBN 0-7868-0995-7  $16.95  
Ad  Gr. 8-10

High-school loser Jeremy Heere and his only friend, Michael, bemoan their lack of social status (read: girls), but no solution presents itself until the Halloween Dance, which Jeremy uncharacteristically attends in hopes of getting closer to his dream girl, Christine. A former tormenter tells the longing and hopelessly inept Jeremy about squips, miniaturized supercomputers that, once ingested, provide directions on how to be cool. After parlaying some stolen Beanie Babies into cash on eBay, Jeremy buys a squip, and sure enough, things change for him: the right clothes, the right body (he buffs up in two weeks), and a squip to keep him from saying something terminally stupid mean status, easy access to recreational drugs, and girls (and almost sex, several times). Still, the squip is not infallible, and following its advice brings Jeremy neither ultimate happiness nor Christine. Jeremy is an aware and self-aware narrator who keeps his eye on not only his own activities but the activities of his peers, and his jaundiced analysis of the social hierarchy is sometimes scathingly funny. Unfortunately, the characterizations are see-through shallow, with little emotional feeling beneath the properly outfitted surfaces. Female characters especially suffer from glossy underdevelopment that gives them little beyond trendy prettiness and sexual availability. The squip is a scarily believable premise, however, and the main character’s burning desire to acquire one to alter his life for the better is, sadly, all too understandable. Contemporary young adult readers with a penchant for technology and social science fiction will appreciate not only Jeremy’s desire to have a coolness arbiter sitting in his frontal lobe, but also his dryly clueless commentary on the image-conscious world many adolescents inhabit. JMD

WAHL, JAN  
Knock! Knock!; illus. by Mary Newell DePalma. Holt, 2004  [32p]
ISBN 0-8050-6280-7  $16.95
Reviewed from galleys  Ad  4-6 yrs

Witch Ella La Grimble “wished for company,” and boy, did she get it. Feet, legs, knees, hips, waist, shoulders, arms, hands, neck, and finally a dour-faced head “Knock! Knock!” at her door and then assemble themselves, piece by piece, into a rather intimidating character who—thank goodness—reveals that he has come to
visit Witch Ella in response to her wish. Mixed-media illustrations in soft blues, tans, and greens establish Ella’s cottage as a peaceful, safe place, crisscrossed with almost-touchable brush strokes and splashed with wry shadows in witch shapes (much more traditionally witchy than gentle Ella herself). The cumulative nature of this tale (a variant of Jacobs’ “The Visitor,” though source notes are absent) does build suspense, and the repetitive style of the text encourages listener participation. Unfortunately, the dénouement, with its lessening of the traditional version’s punch and its hasty resolution (one illustration of Ella and the visitor smiling peacefully at each other over a steaming cuppa), is a letdown. Creative readers aloud, however, may still get Halloween mileage out of the lively witchy tale. TC

WEEKS, SARAH  
*So B. It.* Geringer/HarperCollins, 2004 245p  
Library ed. ISBN 0-06-623623-1 $16.89  
Ad Gr. 5-8

Heidi’s mother only knows twenty-three words. Most of them are ordinary, like “done,” “tea,” “out,” and “more,” but one is mysterious—“soof”—and it is this word that sends Heidi off on a quest to find out who her mother is, and who Heidi is along the way. Twelve years earlier, Heidi’s mother had showed up on Bernadette’s doorstep with a crying baby. Conveniently, Bernadette is agoraphobic (and she’s remarkably uncurious about where the two came from and how they are supported), and she finds an unused doorway that connects Heidi’s mom’s apartment with her own. Bernadette is committed to Heidi and her mother, whom she names So B. It, since that is one of her words, and their life is quiet and uneventful until Heidi finds an undeveloped roll of film in her mother’s closet. The pictures set off a storm of questions, and Heidi travels from Reno to New York by herself to find the meaning of Mama’s word and the key to her own history (both So B. It and “soof” turn out to be mispronunciations of Heidi’s mother’s name, Sophia). The plot premise, as well as Heidi’s solitary cross-country trek, is a bit implausible in these days of Amber Alerts and invasive social services, but Weeks manages to give enough reality to Heidi’s voice and enough pace to the plot to help a reader suspend disbelief, or at least damp it down enough to become involved in Heidi’s mystery. Heidi herself is doggedly determined, and, despite moments of fear and despair, as obsessional in her way as the women who reared her. Neither plot, character, nor ethos is as fully developed as in Holt’s *My Louisiana Sky* (BCCB 6/98), but this is a quick and satisfying tale of love, determination, and the kindness of strangers. KC

WHEELER, LISA  
ISBN 0-689-84952-4 $14.95  
R Gr. 1-2

The unlikely pairing of good friends Fitch (a wolf) and Chip (a pig) continues in this third entry in the Fitch and Chip series (*New Pig in Town*, BCCB 12/03, *When Pigs Fly*). Here, Fitch has invited Chip over to meet his grandmother, and while Chip is confident in his friendship with Fitch, he is a little concerned about what a wolf granny might serve up for dinner (“My granny will love you!” “Baked or boiled?”). The humor centers on Granny’s false teeth and subsequent bent towards mispronunciation (“I am pleased to eat you,” she said with her wiggly teeth. “Eat me?” cried Chip”), and the phonetic puns are perfectly suited to the ready-to-read set. The theme of exploring differences continues in this story as
Chip examines Granny's house for things different from his own (such as a magazine rack in the bathroom and magnets on the fridge) and ultimately concludes that he and Granny aren't that different after all (much to the delight of Fitch who, in a thought bubble, imagines his beloved Granny hugging his best bud). The fairy-tale jokes woven throughout the text are hilariously subtle ("'I have been in three kinds of houses,' Chip said. 'Straw, wood, and brick'"), and the vocabulary used is well suited to the intended readership. Ansley's cheerfully fluid line-and-watercolor illustrations feature carefully caricatured facial expressions, highlighting the childlike Fitch and Chip and the pointy-nosed Granny in her sleeping cap. Chip's cheeks, true to the text, grow increasingly flushed upon meeting Granny, perfectly matching his nervous stutter, and the domestic detailing of Granny's wolf house provides extensive visual clues to help young readers work through the tale. Those following Fitch and Chip will definitely want to check out their latest adventures, but those new to the series will also find a good deal to like in this entertaining tale of bringing a friend home for the first time. HM


Beginning with the introduction, which focuses on how "two young people" provided the catalysts for the creation and the publication of Tolkien's literary classics, The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, this short but dense biography sets its sights on involving youthful readers. Text blurbs, black-and-white photographs, and sidebars dot the pages, providing visual interest and facilitating browsing—an excellent editorial decision, since no account of Tolkien's quiet life can be described as electrifying reading, and young people drawn to this book by the action-crammed New Line films will appreciate this mark of consideration. However, this isn't a fluffy biography but a thorough examination of the influences and opportunities which prepared Tolkien to write his masterworks. With the inclusion of brief appendices of Tolkien's interview quotes, a timeline of his life, timelines of his major works and selected additional works, a glossary, extensive chapter notes, a short list of titles for further reading, and an index, this volume is a useful introduction to Tolkien's further works, to the processes behind his creative endeavor, and to the standards of good research scholarship. TC


In time for the third anniversary of the September 11th tragedy, Winter presents as a memorial the story of a memorial created at the time. A pair of South African sisters, rose growers by profession, traveled to New York with 2,400 roses for a flower show; when the airports were closed, they were stranded with no place to go and no purpose for their roses (a note explains the flower show had been canceled). A kind stranger offered them a place to stay, and the sisters used their roses to create a floral tribute to the towers, arranging the blooms in the shape of the fallen buildings for all to view in Union Square. The authorial involvement sometimes detracts from the focused detail of the story, but the account is nonetheless a moving one. The quietly declarative sentences generally resist sentimentality, and the account is a subtle reminder of how many lives, even of people just passing through,
were touched by the ripples of the tragedy. Winter's controlled line-and-water-color illustrations gain additional order from careful uses of patterning in unexpected places, giving the visuals a dignified restraint; her palette slips to monochrome at the towers' destruction and then gradually returns to color in the elements of tribute, such as the lit candles and the roses themselves, without completely removing the gray pall from the city scenes. This doesn't have the engagement and impact of Maira Kalman's *Fireboat* (BCCB 10/02), but it's a modest and tender account of short-lived memorial that will last long in memory. DS

Library ed. ISBN 0-06-028885-X $15.89
Reviewed from galleys

Ad 4-6 yrs

Whoooo can win the Make a Monster contest at the teeny tiny school? The Teeny Tiny Ghost can, in spite of his dread of all things scary. Cocksure bullies hassle and boo him, but with the help of his two remarkably prescient black cats, the Teeny Tiny Ghost constructs a friendly monster out of parts from the dump and wins the blue ribbon. Watercolor paintings curl and streak between the text blocks, lending dynamic impetus and narrative tension, while fibrous accent lines provide body and grain to ghostly forms. Unfortunately, the rhyme suffers from serious scansion impairment, and it's further laden with excessive amounts of cuteness. Nonetheless, creepy design details such as the ghosts' irregular teeth and crabbed mouths keep the mood sufficiently eerie to hold listeners until the Teeny Tiny Ghost and his two black cats celebrate their victory. TC

**WOODING, CHRIS** *The Haunting of Alaizabel Cray*. Orchard/Scholastic, 2004 292p
ISBN 0-439-54656-7 $16.95
R Gr. 8-12

The Old Quarter of London is not safe at night, and the danger that was once confined there is spreading. Skulking amid the muted glow of gaslights on foggy nights, in narrow, crooked alleys and squalid streets, there are myriad death-dealers: a plague of perverse wych-kin, who kill, infect, or possess in a thousand different ways; an all-too-human serial killer named Stitch-face, offering rides to unfortunates in his death carriage; and an underground cult known as the Fraternity, with powerful high-society members bent on fulfilling an unholy ritual. Walking the same beat are the wych-hunters, people dedicated to ridding the world of wych-kin; Thaniel Fox, at seventeen, is already one of the most renowned of his kind. Still, he is unprepared for the depths of evil he unearths when he meets Alaizabel Cray, an amnesiac girl who appears to be possessed. Alaizabel, he discovers, is the key to the Fraternity's success and to the wych-kin's domination, and he and his few friends are the only ones who can stop them from unlocking the door to hell itself. Wooding has written a haunting and atmospheric horror story that seems, with its breakneck action, cinematic scenes, disquieting dread, and shuddering scares, like the best movie you've ever read. Though the prose occasionally becomes grandiloquent enough to make readers aware of its costuming, its old-fashioned gothic formalwear suits the alternative-Victorian London locale and the darkly intelligent plot. Wooding's characterizations are done in moody, descriptive passages that create people with strong psychological presence instead of well-rounded...
definition; they come off as somewhat shallow, but that's appropriate in a book more about semblance and setting than people. Recommend this to those who enjoy feeling like they're reading at night by flashlight, even when they aren't. KH

WOODS, BRENDA  *Emako Blue.*  Putnam, 2004  124p  
ISBN 0-399-24006-3  $15.99  
Ad  Gr. 7-10

The story of Emako Blue begins where it ends—with Emako's funeral. A group of friends there reflect variously on their relationship with Emako, who came into their lives as a new girl in their school and chorus with an amazing voice ("better than Whitney"), a beautiful face, and the legacy of South Central L.A. from which she just couldn't manage to escape. Despite the fact that we know from the start that Emako is dead, her murder in a drive-by shooting aimed at her elder brother comes as a surprise on an otherwise uneventful day, capturing a bit of the randomness and lack of preparation that a group of friends might feel upon losing one of their own. The friends—Monterey, Jamal, Eddie, and Savannah—all hail from a less scary section of town, and they have different reactions to Emako that are developed through memories each shares in first-person narration, but, with the exception of Savannah, the characterizations don't quite gel into memorable portraits. Because of the succession of narrators and the blending of memory with the present, it's sometimes difficult to follow the path of the story and who's telling it, but Emako's distinctiveness as a friend and her star qualities are well developed. As a result, readers are left with the sense that Emako's death is tragic because she was special, not simply because she was an innocent victim of gang violence. The limited perspectives of the characters allow Woods to scapegoat both Emako's and Eddie's elder brothers, whose gang activities are vilified as the source of all the trouble the characters face, but who also provide the motivation for Emako and Eddie to pursue their big dreams so as not to become like them. More complex and honest portrayals of similar situations can be found in Walter Dean Myers' *Scorpions* (BCCB 7/88) and *The Beast* (1/04); this offering is a rather "lite" version, both morally and consequentially, of similar circumstances. KC

WORMELL, CHRIS  *The Big Ugly Monster and the Little Stone Rabbit;* written and illus. by Chris Wormell.  Knopf, 2004  32p  
Trade ed. ISBN 0-375-82891-5  $15.95  
R*  4-7 yrs

See this month's Big Picture, p. 3, for review.

WORMELL, CHRISTOPHER  *Teeth, Tails, & Tentacles: An Animal Counting Book;* written and illus. by Christopher Wormell.  Running Press Kids, 2004  64p  
ISBN 0-7624-2100-2  $18.95  
R  2-4 yrs

Beginning counters will find memory aids aplenty in this picture book of color linoleum-block animal prints introducing numbers one through twenty. Stocky chunks of concise text ("2 two camel humps") mirror the heavy black lines of illustrations executed in an iconic period style reminiscent of the woodblocks in C. B. Falls' historic *ABC Book* (1923). Within the art, limpid colors melt into single-hue light-to-dark continuums or flash in arresting contrast, while surprising shifts in perspective and shadow create an almost tangible visual texture and depth which invite repeated viewing. With the last print, the narrative returns to the number
one ("twenty barnacle shells on . . . one humpback whale"), implying that such adventures in counting need never end. Miniature repetitions of the illustrations fill the endpapers, and an appendix of "Specific Animals Featured in This Book" gives short paragraphs of information about each animal. TC

ISBN 0-938317-84-9 $17.95
Reviewed from galleys Ad Gr. 2-4

In the war-ravaged cities of Haiti, street children live in deprivation and persecution. One child, named Sélavi—"that is life," in the Haitian language of Kreyol—is orphaned by "people with guns" before being adopted by other street children. Sélavi eventually instigates the building of the shelter Lafanmi Sélavi—"the family is life," or "Sélavi’s family"—and participates in the development of Radyo Timoun, a radio station run by street children. The children who adopt Sélavi are each given half a page to describe their lives, offering the reader individual voices with which to sympathize. The children’s attempts to create stability for themselves are shown in watercolor mural-style illustrations with hieroglyphic borders, the deep hues and intricate patterns reminiscent of Caribbean fabric prints. Individuals are shown running from men with guns, weeping in despair, reaching helpful hands toward others in need, and working together to build a place of asylum. Tragedies past are portrayed in shaded monotones of gray-blue, emphasizing the courage of the survivors. The main text is richer in exhortation and emotional description than in specific information, so kids will have to rely on denser end matter or additional information to fill in the picture and answer their questions. Though Sélavi’s story is referred to multiple times as “true,” and the shelter and radio station are real, the extensive addenda (an author’s note, black-and-white photographs of the children of Lafanmi Sélavi with descriptions of their daily life, and a three-page open letter from Haitian author Edwidge Danticat) suggest that Sélavi is probably an amalgam of many children. The children who read or look at this book may not care if Sélavi himself is real, since the story is made meaningful by its overall veracity and by the urban mural character of the illustrations, which bring home the real-world impact of far-off political turmoil. The text lends itself to being read aloud, but the book topic and the length of the addenda—and the news that Radyo Timoun was destroyed in an attempted coup in March 2004—will be better absorbed by children old enough to read the book for themselves. TC

Trade ed. ISBN 0-06-053499-0 $15.99 R Gr. 4-6

When your last name is Mink, and your parents saddle you with Winchell for a first name, you’re going to get teased, chased by bullies, and occasionally even beaten up. What you might not expect, however, is that things could get worse. You might, for instance, fall off “THAT CLIFF” (always referred to in an oversized comic font accompanied by musical notes), or exchange bodies with your pet turtle, or go back in time and become a baseball-playing brontosaurus whose fielding error could lead to the extinction of his species. Then again, you might have an opportunity to change someone’s life, or your own, if you can just figure out
the point of the story Abe Lincoln has just told you about the invention of the Gratchkea. Such is the fate of Winchell Mink, whose high-spirited adventures are cast in an offbeat narrative style that challenges and bends conventional storytelling. His tale is peppered with font changes to highlight various sound effects, and it features one-sentence chapters, a commercial for bottled air, and witty authorial asides and commentary that will keep even the most reluctant readers turning the page to see what outrageous and out of context thing might happen next. The general silliness offers a clever alternative to more didactic treatments of the timid soul’s triumphant emergence in the face of bullying peers. Winchell’s effervescent first-person narration with its deadpan humor and hyperbolic content will make for a romp of a readaloud; practice first to maximize the comic timing of your delivery. KC

In the belief that “every child should know specific children’s books” as part of his or her “literary heritage,” children’s literature expert Anita Silvey has compiled her personal list of the all-time best in publishing for children with a special emphasis on kids preschool to age twelve. The process of selection, as described in the introduction, included conversations with hundreds of individuals about the books they remember, consultation with published lists of best books, and months of reading and rereading; it is a project of inescapable subjectivity but seemingly sincere in its planning. Silvey has taken this extended annotated bibliography a step beyond the more encyclopedic examples by including not only summaries and suggested uses for each entry but also “the story behind the story,” whether it be a glimpse into the book’s little-known publication history, the relationship of the writer and illustrator, or details about the process of its creation. This is actually an entertaining collection of factoids about favorite books (did you know Curious George was called Fifi in the original French version? Or that A Wrinkle in Time was rejected twenty-six times before Farrar picked it up?), and librarians and teachers will find plenty of fascinating tidbits to share with their students. The text reads more like a narrative than a reference source, and children’s literature enthusiasts will find it an enjoyable read in and of itself. The entries are organized by age group; a more extensive listing (“Beyond the 100 Best”), which recognizes hundreds more titles, is organized both by age and, within the age groupings, by genre. An extensive bibliography is included, as is a “Reading Journal,” intended for families to use in jotting down the experience of reading each title. HM
**SUBJECT AND USE INDEX**

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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- **Adoption—stories:** Chen
- **ADVENTURE:** Anderson; Bath; Colfer; Crilley; Hutchins; Langrish; Meyer; Pike; Roberts; Stewart; Wooding
- **African Americans:** Bolden; Miller
- **African Americans—fiction:** Davidson; Quattlebaum; Woods
- **Airplanes—fiction:** Lawrence
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- **Animals:** Ehrlich; Sobol; Wormell
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- **Fathers:** Ehrlich *Does a Duck*
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Witches—stories: Wahl
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World War II—fiction: Lawrence
Worms—stories: Johnston
TRANSITIONAL CHAPTER BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS WITH A THIRST FOR ADVENTURE

It Can’t Be Done, Nellie Bly! A Reporter’s Race Around the World
By Nancy Butcher
1-56145-289-0 / Hardcover $12.95 / Ages 7-10

The true story of a courageous woman’s famous journey in 1889 that took her all the way around the globe in record time.

“Fun, factual, and well written.” —School Library Journal

Amelia Bloomer Project 2004 List (Recommended Feminist Books for Youth, Feminist Taskforce of American Library Association Social Responsibilities Round Table)

The Amazing Mr. Franklin or The Boy Who Read Everything
By Ruth Ashby
1-56145-306-4 / Hardcover / $12.95 / Ages 7-10

The story of Franklin’s insatiable desire for knowledge and how it became the foundation of all his great accomplishments.

AND COMING FALL 2004...

Rocket Man: The Mercury Adventure of John Glenn
By Ruth Ashby
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