



SOUTH DAKOTA
**TEEN
CHOICE**
BOOK AWARDS

Book Biographies

October 1, 2026 – April 1, 2027

Young Adult Reading Program

South Dakota Library Association

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Abstract

The purpose of this document is to provide more detailed information about the present year's South Dakota Teen Choice Book Awards nominees. The information outlined in this document includes professional reviews of materials, genre listings, and the publisher's recommended age range for the title. This information is provided to all young adult school and public librarians within the State of South Dakota to allow them to make more informed purchasing decisions.

Original book talks are included by Committee members. This year's book talks were written by Jayde Hart, Kendra Brewer, Cassi Pietz, and Sarah Jones-Luter. If there are any questions regarding the South Dakota Teen Choice Book Awards, please reach out to Jayde Hart at jayde.hart@siouxfalls.gov.

Middle School List

All the Blues in the Sky by Renée Watson

Genre(s): Novel in Verse, Realistic Fiction

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 10 and up

Description: On Sage's 13th birthday, her best friend Angel was killed in an accident. Now, a heartbroken Sage attends a counseling group as she faces life without the person who understood her best. Blending poetry and prose, *All the Blues in the Sky* is a bittersweet and hopeful story of grief and recovery.

Reviews:

- **School Library Journal:** Gr 5 Up—Sage is a Black girl living in New York City, and at 13, she's an age her best friend will never be. Angel was killed in a hit-and-run accident on her way to Sage's birthday party. Raw, honest emotions mark this novel in verse that explores Sage's grief. However, she is not alone. Great Aunt Ini and new friends from her counseling group demonstrate how not all experiences with death look the same and how healing is not uniform or linear. "Sometimes you go to sleep crying/ and wake up crying/ and that life after losing someone you love/ feels like one big ocean of sorrow/ and you might feel like you are drowning,/ but always there is something/ to hold on to/ to keep you afloat." New romantic interests also offer Sage a chance to redefine who she is and provide an escape from the heaviness of her feelings, which are tested as new challenges unfold. Hand to readers looking for a good cry. VERDICT A heartrending story of grief and resilience with a surprising depth despite a brief page count. A recommended first purchase for all collections serving teens and tweens.—Monisha Blair -- Monisha Blair (Reviewed 02/01/2025) (School Library Journal, vol 71, issue 2, p64)
- **Publishers Weekly:** Sage is left reeling after her best friend is killed in a hit-and-run accident. And since she was on the way to celebrate Sage's 13th birthday, Sage blames herself for the event. At school, she starts attending a grief counseling group where she meets DD and Ebony, whose loved ones also died unexpectedly. With the help of her new friends, her crush Kofi, and her beloved aunt Ini, Sage learns more about the grieving process. All the while, she struggles to move forward and grapples with regret over not having the chance to say goodbye. Alternating verse and prose depict Sage's present-day navigating new and uncomfortable experiences while going back and forth between her divorced parents' homes alongside memories with her best friend and the imagined future she wishes they had together: "We would be fantasizing about first kisses, first loves/ Dreaming about going to high school one day." These brief yet poignant vignettes drive home the immediacy

of Sage's grief as well as the importance of remaining attune to one's emotions in this tender and heartbreaking interpretation of loss. Sage is Black; supporting characters are racially diverse. Ages 10–14. Agent: Rosemary Stimola, Stimola Literary Studio. (Feb.) --Staff (Reviewed 11/04/2024) (Publishers Weekly, vol 271, issue 42, p)

- **Kirkus:** In the Newbery Honor–winning author's latest, a Harlem teen copes with overwhelming pain while learning how to open up. Sage's 13th birthday was the worst day of her life; it was the day her best friend, Angel, was killed after a hit-and-run. In the wake of Angel's death, Sage takes part in grief counseling with four other students; she connects with Ebony and DD, whose losses were sudden as well. Sage grapples with conflicting emotions, but the person who could help her sort them out is gone forever, leaving her convinced it was her fault. She wishes her life had concrete answers, like the math problems she enjoys. Instead, new friendships and a possible romance raise more questions. Finally, all her pent-up anger and sadness spill over, and Sage can no longer hold in her feelings. Much to her surprise, speaking honestly helps lift the veil of sadness and sets her on a path toward healing. Watson has crafted an achingly beautiful novel that masterfully captures the realities of loss—the constant reminders of what life used to be like, the guilt that haunts Sage, and the anguish of “talking about someone you love in past tense.” Sage's voice, rendered in a mix of prose and free verse, is visceral and wholly authentic, while the supporting characters are also richly and fully realized. Characters are cued Black. A heartfelt portrait of the complexities of grief and the indomitable human spirit. (author's note, resources)(Verse fiction. 10-14) (Kirkus Reviews, January 1, 2025)

Book Talk

Renée Watson's 2026 Newbery Medal winner *All the Blues in the Sky* is a touching and beautifully written middle-grade novel about grief, friendship, guilt, and healing.

Thirteen-year-old Sage is struggling after the sudden death of her best friend, Angel. Through a school grief group, family support, and new friendships, Sage begins to understand that grief looks different for everyone and that it is possible to experience happiness while still mourning someone you love. Written in a combination of prose and free verse, the novel is accessible while still providing considerable emotional depth. The verse format may appeal to reluctant readers and students who enjoy shorter, highly emotional narratives. Although the subject matter is heavy, the novel ultimately offers a message of hope, empathy, and resilience. It can help young readers develop an understanding of grief while providing a safe starting point for conversations about loss, friendship, and supporting others through difficult experiences.

Buzzing by Samuel Sattin

Genre(s): Graphic Novel, Realistic Fiction

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 8-12

Description: As a lonely twelve-year-old kid with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), everything from studying to looking in the mirror becomes a battle between him and a swarm of unhelpful thoughts. When a group of friends invites him to join their after-school role-playing game, the thoughts feel a little less loud, and the world feels a little brighter. But Isaac's therapist says that exposure to games can have negative effects on kids with OCD, and when his grades slip, his helicopter mother won't let him play anymore. Now Isaac needs to find a way to prove to himself and to his mother that the way to quiet the noise in his head may have been inside him all along.

Reviews:

- **Booklist:** Grades 3-7 Isaac has recently been diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder, and his mother hovers over all his behavior with worry and disapproval. Hickman evocatively depicts Isaac's intrusive thoughts as buzzing bees that fuel negativity and compulsive behaviors. While Isaac has some success quieting the thoughts with drawing, the bees' buzzing significantly fades when he joins a new group of friends to play *Swamps & Sorcery*. Though his mother allows him to play the game, she worries fantasy gaming will worsen his condition, but Isaac knows how much creativity and fantasy help. Hickman cleverly uses color to portray Isaac's emotional reality: when he's stuck in his compulsive thought patterns, the world is gray, but when he's with his new friends or playing *Swamps & Sorcery*, the panels are in full color. There are lots of graphic novels about kids experiencing anxiety or intrusive thoughts, but not many featuring boys, which makes this stand out. Hand to kids who related to Lee Durfey-Lavoie's and Veronica Agarwal's *Just Roll with It* (2021) or Kathryn Ormsbee and Molly Brook's *Growing Pangs* (2022). -- Julia Rittenberg (Reviewed 7/1/2023) (Booklist, vol 119, number 21, p50)
- **School Library Journal:** Gr 6 Up—Isaac was recently diagnosed with OCD. At school, he has trouble focusing because of his intrusive thoughts. At home, Isaac's mom wants the best for him but is overprotective to the point where his sister, Miriam, is ignored. Miriam is jealous of the attention Isaac gets and is mean to him at home and in school. When a classmate, Micah, sees Isaac's drawing, they introduce him to their group of friends and invite him to play *Swamps & Sorcery*, a fantasy role-playing game. Isaac's mom worries this could make his OCD symptoms worse; throughout the story, Isaac struggles to show his mom that it is actually helpful for him. The art adeptly

depicts how Isaac's thoughts can be so harmful. At first, only shades of a blueish gray are used except for the bees, which are yellow and stand out. When Isaac hangs out with his new friend group for the first time, readers get full pages of color. From there, they'll bounce back and forth between these palettes, and it helps show where Isaac is comfortable and can be himself. The story handles different topics other than OCD. Isaac's relationships with his mom and sister are both important, and both are tested. Isaac and Micah, who is nonbinary, like each other and get closer as the story progresses. The story falls a little flat toward the end, as conflicts quietly resolve on their own. Drawings from *Swamps & Sorcery* are included in the back matter. **VERDICT** Overall, a sweet story that fans of Raina Telgemeier will enjoy.—Michelle Lettus --Michelle Lettus (Reviewed 06/01/2023) (School Library Journal, vol 69, issue 6, p81)

- **Publishers Weekly**: Because of the intrusive thoughts and compulsions—visually rendered as an ever-present swarm of bullying cartoon bees—that characterize his recently diagnosed obsessive-compulsive disorder, 12-year-old Isaac, portrayed with brown skin, has been feeling overwhelmed and isolated. So he's delighted when classmates, impressed by his drawings of dragons and other mythical creatures, invite him to join their *Swamps & Sorcery* RPG group. Isaac finds that he loves the game and that hanging out with his intersectionally diverse new friends—and developing romantic feelings for white and freckled nonbinary peer Micah—helps reduce the frequency of his symptoms. But Isaac's mother worries that these new experiences will have a negative effect on his mental health, and Isaac's older sister Miriam feels ignored because of their mother's focus on Isaac. Palette shifts between blue/gray tones and full-color sequences respectively depict Isaac's everyday life managing his OCD alongside moments of joy and calm, such as interactions with his friends and fantastical scenes from the tweens' RPG. Via Isaac's nuanced relationships with classmates, family, and himself, collaborators Sattin and Hickman (Bezkamp, for adults) conceive a cleverly rendered interpretation of OCD embedded in a wholesome graphic novel drama. Ages 8–12. Agent: (for both) Dara Hyde, Hill Nadell Literary. (July) -- Staff (Reviewed 06/26/2023) (Publishers Weekly, vol 270, issue 26, p)
- **Kirkus**: A middle schooler with obsessive-compulsive disorder navigates family, friendship, and role-playing games. Isaac, who has light brown skin and dark curly hair, was recently diagnosed with OCD. He constantly hears the metaphorical buzzing of his intrusive thoughts, depicted as cute but cruel cartoon bees. The artwork makes good use of color to bring readers into Isaac's world. His bees are always brightly colored, as are the panels depicting positive experiences such as his art, the friends he is beginning to make, and the fantasy world of their Dungeons & Dragons–like role-playing

game. In contrast, school and home are shown in drab, largely gray and beige tones. Isaac's mom does her best to support and protect him, but her efforts slide into being overprotective and controlling. Over the course of the narrative, however, she learns to trust Isaac and support him as he figures out his own path. With their mom's attention on Isaac, his sister, Miriam, feels ignored, and she takes this out on him. This is a sensitive depiction of an unfortunate reality: When one sibling has a difficult diagnosis, others often feel pushed aside. In this case, both siblings are ultimately able to support each other while expressing their needs to their mother. This book provides a positive, sympathetic introduction to living with OCD, with appeal for readers who have the same diagnosis as well as those who do not. An original exploration of living with mental illness. (supplemental art) (Graphic fiction. 9-13) (Kirkus Reviews, May 15, 2023)

Book Talk

Isaac is a talented artist and one day in class, his drawings catch the attention of a couple of classmates. These new-found friends want to start a Swamps & Sorcery group, a Dungeons & Dragons style role-playing game, and they feel Isaac would be the perfect addition. There's one big problem though, as Isaac struggles with obsessive compulsive disorder, his mother is worried that the game could make his condition worse. But Isaac is determined to stick with his new friends, convincing his mother that his intrusive thoughts are under control. As the school year progresses, Isaac's thoughts grow stronger, buzzing in his head non-stop. When Isaac's grades start to slip at school, his mother forces him to quit his Swamps & Sorcery group. Now it's up to Isaac to prove that the game, and especially his friends, are what give him the strength to quiet the noise in his head. With muted illustrations and pops of color, *Buzzing* is wholesome story about friendship and belonging.

Grin by D. W. Gillespie

Genre(s): Horror

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 8-12

Description: Danny is spending a week with his Uncle Bill who runs a massive retro arcade called PixelWorks. His only plan is to play as many games as possible from open to close, but he wasn't expecting to find the Holy Grail of arcade collectors, a gruesome looking game titled Grin.

Anyone who plays the game becomes surprisingly violent, and soon with the help of his friend Jodi and a knowledgeable videogame streamer, Danny realizes that Grin holds the soul of a dead serial killer.

Soon, the killer makes the jump into Bill's body, and it's up to Danny to figure out a way to stop him for good.

Reviews:

- **School Library Journal:** Gr 3–7—Thirteen-year-old Danny is an avid gamer who can't wait to spend a week with his uncle who owns PixelWorks, the biggest arcade in Tennessee. Uncle Bill is a self-proclaimed "big kid" and game connoisseur, and he's thrilled to show Danny his latest purchase: the extremely rare, supposedly cursed game Grin. But Danny has misgivings about the game; it seems to stoke violence in anyone who plays it, and its creepy aura infiltrates his life outside the arcade. When the game's bloodthirsty secrets are revealed, Danny has to work fast to save his friends, his family, and even himself from the evil it holds. Gillespie's latest is a rollicking, compelling contribution to the middle grade horror genre. While the beginning feels a bit slow (some dialogue is stilted and the tween characters sound identical to their adult counterparts), the plot builds quickly into action. The horror elements are intense; grimly descriptive images of blood-soaked murder victims and an unnervingly upbeat serial killer nudge this title into the older middle grade/early YA category. Danny has mental health struggles, including anxiety and panic attacks. There are fruitful albeit didactic discussions of coping mechanisms, including using horror media as a safe way to explore and experience fear. The abundant vintage game references will excite enthusiasts. The overall cast is diverse; Danny is described as having blonde hair, and his close friend Jodi is a Chinese American. **VERDICT** A compulsively readable "follow you home" horror novel, recommended for gamers and fans of K.R. Alexander.—Ashleigh Williams, -- Ashleigh Williams (Reviewed 06/01/2025) (School Library Journal, vol 71, issue 6, p83)

- **Kirkus:** Playing video games can be bad for your health—even deadly. Thirteen-year-old gamer and horror fan Danny Dawson is psyched to be spending the week with his eccentric uncle, who owns a retro arcade. Unlimited snacks, “endless video games, pinball, Skee-Ball, and light guns”: heaven for the self-professed nerd. Danny’s thrilled when he’s invited to help unbox *Grin*, an incredibly rare game that’s rumored by Danny’s favorite YouTuber, Mr. Griller, to be “so cursed that most people think it’s not even real.” Strange things start happening immediately. Danny hears menacing voices, and, making real the parental refrain that excessive screen time begets bad behavior, the players become violent and aggressive. When *Grin* begins to control Uncle Bill, Danny and his friend Jodi take action. With the help of Mr. Griller, they deduce that the game’s haunted by the spirit of a serial killer who uses players to escape into the living world. The three devise a dangerous plan to destroy the game, ending the reign of terror once and for all. This high-octane narrative is an excellent choice for readers who are ready for something with real bite. Gillespie references some actual vintage games, including *Polybius*, which people say “the government built to test out mind control”—a nice touch for avid gamers who know their urban legends. Danny and Jodi are cued white. High-stakes action and imminent danger will satisfy young horror fans. (Horror. 9-13) (Kirkus Reviews, July 1, 2025)

Book Talk

Grin is a fast-paced middle-grade horror novel that melds video games, retro arcades, supernatural suspense, and friendship. Twelve-year-old Danny is thrilled to spend a week at his uncle's massive retro arcade, PixelWorks, until he discovers a mysterious game called *Grin*. When the game begins causing players to become violent and a serial killer's spirit possesses Danny's uncle, Danny and his friends must uncover the game's secrets before the killer escapes. The book will appeal to young gamers. The retro arcade setting, gaming references, and high-stakes action create an engaging entry point for reluctant readers. The story also emphasizes friendship, courage, problem-solving, and teamwork as Danny confronts something far beyond what he expected. *Grin* provides a high-interest horror option for students who may not connect with more traditional realistic or literary fiction. Its accessible writing and suspenseful plot make it particularly useful for readers seeking something scary.

How to Talk to Your Succulent by Dana VanderLugt

Genre(s): Fantasy Fiction, Graphic Novel

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 8-12

Description: Eleven-year-old Adara and her dad are moving from California to the cold and flat lands of Michigan . . . and it sucks. After Mom's recent passing, it seems way too soon. Talking to Dad has always been harder than with Mom, but now it's like walking on eggshells. And why did Dad bring so many of Mom's houseplants across the country? Her mother might have been called the "plant whisperer" back home, but Adara is beginning to wonder if there is something more to it. But when she meets a little succulent named Perle, she unlocks the same magical ability her mother had: talking to plants!

But taking care of Perle isn't as easy as it seems — the environment isn't suited for her, and Adara doesn't know how to meet her needs. Kind of like the situation Adara herself is in. If only Perle could ask Adara for help . . . and Adara could ask her dad.

With a touch of magic, this debut middle-grade graphic novel explores loneliness, mental health and empathy, and shows how communication, openness and a willingness to listen can help young people — and older people — and plants! — navigate their mental well-being and heal from loss, individually and together.

Reviews:

- **School Library Journal:** Gr 4 Up—After the death of her mother, Adara's dad, struggling to cope with his grief alone, moves them to Michigan to live with her grandma. As Adara tries to find her new normal, her father's overprotectiveness feels suffocating. When he notices Adara engaging with nature as her mother did, he finds strength and encourages her to open her heart by introducing a new plant into her life. As Adara grows into her gift of speaking with flora, she delights in discovering her mother's plant family. Over the course of the story, Adara tries to balance her mourning, new friendships, her dad's emotional needs, and her plant companions' blossoming requirements, but struggles to keep up. Persico offers readers a tender yet unflinching exploration of grief, delving into jealousy, sadness, and the many ways loss affects people. The text also underscores the importance of self-care when supporting others who grieve differently. For the story, told in long chapters, the soft, cartoon-style artwork brilliantly captures tone and mood through its colors and intricate details. The illustrations, paired with the utterly charming characters, make this book a must-read. Adara's story concludes on a hopeful note, perhaps inspiring readers to let happiness take root. VERDICT With enchanting artwork and profound storytelling, this debut offers windows and mirrors into the grieving process, and will move readers to tears—in the best way.—Angie Jameson --Angie Jameson (Reviewed

03/01/2025) (School Library Journal, vol 71, issue 3, p82)

- **Kirkus:** Freshly grieving the death of her mother, 11-year-old Adara finds herself transplanted from California to her father's Michigan hometown. Worse, Dad keeps going quiet instead of talking about their shared loss. All Adara wants is to "feel normal again," but she doesn't know how to even begin talking about the intensity of her feelings. What she has is Grandma, Mom's many plants, and a tentative, blossoming new friendship. One day, a Perle von Nurnberg, a variety of purple succulent that was special to her mother, suddenly comes alive and talks to her. That's when she discovers the real reason Mom was called the "plant whisperer"—and that she, too, has a special, wild power. But like her beloved Perle, Adara needs care and attention. Poignant moments are embedded throughout this graphic novel, as when Adara suddenly finds herself grief-stricken when she has to introduce herself to a class of staring students in her new school. Precious scenes include ones in which she cooks with her grandmother, forging a deeper connection with her. Although the luminous illustrations are a delight, the fantastical plants sometimes feel too cute and young for the story's overall tone and audience. This lightly magical exploration of grief will appeal to fans of *Eventown* by Corey Ann Haydu and *Savi and the Memory Keeper* by Bijal Vachharajani. Adara presents biracial, her father reads white, and her mother had brown skin. A touching story rooted in grief and healing. (author's note, photos, succulent information, sketches) (Graphic fiction. 8-12) (Kirkus Reviews, February 1, 2025)

Book Talk

How to Talk to Your Succulent is a thoughtful and beautifully illustrated middle-grade graphic novel about grief, family, friendship, and finding the courage to communicate. Eleven-year-old Adara is struggling after the death of her mother when she and her father move from California to Michigan to live with her grandmother. Lonely and unable to talk openly with her father about their loss, Adara finds an unexpected source of comfort in her mother's plants. When a succulent named Perle begins talking to her, Adara discovers that she has inherited her mother's ability to communicate with plants. The combination of magical realism and realistic emotional struggles makes this an especially engaging story. Adara's relationship with Perle provides a creative way to explore grief, loneliness, mental health, empathy, and the importance of listening to others. The graphic novel format and vibrant, expressive artwork make the story accessible to a wide range of readers, including reluctant readers who might not pick up a traditional novel. This graphic novel offers students a sensitive portrayal of grief and family relationships while also providing a gentle introduction to conversations about emotional well-being. Adara's experiences and feelings of being uprooted, lonely, and unsure how to communicate are relatable.

Kareem Between by Shifa Saltagi Safadi

Genre(s): Novel in Verse and Sports Fiction

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 10 and up

Description: Seventh grade begins, and Kareem's already fumbled it.

His best friend moved away, he messed up his tryout for the football team, and because of his heritage, he was voluntold to show the new kid—a Syrian refugee with a thick and embarrassing accent—around school. Just when Kareem thinks his middle school life has imploded, the hotshot QB promises to get Kareem another tryout for the squad. There's a catch: to secure that chance, Kareem must do something he knows is wrong.

Then, like a surprise blitz, Kareem's mom returns to Syria to help her family but can't make it back home. If Kareem could throw a penalty flag on the fouls of his school and home life, it would be for unnecessary roughness.

Kareem is stuck between. Between countries. Between friends, between football, between parents—and between right and wrong. It's up to him to step up, find his confidence, and navigate the beauty and hope found somewhere in the middle.

Reviews:

- **Booklist:** Grades 5-8 Syrian American Kareem sees the world through the lens of football, and he's fumbling hard when he doesn't make the middle-school football team. He ends up agreeing to do the homework of the quarterback in hopes of making the spring squad, which puts his honesty and friendship with a new kid (a refugee) in school on a path toward trouble. When his mother travels back to Syria to bring Kareem's grandfather to the U.S., she gets caught up in the 2017 Muslim Ban. As Kareem's life plunges into chaos, he struggles—both on and off the field—to know who he is as a student, a friend, and a son. The story is told in quick-paced verse threaded with NFL facts that relate to the poems and provide a unique insight into his thoughts, and Kareem's voice effectively expresses the lived experiences of many children of immigrants in a post-2016 world while also incorporating classic middle-grade drama and abundant literary allusions. For fans of Kwame Alexander, Daniel Nayeri, and sports-heavy books with broad appeal. -- Aryssa Damron (Reviewed 9/1/2024) (Booklist, vol 121, number 1, p80)
- **School Library Journal:** Gr 5 Up—Stuck between his Syrian heritage and his American citizenship, a boy looks for meaning in this powerful novel in verse. It's the end of 2016's summer, and huge Chicago Bears fan Kareem has lost the chance to play quarterback for the school team. When the coach's son and reigning bully strikes a sketchy deal with him, Kareem is stuck lying and cheating in hopes of securing a spot during spring training.

His parents welcome a new Syrian family into their community and start pushing for a friendship between their son and Kareem, and it becomes apparent how reluctant he is to embrace where he comes from. His mom travels to Syria to aid her ailing parents but is prevented from returning by the executive order known as the "Muslim Ban," upending their household and leaving Kareem feeling even more lost. Kareem finds meaning in fighting against prejudice and ignorance; however, he'll have to look inward to straighten his own moral compass. This novel seamlessly merges all-American football and NFL terms with Arabic language and Syrian culture. The nonlinear text makes the story dynamic and engaging, drawing readers in from page one. Safadi weaves a story of identity, growing up, standing up for what's right, and boyhood. VERDICT A first purchase for middle school libraries, especially where fresh approaches to sports fiction are in high demand.—Carol Youssif --Carol Youssif (Reviewed 10/01/2024) (School Library Journal, vol 70, issue 10, p72)

- **Kirkus:** A football-loving, Syrian American Muslim boy must find the courage to confront feelings of being stuck in between the worlds of home, school, and wider society. The start of seventh grade couldn't have gone worse for Kareem: His best friend moved away, and Kareem was cut from the football team. His integrity is challenged when a chance for a spot on next year's team comes with strings attached—helping Austin, the coach's son, cheat by writing an essay for him. Kareem's desire to fit in also affects Fadi, the Syrian Christian refugee classmate his mom has asked him to help. Tensions rise when Kareem's mom is stranded in war-torn Syria as she tries to bring his grandparents to the U.S. Now Kareem must find confidence at school (where xenophobic Austin bullies Fadi) and at home (where Mama's absence is keenly felt). Safadi's verse novel is set during the 2016-17 school year, amid the build-up to then-President Donald Trump's executive order affecting travel from seven Muslim-majority countries, including Syria. The author uses line breaks, concrete poetry, and changes in the alignment of the text to powerfully and evocatively convey conflict between senses of identity and self and to accentuate the story's action. She seamlessly integrates football, literary, Islamic, and Arabic language references into the plot. The book's messages of finding the confidence to stand up against injustice and be true to one's heritage is critically expressed without feeling contrived. A masterfully written, deeply resonant tale. (author's note) (Verse fiction. 8-12) (Kirkus Reviews, July 1, 2024)

Book Talk

Middle schooler Kareem feels stuck in between. Between his identities of being Syrian and American, between his friends and football, and between what his family expects of him and who he wants to be. To make matters worse, Kareem's grandfather is very ill,

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and while his mother travels to Syria to bring him to the US for treatment, she gets caught up in 2017 Muslim ban. This conflict makes Kareem confront who he is and what he really wants. With striking prose and a swath of all-American football references, Kareem begins to unravel what it means to grow up and to stand up for what he believes in.

The Last Dragon on Mars by Johanna Taylor

Genre(s): Graphic Novel, Fantasy Fiction

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 10 and up

Description: Like everyone else in the failing human settlement on Mars, orphaned scavenger Lunar Jones is just trying to survive. When he joins a secret squadron of dragon riders, however, Lunar realizes that there may yet be hope for the planet. This series opener boasts high-flying action and an imaginative blend of science fiction and fantasy.

Reviews:

- **Booklist:** Grades 5-8 Despite living in a universe teeming with dragons, Lunar Jones hasn't experienced much wonder growing up on Mars. He was orphaned long ago, and after Mars' resident dragon was killed, the cursed planet has become increasingly inhospitable to humans. Lunar scavenges for scrap to keep himself afloat, but after one expedition goes awry, he takes refuge in an underground military school preparing young recruits and one secret dragon to save their planet. A last-minute reprieve sees Lunar tapped to train, too, and it will take all of his hard-won street smarts to manage hostile peers, potential allies, a galaxy in turmoil, and an enormous dragon who may not be what he appears. This fantastic first entry in the Dragonship series is incredibly imaginative, combining intriguing dragon lore, fierce friendships, and full-tilt action into a whirlwind story sure to keep readers riveted. It's part sf (dragon spaceships!), part fantasy, and all enormous fun, complete with a twist ending that will leave the audience eagerly awaiting future installments. A rollicking reminder to remember your roots and stay open to the unexpected. -- Emily Graham (Reviewed 10/1/2024) (Booklist, vol 121, number 3, p63)
- **Publishers Weekly:** In this rip-roaring series launch from Reintgen (the Celia Cleary series), dragons are the living embodiment of celestial bodies; Earth is only habitable because its dragon, Gaia, sacrificed herself. A century before the tale's start, people headed for Mars, assuming its dragon, Ares, would be similarly selfless. Ares refused, however, sparking a war that ended when the dragons of Mars's moons killed Ares. With his dying breath, Ares turned Mars's plants, animals, and weather against humans. Now Martian society is nearing collapse, and orphaned 13-year-old Lunar Jones must risk his life salvaging scrap to support himself. While hiding from murderous rivals, Lunar finds a secret bunker that's home to juvenile dragon Dread and a squadron of kids training to be his flight crew. Dread has the potential to help save Mars—and wants resourceful Lunar to be the crew's new captain. Reintgen's latest balances fraught interpersonal drama with expertly choreographed action and

gleefully imaginative worldbuilding. The keenly rendered, racially diverse cast boasts jocularity, heart, and derring-do, enthralling readers while illustrating the revolutionary power of forgiveness and teamwork. Ages 10–up. Agent: Kristin Nelson, Nelson Literary. (Oct.) --Staff (Reviewed 07/22/2024) (Publishers Weekly, vol 271, issue 28, p)

- **Kirkus**: A tenacious 13-year-old battles to save Mars, the only home he knows, in this series opener. Lunar Jones, called “Dad” by the other orphans at the understaffed, underfunded Martian Relocation Clinic, is a scrapper in the dying Mars settlement, which is ironically named Harvest. Although the atmosphere supports human life, Martian plants, animals, and weather pose threats to survival, and the salvagers risk their lives with every expedition. A century ago, people killed Ares, Mars’ King-Dragon, hoping to make the planet “a paradise. A second version of Earth.” But that plan backfired. After a bloody attack by a rival salvage group, Lunar regains consciousness in an underground bunker, under the care of Gen. John Poppy, who’s secretly rearing a dragon named Dread. Poppy has rallied a group of young people with assorted special skills. Soon Dread will choose his dragoon, the human he bonds with for life. In the world of the story, which is reminiscent of Mad Max and Star Trek, each celestial body has its own dragon avatar. The backstory is fairly well developed, and the short chapters are packed with action. Lunar and some other key characters show positive growth, while the minor characters feel more like types. Lunar presents white; there’s some diversity in race among the supporting cast. Fast-paced dragon flights and mid-space fights—plus underdog heroes who are easy to root for. (Fantasy. 10-14) (Kirkus Reviews, September 1, 2024)

Book Talk

What if dragons ruled the world? Well in this sci-fi fantasy mashup that is the first in its series, dragons do. Or did that is. Lunar Jones lives on Mars, once ruled by a dragon who fiercely fought to maintain control. But when humans sacrificed Mars’ dragon to make the planet habitable, they cursed the very land they sought to survive on. Lunar, now an orphan, has resorted to being a scavenger, or Duster, to survive. In his last mission, his fellow Dusters stole his bounty, leaving him for dead. With grit and luck, Lunar manages to find refuge in a local military base. But this base is not like the others—kids his age are the trainees, and they have something major to hide. Could their secret save the fate of Mars, or destroy it? This fast-paced read is filled with secrets, nods to Greek mythology, and a twist ending that will have readers keeling for the sequel.

The Lost Year by Katherine Marsh

Genre(s): Historical Fiction

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 10-14

Description: When his great-grandmother comes to stay with them during the pandemic, 13-year-old Matthew discovers a photo in her belongings that reveals a life-shattering family secret, in this brilliant survival story set in alternating timelines that connects the present day to 1930s Soviet Ukraine.

Reviews:

- **Booklist:** Matthew is stuck at home during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, and, like most 13-year-olds, he would rather play video games than hang out with his 100-year-old great-grandmother, Nadiya, or “GG.” Matthew’s mom has other plans. Forced to unpack GG’s storage boxes, Matthew finds a photo that sparks questions and ultimately unspools a long-hidden history about GG’s childhood in Stalin-ruled Soviet Ukraine. Alternating perspectives between Matthew and GG’s cousins when they were young girls, the story connects 1930s Brooklyn to Communist Ukraine during its devastating, man-made famine, the Holodomor. As the cousins’ narratives unfold, the book also links two moments in history deeply impacted by disinformation; it encourages readers to consider carefully their sources and emphasizes that “we need to tell the whole story” and be mindful of whose stories have not—or cannot—be told. Marsh, Edgar Award–winning author of *The Night Tourist* (2007), explains in a note that she rooted her research in her own relatives’ experiences during the Holodomor. The fairly lengthy middle-grade book rewards readers with a nimble twist and satisfying ending and has an obvious urgency in light of current geopolitics. A natural selection for fans of Alan Gratz and a stepping stone to the work of Ruta Sepetys, this sobering and important story will be an excellent addition to classroom and library collections. -- Kit Ballenger (Reviewed 12/1/2022) (Booklist, vol 119, number 7, p124)
- **Kirkus:** A 13-year-old boy trapped indoors by Covid-19 uncovers a dark family secret leading back to the Holodomor, the early 1930s Ukrainian famine caused by Stalin’s policies. When the pandemic shuts down the world in 2020, Matthew is more isolated than most kids. His journalist father is stuck in Paris, and since his mom has moved GG, his frail, 100-year-old, Ukrainian immigrant great-grandmother, in with them, protecting her means Matthew can’t see his friends. Matthew starts helping GG sort her boxes of keepsakes, gradually piecing together a story that’s also told from the points of view of Mila, the privileged daughter of a Communist Party member, and Helen, the daughter of Ukrainian immigrants living in Brooklyn. When Helen’s cousins

write to say they are starving, she secretly mails them her father's cherished gold cross. Meanwhile, in Kyiv, Mila encounters a starving girl who claims to be her cousin Nadiya. Mila is a strong supporter of Papa Stalin, but her efforts to help Nadiya ultimately open her eyes to the truth about his regime—as well as endangering her own life. Marsh's intertwining narratives ground the story of the Holodomor—which affected her own family—within a historical framework while leading up to a completely believable and emotionally powerful conclusion. A strong subplot discusses journalistic integrity and how one powerful man managed to keep the truth of the Holodomor hidden for years. A moving presentation of a long-suppressed piece of history. (author's note) (Historical fiction. 9-14) (Kirkus Reviews, November 15, 2022)

Book Talk

In 2020, Matthew's one-hundred-year-old great-grandmother has just moved in to his house to ride out the COVID pandemic. But when Matthew finds a tattered black-and-white photo in his great-grandmother's belongings, he discovers a clue to a hidden chapter of her past. *The Lost Year* tells the story from three different perspectives: Mila in Ukraine in 1932, Helen in New York in 1932, and Matthew in New Jersey in 2020. Mila and Helen are Matthew's great-grandma Nadiya's cousins. Katherine Marsh's latest novel sheds fresh light on the Holodomor – the horrific famine that killed millions of Ukrainians, and which the Soviet government covered up for decades. This is a heart-wrenching story that also has a twist you don't see coming.

My So-Called Family by Gia Gordon

Genre(s): Realistic Fiction

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 8-12

Description: It's the first week of middle school, and Ash (don't call her "Ashley") already has a class assignment: Make a family tree. But how can Ash make a family tree if she doesn't have a family? Ever since she was four years old, Ash has been in foster care, living with one so-called family after another. Now she's stuck with Gladys. And the only place Ash feels safe is in the branches of her favorite tree, drawing in her sketchbook, hidden from the view of Gladys' son Jordan.

As Jordan becomes harder to hide from, and more dangerous to be around, Ash isn't sure who she can trust. A new friend, an old friend, some teachers at school? Sometimes the hardest part of asking for help is knowing who to ask.

Reviews:

- **Booklist:** Grades 5-8 Ash, not Ashley, does not want to do the family-tree assignment because she doesn't have a family tree. She's got a mom in prison, a dead grandma, and a series of failed foster families that never made her feel like she's engulfed in their loving branches. Her latest foster mom, Gladys, doesn't seem to care much about her, but Gladys' son, Jordan, is around more and more; he's growing angrier and angrier, and Ash knows the clock is ticking. With a new friend by her side, Ash slowly begins to open up to those around her and learn that while her life may be hard, that doesn't mean the lives of those around her are easy. A tough book that doesn't shy away from challenging families and scary nights, this debut novel allows Ash to grow not only in resilience but also her ability to rely on others once she allows her friends and teachers in. Hand to fans of Ellen Hopkins and Barbara Dee. -- Aryssa Damron (Reviewed 11/1/2024) (Booklist, vol 121, number 5, p87)
- **School Library Journal:** Gr 5 Up—Ash has no one she can trust. In her first week of middle school she is relentlessly bullied because of her gender expression, and she knows she will find no comfort at home. Her foster placement with Gladys was tolerable before Gladys's adult son, Jordan, moved into their tiny home along with his girlfriend and their baby. Now Ash is constantly exhausted from handling the baby's nighttime care while the thin wall of their bedroom fails to hide the sounds of Jordan abusing his girlfriend. This is Ash's ninth foster home in eight years and she knows that it violates rules that are designed to protect her, but she heeds Gladys's warnings not to tell her caseworker, fearing that her next placement could be even worse. Despite other characters' fixation on her sexuality and gender expression, this is not a coming-out story, and Ash is refreshingly unconcerned with using

labels to define herself. Ash's voice is authentic and moving, and readers will root for her as she learns who to trust when she can no longer keep herself safe from Jordan's increasingly threatening behavior. The ending is a little too convenient, but its hopeful note is a welcome end to a harrowing read. Ash's race is not specified. Additional characters are diverse and appropriate for the northern California setting. VERDICT An affecting story of persistent trauma that leaves the door open for eventual healing.—Amy Reimann --Amy Reimann (Reviewed 11/01/2024) (School Library Journal, vol 70, issue 11, p68)

- **Publishers Weekly**: Twelve-year-old Ash doesn't need her foster family to love her. What she needs is a family that will respect and care for her. But her experiences as a foster child have taught her that adults are untrustworthy. A family tree school assignment exacerbates her feelings of loneliness and otherness among her classmates and in her new foster placement with Gladys, who's also "temporarily" caring for her adult son, his wife, and their infant child. When the project pressures her to reveal too much about herself ("I'm not a huge fan of sharing my feelings"), and concerns about being disrespected at school and at home become overwhelming, Ash finds solace in her superhero alter ego while hiding in her favorite tree. But when her physical safety is threatened, Ash must fight her instinctive self-concealment to learn who she can trust. In her debut middle grade novel, *Gordon (The Redemption of Daya Keane)* touches on themes of gender identity and sexuality to deliver a strong message about the necessity of letting in people who will see and support one's most authentic self. The inclusion of supportive adults who actively work to earn Ash's trust, especially as she struggles between self-protection and vulnerability, populate this sensitive read. Ages 8–12. (Nov.) --Staff (Reviewed 09/09/2024) (Publishers Weekly, vol 271, issue 34, p)
- **Kirkus**: A tough kid earns a family. Twelve-year-old Ashley Dalton, who prefers to be called Ash, has one refuge in the world: a walnut tree in the yard of her foster mother's rental house, where she lives along with her foster mother's volatile son, his girlfriend, and their baby, who shares a room with Ash. Middle school, where Ash gets bullied for being unfeminine in her clothing and appearance, is scary and threatening. And then, making things worse, her new social studies teacher assigns the class to draw family trees. Ash's past is no one's business but her own. Eventually, with the help of her friends Gentry Noble (a gentle boy who's lost his own mother) and Joss Cruz (a supremely cool girl who's also concealing family secrets)—along with adults who listen to Ash, appreciate her talents, and ask the students to consider what they don't know—she finds the courage to confide in a teacher and her friends about the trouble she's in. *Gordon's* middle-grade debut is

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gritty, messy, and honest, with complex, nuanced characters navigating a realistically complex world that includes abuse, drug use, and homophobia. Ash's simple request at the end—"I want to live with people who actually care about me"—feels earned, and attainable. Ash and Gentry read white, and Joss is cued Latine. A finely drawn and cleanly written story that will give readers hope. (author's note, resources) (Fiction. 10-14) (Kirkus Reviews, September 1, 2024)

Book Talk

School assignments can be rough, but when twelve-year-old Ash is tasked with a family tree assignment, she feels completely stuck. Ash has been in foster care for the past eight years due to her mother's incarceration. In that time, Ash has bounced between nine different homes, each bringing new challenges and more defeat. In Ash's latest placement with Gladys, things take a turn for the worst when Gladys's adult son, Jordan, moves in with his girlfriend and infant. Much of the nighttime care for Jordan's son falls on Ash, and with her school project looming over her head, she's starting to feel a lot of pressure. This gritty novel doesn't shy away from the tough situations Ash faces, rather its message is one of hope, resilience, and opening up to others to be your best authentic self.

Outside by Jennifer L. Holm

Genre(s): Thrillers and Suspense

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 9-12

Description: Razzi has always been told: Don't go Outside. It isn't safe. There are people and creatures out there that will harm you. The walls of the Refuge will protect you from them. Razzi's friend Ollie was curious about Outside... and it led to his death. So Razzi is trying to be on her best behavior. She is the oldest kid left, the one the younger kids look up to. She has to follow the rules. But Outside has a way of getting in, and Razzi, guided by a dog she has a strangely close connection with, wonders what it's like to run free beyond the walls. If she steps away from everything she's ever known... what will she find?

Reviews:

- **Publishers Weekly:** In this riveting survival novel by Newbery Honoree Holm, a white-cued 12-year-old ventures for the first time beyond her secluded doorstep. A decade before this book's start, "some stupid country decided to start a war" via venomous missile, prompting Razzi's parents to create an isolated compound called the Refuge. As the oldest, Razzi is expected to set an example for other kids, a responsibility she takes seriously. But the death of a peer, Ollie, a few months prior weighs heavy on her mind: desperate to see outside the Refuge's walls, Ollie scaled and fell from the building's roof. When a doctor's visit reveals that Razzi needs a heart transplant, she receives the heart of a greyhound named Wind, and she soon feels that the surgery has changed her, prompting her to forgo her typical rule-abiding tendencies. Upon stowing away on a Refuge truck bound for a supply run, she makes a discovery that changes everything. Fascinating, intimately detailed characterization and worldbuilding makes everything from Razzi's motivations and reactions to the children's carefree games to the community's fear of the outside world feel palpable across a white-knuckled adventure about autonomy and cultivating one's own inner strength. Ages 9–12. Agent: Jill Grinberg, Jill Grinberg Literary. (Oct.) --Staff (Reviewed 07/14/2025) (Publishers Weekly, vol 272, issue 27, p)
- **Kirkus:** A spirited 12-year-old contends with her cloistered life after an apocalypse. Over 10 years ago, the Great Poisoning killed most humans. Razzi lives in an old mansion named the Refuge with her parents, 7-year-old brother, Bing, and a handful of other adults and children. The kids are rarely allowed Outside, especially not since 12-year-old Ollie, a curious risk-taker, had a terrible accident and died while trying to explore. Razzi injures her knee during a game of Chase, which leads to a checkup and a serious diagnosis—she learns that she must have a heart transplant. Luckily, Refuge resident

Saul is a Surgeon, and he successfully implants a greyhound's heart into Razzi. After the surgery, Razzi feels different: Her senses of hearing and smell are keener, and foods she used to love, like chocolate, now sicken her. When Razzi makes the momentous decision to run away, she learns that the world outside the Refuge is bigger than she could ever have imagined. Holm's adventure is riveting and appealing, featuring a relatable cast of characters and unfolding against a post-apocalyptic backdrop with zombie story vibes. Holm's mastery of pacing and her explorations of intergenerational trauma and forgiveness resonate, ensuring that they'll stay with readers long after the final pages. Razzi presents white, and names cue ethnic diversity in the supporting cast. An ambitious and thrilling examination of survival, trauma, and connection. (author's note)(Speculative thriller. 9-12) (Kirkus Reviews, August 1, 2025)

Book Talk

Razzi is the oldest kid at the Refuge, an abandoned estate Razzi's family moved to after the Great Poisoning. When the Refuge doctor diagnoses Razzi with a heart defect, he is able to perform a transplant, using the heart of a greyhound dog. Post-surgery, Razzi starts to experience some canine qualities, including hypersensitive hearing, an allergy to chocolate, and the strong urge to get Outside. So, she stages a daring escape, and this bold decision leads to a startling discovery which will change her life. This is a unique, dystopian book unlike anything I've read before.

Red Bird Danced by Dawn Quigley

Genre(s): Novel in Verse, Realistic Fiction

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 8-12

Description: Living in a large urban Native housing project, Ariel, whose Auntie went missing, and Tomah, who has difficulty reading, find strength and hope in their connection and in their intertribal community as they learn to share the rhythms and stories they carry within themselves.

Reviews:

- **Booklist:** At the outset of this gorgeous novel in verse for middle-graders, we have two children, Ariel (11) and Tomah (12), each battling with their own personal afflictions. Tomah, struggling with reading, had to repeat the third grade but is a brilliant storyteller and comedian. Ariel's aunt is missing and, in an endeavor to support her return, Ariel gives up ballet in favor of jingle dancing to provide her community and family with hope during this uncertain time. When asked to "name a problem and find a solution" as a classroom project, Ariel focuses her efforts on the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women movement, in honor of her aunt. Tomah and Ariel ultimately overcome many obstacles, and this story ends triumphantly, with a call to thrive in their inter-tribal housing community. With this excellent choice for reluctant readers and fans of Anna Rose Johnson's *The Star That Always Stays* (2022), Quigley seems to have carefully and painstakingly placed every word on the page in such a way that, like the red bird, the entire novel spreads its wings and dances. -- Joel Shoemaker (Reviewed 6/1/2024) (*Booklist*, vol 120, number 19, p93)
- **School Library Journal:** Gr 4 Up—Quigley's novel in verse highlights the beauty and struggles within Native American communities through the alternating lens of two preteens. Ojibwe Nation dancer Ariel, 11, is finding new purpose in her movements while trying to deal with the pain of her missing aunt. Her neighbor in the Intertribal Housing Complex is classmate Tomah, 12, who is a gifted oral storyteller afraid to open up about his reading difficulties. Both characters evolve through the process of finding their voice with hearty emotional impact. They work to overcome and finish strong, displaying pride in their community through their natural giftings. There is an emphasis on the #MMIW (Missing or Murdered Indigenous Women) social cry with statistics shared. The Ojibwe language and cultural practices are effortlessly infused in the free verse poems, with a glossary available at the end. **VERDICT** An impactful story about discovering how to declare yourself proudly and bring awareness to your community; this opens an important window into the modern-day life of Native American culture that has yet to be

fully explored thoroughly in middle grade literature.—Lindsey Morrison --
Lindsey Morrison (Reviewed 06/01/2024) (School Library Journal, vol 70,
issue 6, p79)

- **Publishers Weekly**: Employing elegant verse, Ojibwe author Quigley (the Jo Jo series) crafts a story of two Ojibwe kids learning to cope with sorrowful life events. Eleven-year-old Ariel loves to dance ballet; it's something she has in common with her beloved aunt Bineshiinh. But when Bineshiinh disappears, ballet doesn't feel the same. Trying to find comfort in movement again, Ariel practices traditional Indigenous jingle dancing and, in delving into its history, learns that Native women are "ten times more likely to/ be murdered." Meanwhile, Ariel's 12-year-old neighbor Tomah uses humor to hide the fact that he struggles to read. Despite his academic insecurities, he discovers that he is a gifted storyteller and uses his talent to call attention to the disappearances of women in his Turtle Mountain community. Through Ariel and Tomah's steadfast resolve, this heartbreaking yet heartening story tackles themes of grief and the strength it takes to grow through adversity. Even as the tweens confront personal challenges, they remain committed to bettering their surroundings in a moving narrative that highlights issues relating to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women crisis while celebrating the healing power of art—including dance, folklore, music, and poetry—and the solace one can find in connecting with one's heritage. Ages 8–12. Agent: Erin Murphy, Erin Murphy Literary. (June) --Staff (Reviewed 03/18/2024) (Publishers Weekly, vol 271, issue 11, p)
- **Kirkus**: In this novel in verse, two urban Indigenous children persevere despite sorrow. Eleven-year-old Ariel's Auntie Bineshiinh has gone missing, leaving the Turtle Mountain Ojibwe girl unable to pursue the ballet lessons she loves; the family needs the money to search for her aunt. Twelve-year-old Tomah, who lives in the same Intertribal Housing Complex as Ariel, uses humor to mask insecurities about his struggles at school. Years ago, Auntie Bineshiinh babysat Ariel and Tomah; she taught them to "see / past / what / others might / see," and both children now confront their problems with sensitivity and perceptiveness. Ariel decides to do a school project on the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, and as Tomah's grandmother teaches Ariel to perform the Jingle dance, she learns that the dance can help heal both her and her community. Meanwhile, Tomah finds inspiration in observing the nearby birds and realizes that while he may have a reading disability, he's a gifted storyteller nevertheless. Quigley (Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe) employs ample white space and inspired formatting as her potent, eloquent words dance across the page. She makes deft use of imagery: A bird motif underscores Auntie Bineshiinh's absence (indeed, her name is Ojibwe for bird), while Tomah uses a red dress, a symbol

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for missing Native women and girls, to raise awareness. The protagonists' dual perspectives convey a mix of hurt and optimism; above all, the power of community comes through. A captivating, exquisitely penned story of hope and survival. (Ojibwe glossary, author's note, information on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and jingle dancing, note from author and Heartdrum curator Cynthia Leitich Smith) (Verse novel. 10-16) (Kirkus Reviews, April 15, 2024)

Book Talk

This dual narrative novel in verse focuses on middle-graders Ariel and Tomah as they navigate challenges in their urban Native American community. Ariel's Auntie is missing and Tomah is battling a reading disability. While in class together, they are asked to identify a problem in their community and come up with a solution. Both focus on a topic very dear to Ariel: Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. Ariel loves to dance and she focuses her energy on learning to perform the jingle dance to honor her Auntie. For Tomah, he discovers that despite his adversity, he is a gifted storyteller. Together they use their skills to help their community to heal. Don't let the length of the book fool you, it may be a quick read, but it has a lot to say.

Something Like Home by Andrea Beatriz Arango

Genre(s): Novel in Verse, Realistic Fiction

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 10-14

Description: *Titi Silvia leaves me by myself to unpack,
but it's not like I brought a bunch of stuff.
How do you prepare for the unpreparable?
How do you fit your whole life in one bag?
And how am I supposed to trust social services
when they won't trust me back?*

Laura Rodríguez Colón has a plan: no matter what the grown-ups say, she will live with her parents again. Can you blame her? It's tough to make friends as the new kid at school. And while staying at her aunt's house is okay, it just isn't the same as being in her own space.

So when Laura finds a puppy, it seems like fate. If she can train the puppy to become a therapy dog, then maybe she'll be allowed to visit her parents. Maybe the dog will help them get better and things will finally go back to the way they should be.

After all, how do you explain to others that you're technically a foster kid, even though you live with your aunt? And most importantly . . . how do you explain that you're not where you belong, and you just want to go home?

Reviews:

- **School Library Journal:** Gr 4 Up—Everything in Laura's life is wrong, and it is all her fault. If she hadn't called 911, then the police wouldn't have found her parents on pills, and she wouldn't have been sent to live with an aunt she doesn't know while her parents are in rehab. Haunted by her guilt and lack of autonomy, Laura is struggling to find a place in a new school and in a house with rules she doesn't understand when she discovers an abandoned puppy and sets out to train him as a therapy dog. Maybe he will be the key to visiting her parents so she can apologize and they can all go home together. Extraordinarily honest and sensitive, this novel in verse tactfully and gracefully deals with foster and kinship care and some of the many emotions involved. Laura and her aunt are both Puerto Rican, although Laura doesn't speak fluent Spanish, and some simple Spanish phrases are included through their dialogue. The verse format and word choice make this a more accessible option than some other books on similar topics. Throughout the story, Laura learns to accept that her love for her parents does not make her responsible for their actions, and to allow herself to have space in her heart

for all those who love and care for her. An author's note supplies more information for readers who are not familiar with foster/kinship care, as well as encouragement to those who have experienced it firsthand. VERDICT So much affirmation, exploration, and positivity for those in similar situations are packed beautifully into these verses, making it a solid addition to collections.—Emily Beasley --Emily Beasley (Reviewed 09/01/2023) (School Library Journal, vol 69, issue 9, p99)

- **Publishers Weekly**: Latinx 11-year-old Laura Rodríguez Colón believes that it's her fault she was separated from her parents and sent to live with her aunt, Titi Sylvia, a "rich perfect stranger" who resides on the other side of Laura's Virginia county. If she hadn't called 911, she thinks, her parents wouldn't have been sent to rehab for substance reliance, and she wouldn't be staring down the barrel of an uncertain future with Titi Sylvia, whose emotionally closed-off nature makes Laura feel isolated. Though she'd rather be with her parents, she's elated when Titi Sylvia lets her keep the abandoned pup that Laura finds in town, which she names Sparrow. When Laura is told that she can't visit her parents in rehab, she resolves to train Sparrow as a therapy dog, because "Children may not be allowed in Harmonic Way... but apparently therapy dogs and their owners/ are." Laura's improvised training seems to go well, until a disastrous event imperils her hard work. In moving, approachable verse, Arango (Iveliz Explains It All) thoughtfully portrays Laura's guilt and the constant push-and-pull of her desire to be with her parents and her growing connection with Titi Sylvia. Abundant bird facts—which Laura learned on daily walks with her father—add sensitive insight into Laura's interpretation of family and loyalty. Ages 10–14. (Sept.) --Staff (Reviewed 07/17/2023) (Publishers Weekly, vol 270, issue 29, p)
- **Kirkus**: A powerful novel in verse about a girl coping after being ripped from her home. When 11-year-old Laura Rodríguez Colón calls 911 to save her parents from a possible overdose, authorities remove her from her home and place her into the care of Titi Silvia, her estranged aunt. Laura, who is Puerto Rican, resists "this borrowed life," anxiously awaiting the day her parents will be released from rehab. One day, she rescues a sick, abandoned puppy she names Sparrow, and he helps her feel better about everything. When the social worker informs her that children aren't allowed to visit the rehab center, Laura hatches a plan to train Sparrow to be a therapy dog and get inside that way. But when her parents leave without completing the program, Laura learns her stay with Titi may become permanent. Laura's distress increases when her mother shows up at school only to be sent away, leaving Laura torn between life with her aunt and love for her flawed parents. With the help of caring friends and adults, Laura learns that creating a new home doesn't have

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to mean discarding the old. The short sections written in accessible free verse create a segmented structure that mirrors Laura's experiences and drives the storyline. The clear narrative arc and strong symbolic system make the novel cohere, and Laura's emotional landscape is realistically contradictory.

Arango's writing is a joy to read, combining strong storytelling, compelling characters, and rich language. Beautifully executed. (author's note) (Verse fiction. 10-14) (Kirkus Reviews, August 1, 2023)

Book Talk

Eleven-year-old Laura has just moved in with her aunt Silvia. Laura's convinced it is only temporary - that her parents will be back soon. The reader soon discovers that Laura's parents are addicts and are currently in rehab. While Laura waits to be reunited with her parents, she starts a new school and gets to know an aunt she's never met before. To see her parents sooner, Laura finds an abandoned puppy and decides to train it to become a therapy dog. A therapy dog she can bring to her parent's rehab. "Something Like Home" is a beautiful and heartbreaking novel in verse that tackles heavy issues like identity, addiction, and foster care.

Swing by Audrey Meeker

Genre(s): Coming-of-age, Graphic Novel

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 9-12

Description: Marcus McCalister wants to fit in. So much so that he's still playing on a soccer team with his childhood friend Ted, despite not liking soccer—or Ted—all that much.

Izzy Briggs wants to stand out. Being labeled the “weird kid” for her bold fashion choices is the price an aspiring designer must pay for a life of greatness—but being confident isn't always easy.

So when Izzy and Marcus are paired together to perform a swing dance routine for a gym project, it's no surprise that everything goes up in flames, including their grade in the class. Until their gym teacher proposes a deal: if the pair performs the swing routine in the upcoming talent show, they'll receive extra credit and a passing grade. They accept. . . but Izzy has her own proposal for Marcus: this time, she gets to be the lead.

Reviews:

- **Booklist:** Grades 4-7 Eighth-graders Izzy and Marcus are both coping with heavy expectations from their families and judgment from supposed friends when they get paired to swing dance together in gym class. A botched performance leads to an unlikely friendship as the two realize what they have in common. But Marcus' desire to fit in and keep playing soccer to avoid disappointing either his parents or old friend Ted leads to him betraying Izzy's trust. Can the pair salvage their friendship and their gym-class grades? Will either of them be able to stand up to their parents and defend their developing independence? All the questions will be answered on the evening of the school's talent show. Meeker and Davidson's art adds great dynamism to the book. Expressions of anxiety, embarrassment, and delight all play out marvelously to really sell a relatable middle-school experience, and the scenes of swing dancing demonstrate the duo's growing capability and confidence while also making it look very fun. Overall, a charming story about two awkward kids growing up. -- Sarah Rice (Reviewed 10/18/2024) (Booklist, vol 121, number 4)
- **School Library Journal:** Gr 5 Up—Meeker combines character, plotting, and setting in the art and dialogue to make her debut a satisfying whole. Bespectacled Marcus faces the school year unhappy, with expectations that he will remain engaged in soccer. Plus, he is far from thrilled when last year's school outcast Izzy is paired with him for an English assignment and as a PE partner in a dance unit where they are learning swing. Izzy eschews caring about her social status, and she doesn't trust Marcus since he is obligated to partner with her and

refuses to be much help with carrying the load. Meanwhile, Max, a teammate and (soon to be former) friend, turns his bullying on Marcus. Marcus is a terrible dancer when he, being male, leads; when Izzy demands they switch roles, he improves—enough that they place second in the school talent show. Meeker's compelling and unusual ways to show motion and her capacity for honest facial expressions seem limitless. The adults are stereotypical but in ways young teens will read as accurate. A tidy and happy ending may be less believable, but readers will be rooting for Marcus and Izzy. Main teen characters are depicted as white, while the supporting cast is more diverse. VERDICT Friendships, classroom dynamics, and extracurricular interests get complicated for many, and eighth graders will delight in finding mirrors for their increasingly self-aware lives.—Francisca Goldsmith --Francisca Goldsmith (Reviewed 09/01/2024) (School Library Journal, vol 70, issue 9, p108)

- **Kirkus**: A contemporary graphic novel about swing dancing, cyberbullying, and stepping into one's own. Eighth grade has just started, and Marcus McCalister is poised to be a star on his school soccer team, but his heart isn't in it. He distances himself from the team, and tension builds. Meanwhile, Marcus is paired for swing dancing in gym class with Izzy Briggs, whom his classmates perceive as a fashion- and theater-obsessed, purple-haired "weirdo," leaving him worried about how others will see him. The two don't cooperate or listen to each other, so their teacher offers them a deal: If they perform at the school talent show, he'll change their failing grade, and they won't have to repeat gym. Izzy agrees—as long as Marcus lets her lead—and as the two work together, a friendship blossoms. Marcus grows more self-assured and comes to better understand Izzy, who's enduring bullying at school and an overbearing, academics-obsessed mother at home. When the bully discovers what they're up to, he sets his sights on them both. Marcus struggles with being targeted, but ultimately learns to be a confident and supportive friend. Though the bullying could have been portrayed with more nuance and the toxicity interrogated more deeply, the quickly moving plot feels fresh. Straightforward cartooning, with bold black outlines and solid-colored backgrounds, keeps the focus on the plucky protagonists and their dramatic interactions. Both Marcus and Izzy present white. A friendship-focused coming-of-age story that successfully challenges gender stereotypes. (Graphic fiction. 8-13) (Kirkus Reviews, September 15, 2024)

Book Talk

At the start of their eighth-grade year, Marcus and Izzy are both struggling with where they belong. Marcus lives in the shadow of his older brother's soccer stardom, and Izzy is trying to rebuild her confidence after a harsh year of bullying. When the two are paired together for a dance project in gym class, they botch their performance. With their grades on the line, their gym teacher makes them a proposition: compete in the school's talent show with their dance and they'll pass the class. They agree, but Izzy

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has one condition, she will be the lead. As they practice to perfect their craft, Marcus's friend Ted is jealous of the time and attention that dance takes away from soccer. Marcus doesn't want to let Ted down, but when he says some hurtful things about Izzy to satisfy Ted, Izzy's ready to call it quits. With bold and colorful illustrations, *Swing* is an upbeat, coming of age story about standing up for yourself.

High School List

All the Noise at Once by DeAndra Davis

Genre(s): Realistic Fiction

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 14 and up

Description: All Aiden has ever wanted to do was play football just like his star quarterback brother, Brandon. An overstimulation meltdown gets in the way of Aiden making the team during summer tryouts, but when the school year starts and a spot unexpectedly needs to be filled, he finally gets a chance to play the game he loves.

However, not every player is happy about the new addition to the team, wary of how Aiden's autism will present itself on game day. Tensions rise. A fight breaks out. Cops are called.

Brandon interferes on behalf of his brother, but is arrested by the very same cops who, just hours earlier, were chanting his name from the bleachers. When he's wrongly charged for felony assault on an officer, everything Brandon has worked for starts to slip away, and the brothers' relationship is tested. As Brandon's trial inches closer, Aiden is desperate to figure out what really happened that night. Can he clear his brother's name in time?

Reviews:

- **School Library Journal:** Despite a disastrous summer football tryout, when fall arrives, star quarterback Brandon convinces the coaches to let his younger autistic brother Aiden join the team. Aggravated by the updated roster, some players turn a post-game hangout into a fight, and when the cops are called, chaos ensues. In the aftermath, the white players walk away unscathed, Aiden is shaken up, and Brandon is wrongly charged with assaulting a police officer. As everything Brandon worked for begins slipping away, Aiden is determined to prove his brother's innocence before the impending trial destroys their family. Davis's debut novel beautifully tackles race, social justice, and disability through direct, candid character interactions. Aiden's experience as a Black autistic teen will leave many people feeling seen while exposing neurotypical readers to an acute awareness of life they have never journeyed through. Aiden and Brandon's relationship is dynamic, vulnerable, and healthy, leaning into the messy reality of love and guilt colliding. The resolution comes with the knowledge that sometimes there is no apology, even when warranted, and all one can do is move forward while hoping for better. Aiden and Brandon are Black. VERDICT A stellar debut about ignorance and privilege and the abuse of it that resonates beyond the final page.—Emily Walker --Emily Walker

(Reviewed 04/01/2025) (School Library Journal, vol 71, issue 4, p128)

- **Publishers Weekly**: Though Black high school junior Aiden loves football, he's always believed that his reactions to overstimulation connected with his autism diagnosis would prevent him from joining his older brother, star quarterback Brandon, on the high school team. When he participates in summer tryouts, his overwhelm from a multi-person pileup triggers a meltdown. Assuming he's doomed his chances, Aiden moves on, until a confluence of events results in his making the team, a development that not everyone—including some of his new teammates—is happy about. Then Aiden is involved in a physical altercation with a white teammate, and Brandon, having protected Aiden, is wrongfully charged with assaulting a white police officer. With the future Brandon has worked so hard for—and the brothers' relationship—in jeopardy, Aiden determines to clear his brother's name. Chapter titles count down the days leading up to and following the incident, grounding readers and injecting immediacy into Davis's propulsive debut. Aiden's intimate first-person perspective offers an organic portrayal of a Black autistic teen navigating social stigma and systemic racism. Writing nuanced and complexly rendered characters, family dynamics, and social commentary, Davis delivers a powerful portrayal of identity and siblinghood that's as gripping as it is thoughtful. Ages 14–up. Agent: Kat Kerr, Donald Maass Literary. (Apr.) --Staff (Reviewed 04/07/2025) (Publishers Weekly, vol 272, issue 14, p)
- **Kirkus**: An autistic Black teen in Florida battles on and off the field to define his own destiny and come to his brother's aid. Sixteen-year-old Aiden Wright wants to play football with his older brother during their last school year together before Brandon goes to college. But sensory stress during Aiden's team tryout leads to a meltdown, and he's only invited to play when two other athletes leave. Meanwhile, Aiden is placed in a life skills class that's typically reserved for kids who have challenges. There he's partnered for a project involving getting a part-time job with friendly new girl Isabella, who got in trouble at her old school. When a teammate who's long been cruel to Aiden because of his autism instigates a fight that escalates, Aiden becomes a victim of police violence. Brandon intervenes, trying to protect him, and is arrested and charged with assaulting an officer. Now Aiden battles complicated team dynamics while he tries to get Brandon exonerated. Aiden is a nuanced character with a well-developed inner life. The brothers' realistically drawn relationship is both flawed and vulnerable, showing the different facets of their personalities. The coaches and about half the football players are white, and the Wrights live in a wealthy, predominantly white area of town; Davis' debut explores the intersections of race and socioeconomic differences. An atmospheric gridiron tale that highlights the complexities of

team sports, friendship, and bias.(Fiction. 14-18) (Kirkus Reviews, February 1, 2025)

Book Talk

This William C. Morris Award winner *All the Noise at Once* is a compelling young adult novel about brotherhood, identity, autism, racism, and social justice. Sixteen-year-old Aiden Wright is an autistic Black teenager who dreams of playing football alongside his older brother, Brandon. After Aiden experiences sensory overload during football tryouts, he worries that his autism will keep him from the sport he loves. When he eventually makes the team, tensions with teammates escalate, leading to an altercation that results in Brandon being arrested and charged with assaulting a police officer. Determined to help his brother, Aiden sets out to uncover what really happened that night. Davis creates a strong and memorable narrator in Aiden, whose perspective gives readers an authentic look at navigating high school, friendships, family expectations, and sensory overwhelm while also confronting racism and ableism. The relationship between Aiden and Brandon adds an emotional center to the story, while the football setting provides an accessible entry point for readers who may not initially seek out books about social justice. The mystery surrounding Brandon's arrest keeps the story moving while allowing the larger themes to develop naturally. This story focuses on football, sibling relationships, and finding one's voice also gives the book broad appeal beyond readers specifically seeking socially conscious fiction.

Bright Red Fruit by Safia Elhillo

Genre(s): Coming-of-age, Novel in Verse, Realistic Fiction

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 12 and up

Description: Bad girl. No matter how hard Samira tries, she can't shake her reputation. She's never gotten the benefit of the doubt—not from her mother or the aunties who watch her like a hawk.

Samira is determined to have a perfect summer filled with fun parties, exploring DC, and growing as a poet—until a scandalous rumor has her grounded and unable to leave her house. When Samira turns to a poetry forum for solace, she catches the eye of an older, charismatic poet named Horus. For the first time, Samira feels wanted. But soon she's keeping a bigger secret than ever before—one that that could prove her reputation and jeopardize her place in her community.

In this gripping coming-of-age novel from the critically acclaimed author Safia Elhillo, a young woman searches to find the balance between honoring her family, her artistry, and her authentic self.

Reviews:

- **Booklist:** Samira is used to rumors. She's spent her life surrounded by them in her close-knit Sudanese community. There, reputation is everything, and Samira just wants to be a normal teenager. When Samira's mother gets a hold of an incriminating photo, Samira finds herself grounded for the summer, cut off from her friends and her summer plans. When Samira starts to post her poetry online, she meets a man whose insidious charm causes her to spiral down a path of deception and heartbreak. Elhillo's novel is written in a combination of poetry, texts, and internet exchanges, a form that changes as Samira herself evolves. The clever integration of the Persephone myth highlights the inherent danger of girls coming of age in a world where women are often still seen as commodities. Samira's journey throughout the novel is one of haunting self-discovery. The reader learns, along with Samira, that there is a necessity to community and family, even when those institutions themselves are flawed. In particular, we are able to see the viscerally honest rendering of the changing relationship between Samira and her mother. Elhillo has created more than a cautionary tale. Much like the tale of Persephone's abduction, she has crafted a story that contains misery, but, at its very core, harbors hope. -- Nashae Jones (Reviewed 1/1/2024) (Booklist, vol 120, number 9, p60)
- **Publishers Weekly:** Sixteen-year-old Samira has never kissed a boy, let alone done any of the things her former crush claims they did. Still, rumors

spread like wildfire throughout her tight-knit Sudanese community. Now labeled a “bad girl,” her strict mother upends Samira’s vision of a perfect summer by placing her on indefinite house arrest, the monotony of which is only broken by Samira’s attending a teen poetry workshop that her aunt drives her to and from. When social media posts of her classmates enjoying the summer and the distance between her and her mother become too much, Samira looks to an online poetry message board for connection. There, she meets an older, magnetic poet named Horus. For the first time, someone is complimenting her poetry—and her. But as their relationship develops, Samira is forced to keep secrets that jeopardize her reputation, her relationships, and herself. In perceptive verse, *Elhillo* (Home Is Not a Country) navigates hard-hitting topics such as grooming, predation, and sex shaming. Samira’s journey of self-discovery—and the external forces trying to dim her light—are sensitively and richly wrought, culminating in both a mesmerizing verse novel and a gripping exploration of the hyper-policing of Black girls’ bodies and sexuality. Ages 12–up. Agent: Ammi-Joan Paquette, Erin Murphy Literary. (Feb.) --Staff (Reviewed 11/20/2023) (Publishers Weekly, vol 270, issue 47, p)

- **Kirkus**: A teen poet in Washington, D.C., becomes entangled with an older man as she tries to break free from her mother’s expectations. Sixteen-year-old Sudanese American Samira Abdullahi has long had a tarnished reputation within her ever watchful community. She continually challenges her strict mother’s rules, yearning for the freedom to express herself: “i want the world, / all of it, & it is on the other side / of our front door, outside my mother’s / house &, it seems, outside my mother’s love.” Samira’s defiance leads to her being grounded for the summer, save for the poetry workshop her aunt already paid for. Bored, she connects with Horus on an online poetry forum; he initially appears kind and attentive, providing the affection she craves—but over time, his controlling tendencies surface, and Samira neglects her other relationships. Through the poetry workshop, however, Samira forms new connections, discovers her own identity as a poet, and finally sees Horus clearly. *Elhillo* masterfully portrays the universal theme of naïve first romance, including the potential for exploitation in moments of vulnerability, through the perspective of a girl who’s grounded in the Sudanese diaspora. Notably, the intricate relationship between Samira and her mother is authentic, highlighting the complex connections between immigrant mothers and their daughters. The poems eloquently convey Samira’s experiences, making the novel relatable to readers whether or not they’ve faced similar challenges. A stunning work that deeply explores poetry, the complexities of identity, and the longing for love. (Verse fiction. 13-18) (Kirkus Reviews, December 15, 2023)

Book Talk

Bright Red Fruit is a lyrical coming-of-age story told in a mixed-media format. When teenage Samira seeks a creative outlet to cope with the pressures of her “bad girl” reputation, she turns to poetry. Through an online forum, Samira begins to explore her Sudanese-American identity and strained relationship with her mother, exploring her desire for love and affection. Meanwhile she catches the attention of an older man online, Horus, whom she feels understands her. Likening her experience to that of Persephone, Samira begins to act older to impress Horus, pushing the boundaries of what her mother expects of her. This story is poignant and emotionally intense, showcasing the struggles of growing up and how to open up when faced with the dangers of exploitation.

Fake Skating by Lynn Painter

Genre(s): Romance

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 14 and up

Description: Growing up, Dani couldn't help but follow around the adorable son of her mom's best friend. Funny, kind of nerdy, and a little soft, Alec was always down to hang with Dani when they were little. From play dates to sneaking into movie theaters, Dani and Alec were inseparable. Until Dani moved away. Alec promised they'd stay in touch—except, they didn't.

Flash forward and Dani is back in Minnesota for her senior year, she and her mom living with her grandfather. Dealing with the fallout of her parents' devastating divorce, Dani wouldn't mind a nerd-out with the cozy and comforting Alec (and maybe a chance to confront him on his MIA status for all these years). But teenage Alec is nothing like the kid Dani remembers. He's a hockey star in a town where hockey players are worshiped as gods. Dani's place as his shadow has been taken up by drooling female fans...and he *loves* it.

Dani is resolved to ice out her former best friend until an unlikely series of events brings them together—and forces them to fake being a couple. Once stuck together, the former childhood sweethearts begin to reconnect, unearth complicated family secrets, and face their true feelings towards each other...including the real reason Alec has been pushing Dani away all these years.

Reviews:

- **Booklist:** Acclaimed rom-com author Painter's latest has all her signature ingredients—sharp banter, swoony tension, and characters that feel real. Dani and Alec were inseparable as kids, when Dani would visit for one month per summer. Years later, she's returning to Minnesota to live there full time, only to discover that her once-nerdy bestie is now a hockey superstar. Cue a fake dating scheme, a whirlwind of complicated feelings, and lots of miscommunication, all of which add up to undeniable chemistry. Alongside the main plot between Alec and Dani, Painter thoughtfully and authentically explores issues of mental health in Dani's struggle with anxiety and panic attacks. Adding to the book's atmosphere and charm are a divorced-parents subplot, lots of heartening grandpa bonding, and a Minnesota winter aesthetic. In a story that's sweet, realistic, and brimming with heart, Painter proves once again that she's adept at making readers laugh, swoon, and feel seen. Readers who like the childhood-friends-to-lovers trope will surely be invested in Dani and Alec. Hand to teens who can't get enough of hockey romances. -- Aurora Dominguez (Reviewed 9/1/2025) (Booklist, vol 122, number 1)

- **School Library Journal**: Dani and Alec are childhood besties who only saw each other the summer Dani visited her grandparents in Minneapolis. The last time Dani saw Alec was in middle school, right before the falling out between her parents and Grandpa Mick. Her dad's job in the Air Force caused her family to move all around the country and the world. Her parents never had the perfect marriage, but their divorce has Dani reeling, and suddenly they are moving away from their last station in Germany, all the way back to Minnesota to live with her grandpa. Alec has changed a lot since the last time Dani saw him. No longer is he the short, awkward nerd that she remembers. He is an over six-foot-tall hockey god, beloved by the masses. A huge misunderstanding soon puts them in a compromising position, only fixed by Dani pretending to be Alec's new girlfriend. True to the title, this book follows the fake dating trope to a T. Told in alternating chapters from both Dani and Alec's perspectives, the mystery of why Dani and Alec lost touch with each other is not revealed until the end of the book. This is a feel-good rom-com that accurately portrays the insecurity, complexity, and earnest sweetness of a high school relationship. VERDICT While seemingly formulaic at times, what good romance novel isn't? Give this one to any lover of the genre.—Sara Brunkhorst --Sara Brunkhorst (Reviewed 09/01/2025) (School Library Journal, vol 71, issue 9, p86)
- **Publishers Weekly**: Following her parents' messy divorce, high school senior Dani Collins finds herself moving back to Minnesota with her mother. Despite the emotionally tumultuous reasons for returning to Southview, Dani is optimistic about the change. Maybe she'll finally get answers about why her childhood sweetheart Alec mysteriously ghosted her. Alec, meanwhile, is too focused on maintaining his image as the star of the high school hockey team to be distracted by Dani, whom he believes broke his heart several summers ago. With the tender reunion Dani envisioned a bust, she's more than happy to take Alec's lead, acting like strangers at school—until a misunderstanding forces them into each other's orbit. Alec proposes a deal: he and Dani will fake-date to endear himself to—and restore his reputation with—NHL scouts, who view Alec as a troublesome party boy. In exchange, Alec will vouch for Dani's placement as the hockey team's manager to help be accepted to Harvard. In this breezy rom-com, Painter (Nothing Like the Movies) crafts a tangible feeling world in which the relationship stakes are never too high, and the white-cued characters' chemistry is magnetic, ensuring a satisfying read for romance lovers. Ages 14–up. Agent: Kim Lionetti, BookEnds Literary. (Sept.) --Staff (Reviewed 06/16/2025) (Publishers Weekly, vol 272, issue 24, p)
- **Kirkus**: When star hockey player Alec Barczewski's estranged childhood friend, Dani Collins, moves to town, they end up in a mutually beneficial fake-

dating relationship that reignites old feelings. Following her parents' divorce, Dani and her mom move in with Dani's hockey legend grandfather in Southview, Minnesota, where she spent a month every summer as a child and where her friendship with Alec grew. Between visits, the two were pen pals, but they eventually fell out of touch. Despite some tensions over their loss of friendship, the high school seniors reconnect. Desperate to get off Harvard's waitlist, Dani needs another extracurricular activity, while Alec—whose reputation took a hit when a photo of him holding a bong appeared on social media—is eager to improve his tarnished image for NHL scouts. The pair strike a deal: They'll fake date, making Alec look like a stable guy whose academically gifted girlfriend is related to hockey royalty, and in exchange, he'll get Dani a team manager position that will catch the eye of Harvard's admissions officers. Eventually, complicated feelings about their past, stressful family relationships, and their brewing romance boil over. Romance fans will love the deliciously tension-filled scenes between Alec and Dani, who are believable friends with heavy demands weighing on them. They feel like real teenagers, and readers will enjoy rooting for them as the well-paced story unfolds. Main characters present white. A compelling romance inhabited by complex and appealing characters. (Romance. 14-18) (Kirkus Reviews, September 1, 2025)

Book Talk

Dani and Alec used to spend their summers together in Minnesota. Then a falling out caused them to stop talking. After Dani's parents separated, Dani moved to Minnesota with her mom and both Alec and Dani have grown up. Dani wants to get off Harvard's waitlist, and Alec is a hockey god who wants to go Pro to solve his parent's money problems. When one thing leads to another and Dani and Alec find themselves fake dating, "complicated" becomes an understatement. This is a good, clean hockey romance by the ever-popular Lynn Painter.

A Forgery of Fate by Elizabeth Lim

Genre(s): Fantasy Fiction, Romance

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 12 and up

Description: Truyan Saigas didn't choose to become a con artist, but after her father is lost at sea, it's up to her to support her mother and two younger sisters. A gifted art forger, Tru has the unique ability to paint the future, but even such magic is not enough to put her family back together again, or stave off the gangsters demanding payment in blood for her mother's gambling debts.

Left with few options, Tru agrees to a marriage contract with a mysterious dragon lord. He offers a fresh start for her mother and sisters and elusive answers about her father's disappearance, but in exchange, she must join him in his desolate undersea palace. And she must assist him in a plot to infiltrate the tyrannical Dragon King's inner circle, painting a future so treasonous, it could upend both the mortal and immortal realms. . . .

Reviews:

- **Booklist:** Readers who love the classic fairy tale “Beauty and the Beast” will be enchanted by Lim’s imaginative take set in a world inspired by China. With her signature vivid writing and world building and multifaceted characters, Lim gives readers an immersive experience. Tru is a gifted art forger and reluctant con artist—and keeps secret that she can paint the future. She’s spent most of her life supporting her debt-ridden family, but she’s grown tired of fixing their mistakes. Things take a dark turn when her mother’s reckless gambling puts them in danger, and when they’re forced to flee, Tru takes on the responsibility of keeping them safe. While on the run, they meet dragon lord Elang, who is forced to live without his heart. He asks Tru to marry him in hopes of breaking the curse placed on him by his ruthless grandfather. Tru, eager to save her family and hopefully uncover the truth about her long-lost father, agrees. In a breathtakingly detailed fantasy setting, Lim combines an enchanting underwater world, a clairvoyant artist, and a brooding half-dragon hero in a story marked by a slow-burning, tension-filled romance. Tru and Elang’s undeniably passionate chemistry comes through clearly in their banter, and Lim’s lyrical prose superbly blends whimsical and action-packed moments. This emotional, thoughtful story about love and found family is perfect for romantasy fans. -- Aurora Dominguez (Reviewed 6/1/2025) (Booklist, vol 121, number 19, p97)
- **School Library Journal:** This inspired retelling of Beauty and the Beast traps a reluctant con artist in an underwater kingdom with a dragon lord determined to destroy the gods. Truyan's father disappeared at sea and her mother has

drowned their family in gambling debts, leaving Tru to try and keep them afloat by forging paintings. She is excellent at it, but her true talent emerges with a prickling of her fingertips, and in those moments, she can paint the future—and that future always comes true. When her mother is threatened by a gang to pay off all her debts by midnight or lose her daughters, Tru's attempts to save her family throw her into the path of the dragon lord Elang. Cold and driven by his own goals, Elang will pay her family's debts and set them up for life if Tru marries him and helps infiltrate his grandfather the Dragon King's inner circle. Tru's power to paint the future has never been so perilous as the future they're aiming for commits treason against the gods. Lim has a special talent for creating engaging characters, and Tru's empathy and wit make her a delight to follow. The romance is a yearning slow-burn, full of tension as Lim balances Tru's clairvoyance with the mystery of how the future comes to be. While readers might wish for deeper descriptions of the underwater world, the pacing and plot are exceptional. VERDICT Hand to readers who like the ache of slow-burn romance and the whimsy of fairy tales. Highly recommended for all collections.—Emmy Neal --Emmy Neal (Reviewed 05/01/2025) (School Library Journal, vol 71, issue 5, p131)

- **Publishers Weekly**: When teenage Truyan Saigas's adventurer father disappears during a treacherous voyage, Tru must lean on her skills as an art forger to ensure that her mother and two younger sisters are taken care of. Despite the discrimination she experiences for having a Balardan father and an A'landan mother, Tru makes a name for herself as an artist. When gangsters arrive seeking payment for her mother's gambling debts, Tru feels that she's run out of options. Then she recalls Baba's advice, pulled from fairy tales he told her as a child: "Fortune finds those who leap." Hoping to protect her family and secure their financial future, she agrees to marry the powerful half-dragon Demon Prince Elang, an arrangement that could also provide insight to her father's whereabouts. In beguiling prose, Lim (Her Radiant Curse) skillfully blends elements of classic fairy tales to render Tru's many adventures across Lor'yan, a fictional world inspired by China, and inject heart-pounding action into this lush romantasy epic. Tender moments of connection and discovery enrich Tru and Elang's cautious developing relationship, even as they both contend with xenophobia and preconceived notions based on their nation's mythology, and navigate a perilous world of politics and greed. Ages 12–up. Agent: Gina Maccoby, Gina Maccoby Literary. (June) --Staff (Reviewed 04/07/2025) (Publishers Weekly, vol 272, issue 14, p)
- **Kirkus**: Lim blends "Beauty and the Beast" with Chinese folklore in her wondrous new tale set in the same world as her Six Crimson Cranes series. After Baba, her father, is lost at sea, Truyan Saigas turns to art forgery to

support her mother and two sisters. But Tru's efforts to make ends meet aren't enough, and gangsters threaten to take away her sisters if their mother's gambling debts aren't paid. When the authorities come to arrest Tru for her crimes, she escapes—and then encounters Elang, a cursed half-dragon, half-human prince. He offers a deal she can't refuse: If she marries him and helps him dethrone his tyrannical grandfather, the Dragon King, he'll ensure that she and her family are safe and debt-free and help her get answers to her father's disappearance. After they're officially bound in a loveless marriage, Tru enters Ai'long, a magical underwater realm where she's guarded by turtles, befriends merfolk, and, with the aid of a hot-tempered water demon, masters her gift of Sight (an ability to see glimpses of the future) through painting. The inevitable romance is enhanced by a beautifully rendered subaqueous backdrop and beguiling folkloric elements. In this fantasy Chinese world, Tru's blue hair is evidence of her Balardan heritage on her father's side, a trait regarded as "a damning sight"; but being visibly different motivates her to be independent and self-loving. An adventurous and romantic addition to the genre. (map)(Fantasy. 12-18) (Kirkus Reviews, May 1, 2025)

Book Talk

After Truyan's father goes missing at sea, she and her sisters are forced to take care of themselves and their mother. Truyan uses her gift for art to forge paintings, but when she paints original art, the pictures she creates have a habit of coming true. That gift intrigues a half-dragon prince Elang who wishes to use her skills to overthrow the dragon king who cursed him. Agreeing to a fake marriage, Truyan travels with him to the watery dragon kingdom but bringing down a god is far from easy. This standalone novel is a breathtaking romantic fantasy inspired by Beauty and the Beast and Asian Folklore.

Frontera by Julio Anta

Genre(s): Coming-of-age, Graphic Novel

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 13 and up

Description: As long as he remembers to stay smart and keep his eyes open, Mateo knows that he can survive the trek across the Sonoran Desert that will take him from Mexico to the United States. That is until he's caught by the Border Patrol only moments after sneaking across the fence in the dead of night. Escaping their clutches comes at a price and, lost in the desert without a guide or water, Mateo is ill-prepared for the unforgiving heat that is sure to arrive come sunrise. His one chance at survival may be putting his trust in something, or rather someone, that he isn't even sure exists.

Reviews:

- **Booklist:** Mateo is embarking on the treacherous journey across the Sonoran Desert to cross the border and get to his grandmother in Phoenix. When the coyote tells him it will be at least a week until they can attempt to make their way across, the headstrong Mateo decides to continue the journey on his own. After getting detained shortly after crossing and narrowly escaping with the help of Guillermo, a ghost, Mateo realizes that trekking through the desert will be more dangerous than he could have ever imagined. The inclusion of Guillermo as a guide adds a supernatural element to the story, and as the story progresses, he also offers readers some historical background that supplements the narrative. The artwork is captivating, with the illustrations and choice of color palettes helping to convey emotions such as fear, anger, and sadness during the action-packed moments and flashbacks. A touching story of resilience, this is a must-read for those who are looking for insight on the migrant experience with a supernatural twist. -- Michelle Ortega (Reviewed 7/1/2023) (Booklist, vol 119, number 21, p46)
- **School Library Journal:** When Mateo was three years old, his parents brought him to Arizona to live, never revealing that they were there illegally. Mateo only found out just before he and his parents were deported back to Guadalajara despite their best efforts to remain in the country. Now that Mateo is a teenager, his parents have arranged for someone to help him cross the Sonoran Desert so he can join his grandmother in Phoenix. Mateo follows his parents' instructions until he meets with the coyote, whose caution surrounding the Border Patrol causes Mateo to grow impatient and attempt to cross on his own. Just when he is about to be caught, he receives help from an unlikely source: a ghost named Guillermo, who has been helping migrants cross for decades. Mateo at first struggles to accept that Guillermo is not a hallucination. But after their initial arguments and difficulties, the two become

friends and learn more about each other, with Mateo attempting to help Guillermo as much as Guillermo is helping him. As they bond and share more about themselves, they come closer to one final danger that they will face together. Bold, vibrant colors fill the panels, pulling readers into the hot daytime desert and just as easily as into the dark night. Speech bubbles are either yellow to indicate speech in English or white to indicate Spanish. Readers stay mostly in the present with Mateo, but occasionally travel back to Mateo's youth or to Guillermo's past. Characters are expressive, and Mateo's attitude, influenced by impatience and rash decisions, changes as the story progresses. VERDICT Exploring topics of immigration, racism, freedom, and helping others, this action-packed graphic novel presents the journey across the border in a whole new way.—Selenia Paz --Selenia Paz (Reviewed 07/01/2023) (School Library Journal, vol 69, issue 7, p78)

- **Publishers Weekly**: A Mexican teenager must rely on a new ghost friend to cross the Sonoran Desert in this poignant graphic novel by Anta (Home) and debut creator Salcedo. Mateo has just left Guadalajara to cross the Mexico-U.S. border to Phoenix. Though his parents hired a coyote to smuggle him across, impatient Mateo goes alone, and is pursued by border patrol—then saved by Guillermo, a ghost in a cowboy hat. Via flashbacks in which the ghost guides Mateo's spirit through his own memories, Guillermo reveals that he died while crossing the desert 70 years prior. Unable to move on, his soul now wanders the landscape, protecting migrants from the police. With help from Guillermo and a Tohono O'odham woman, Mateo combats heat exhaustion, dodges militia men, and resolves to help Guillermo cross over to the afterlife. By juxtaposing Mateo's present treacherous situation with harrowing scenes from Guillermo's and other migrants' pasts, Anta pulls no punches, organically weaving together myriad contemporary border issues. Salcedo's richly colored backdrops and expressive characters make the desert and its inhabitants come alive in an adventure steeped in magical realism that artfully conveys a small sampling of migrant stories. Ages 13–up. (July) ■ --Staff (Reviewed 05/22/2023) (Publishers Weekly, vol 270, issue 21, p)
- **Kirkus**: Undocumented and recently deported Mexican national Mateo Renteria sets out on a harrowing journey across the Sonoran Desert to return to the United States for his senior year of high school. Mateo is shocked to learn that his parents, in order to provide a better life for him, brought him to the U.S. at a young age. But the family can no longer stay. After a judge sends the Renterias back to Guadalajara, Mateo's parents prepare to reunite him with his grandmother in Phoenix. Too impatient to follow the advice of the coyote his parents hired, Mateo runs headfirst toward the border—and into trouble. He finds help in the unlikelyst of places: Guillermo, the ghost of a

queer young man who died nearly 70 years ago. Mateo is equal parts determined and naïve, while Guillermo's presence and moving backstory provide relevant historical context for the plight of those crossing the border. Warm, vibrant colors deftly wash over the interestingly varied panels, depicting the brutal, inescapable heat and the intensity of being on the move in a geographically and politically hostile environment. There are also scenes of startling natural beauty and emotional vulnerability. A caption notes that the dialogue, presented in English, is assumed to be Spanish unless otherwise noted. A stirring supernatural framing of an all too common and heartbreaking reality. (Graphic fiction. 14-18) (Kirkus Reviews, June 15, 2023)

Book Talk

Paranormal collides with modern day struggles in this graphic novel that follows Mateo on his journey from Mexico to the United States. Mateo faces battles with border patrol, nature, and trust-in himself as well as others-in this harrowing adventure that helps him learn when to trust his instincts. Mateo connects with an unexpected guide on his journey and discovers that, ultimately, they can both help each other. This story ultimately shows that we often best help ourselves by helping others, and highlights the struggles of many families simply trying to give their children better opportunities and a better life. The beautiful full-color artwork pulls the reader in and immerses them in Mateo's life-or-death journey.

Say a Little Prayer by Jenna Voris

Genre(s): Romance

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 12 and up

Description: Riley quietly left church a year ago when she realized there was no place for a bi girl in her congregation. But it wasn't until the pastor shunned her older sister for getting an abortion that she really wanted to burn it all down.

It's just her luck, then, that she's sent to the principal's office for slapping a girl talking smack about her sister—and in order to avoid suspension, she has to spend spring break at church camp. The only saving grace is that she'll be there with her best friend, Julia. Even if Julia's dad is the pastor. And he's in charge of camp. But Riley won't let a technicality like "repenting" get in the way of her true mission. Instead of spending the week embracing the seven heavenly virtues, she decides to commit all seven deadly sins. If she can show the other campers that sometimes being a little bad is for the greater good, she could start a righteous revolution! What could possibly go wrong? Aside from falling for the pastor's daughter . . .

Reviews:

- **Booklist:** Riley Ackerman has a bone to pick with the pastor of her local Baptist church. Not only has Pastor Young fostered a community that's inhospitable to her as a bisexual teenage girl, he also publicly shamed and excommunicated her older sister, Hannah, after she had an abortion. So the last thing Riley wants is to spend spring break in the wilds of Kentucky at a church camp run by Pastor Young. Even if her best friend Julia—the pastor's daughter—is there. After learning that the camp's theme is the seven virtues as contrasted with the seven deadly sins, Riley hatches a harebrained scheme to commit all seven sins and write an essay showcasing the pastor's evils to their community. Though the plan itself is one that likely would never occur to anyone but an aggrieved teenager, the ensuing story is heartfelt and powerful. It combines a lovely sapphic romance with a side of astute and biting commentary on facets of American evangelical culture. Voris is unflinching when it comes to calling out hypocrisy in the church, and Riley's distaste for religion contrasts nicely with Hannah's soft, lingering faith. Voris' third young adult novel is a delightful romp, a forceful callout, and a gorgeous look at what real community looks like—inside and outside of the church. -- Karis Rogerson (Reviewed 2/1/2025) (Booklist, vol 121, number 11, p74)
- **Publishers Weekly:** In this brash and irreverent novel, Voris (Every Time You Hear that Song) employs comedic energy to critically outline one bisexual teen's relationship with religion. Seventeen-year-old theater kid Riley Ackerman faces suspension after she slaps a classmate for shaming her

older sister about her abortion. To avoid administrative punishment, which would result in her removal from her high school musical production, Riley elects to write an essay on the seven heavenly virtues and spend her spring break at a Baptist church youth camp, despite having avoided church for the past year: “I don’t want to sit in a musty chapel and listen to Pastor Young talk about all the different ways I’m going to hell.” At camp, she grapples with childhood insecurities surrounding her congregation’s teachings, catches feelings for the pastor’s daughter, and endeavors to “prove Pastor Young wrong by committing all seven deadly sins.” Conversations regarding the effects of Riley’s predominantly white Midwestern Baptist community’s ideals on morality and her sense of self are handled with verve via incisive prose and the protagonist’s acerbic, self-assured narration. Ages 12–up. Agent: Lucienne Diver, Knight Agency. (Mar.) --Staff (Reviewed 03/10/2025) (Publishers Weekly, vol 272, issue 10, p)

- **Kirkus:** An outcast teen in Ohio returns to Bible camp with a secret vendetta. Riley Ackerman’s family stopped going to church after the sanctimonious Pastor Young publicly shamed her and her sister, Hannah; Riley came out as bisexual, and Hannah had an abortion. But walking away forever is proving difficult for Riley since the pastor’s twins, Ben and Julia, are her longtime best friends—and she has a secret crush on Julia that she’s afraid to reveal. When Riley gets in a fight at school with Hannah’s former best friend, she dodges suspension by accepting a deal from the principal: She agrees to attend church camp over spring break (along with peers who see her as a lost soul) and submit an essay containing her reflections on what she’s learned. But Riley won’t be subdued so easily. She decides instead to write a scathing takedown of Pastor Young’s teachings, which becomes a secret crusade to undermine his authority among the other campers, too. But in the process of seeking her revenge, Riley becomes aware that her feelings on the situation—and maybe everyone else’s—are more complicated than she realized. Though the book’s themes are seemingly heavy, they’re sweetened by pop culture references galore and the narrator’s sharp, clever sense of humor. Riley and the majority of the cast members in this Midwestern Baptist community are white. An original blend of queer romance, nuanced revenge plot, and religious deconstruction. (Fiction. 14-18) (Kirkus Reviews, January 1, 2025)

Book Talk

Riley Ackerman is an ambitious teen with a passion to protect those around her. Unfortunately, it’s gotten her in trouble at school and facing a suspension that risks her missing out on the school play. Determined for an alternative, Riley’s principal makes her an offer she can’t refuse: attend a local church camp during spring break and write an essay about her experience. There’s one big problem though, Riley left her church a

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year ago and has no desire to engage in the spiritual practices presented to her. Instead, Riley concocts a plan to break all seven deadly sins while at camp. But her best friend Julia is the pastor's daughter, and her crush on Julia only grows stronger with their proximity. Stuck between competing desires, Riley risks losing it all if she isn't careful. With wit, humor, and heartfelt prose, author Jenna Voris asks her readers not to follow anyone's opinion blindly, but rather to say a little prayer and come to their own conclusions.

This Place Kills Me by Mariko Tamaki

Genre(s): Graphic Novel, Mystery

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 14 and up

Description: At Wilberton Academy, few students are more revered than the members of the elite Wilberton Theatrical Society—a.k.a. the WTS—and no one represents that exclusive club better than Elizabeth Woodward.

Breathtakingly beautiful, beloved by all, and a talented thespian, it's no surprise she's starring as Juliet in the WTS's performance of Shakespeare's classic tragedy. But when she's found dead the morning after opening night, the whole school is thrown into chaos.

Transfer student Abby Kita was one of the last people to see Elizabeth alive, and when local authorities deem the it-girl's death a suicide, Abby's not convinced. She's sure there's more to Wilburton and the WTS than meets the eye. As she gets tangled in prep school intrigues, Abby quickly realizes that Elizabeth was keeping secrets. Was one of those secrets worth killing for?

Told in comics, letters, diary entries, and news articles, *This Place Kills Me* is a page-turning whodunnit from award-winning writer Mariko Tamaki and acclaimed illustrator Nicole Goux that will have readers on the edge of their seats and begging for an encore.

Reviews:

- **School Library Journal:** Newcomer Abby is desperately struggling to find her place at her new all-girls boarding school when she finally bonds with a classmate, Elizabeth, who warns her of the dangers of fitting in with the popular crowd. The next day, Wilberton Academy is shaken to its core when Elizabeth, who just starred as Juliet in the school play, is found dead in the woods, staged in her Juliet costume complete with a dagger. Investigations ensue, and Abby continues to struggle with her peers but eventually begins to build a relationship with her roommate as they try to uncover the truth behind Elizabeth's death, realizing it may not be what it seems. Elegantly crafted through several art mediums, including posters, handwritten notes, bulletin boards, and playbooks, Tamiki and Goux take readers through a coming-of-age journey filled with angst, grief, discrimination, and justice. The raw depiction of high school includes mature language, sexual references, and teen partying. Tamiki introduces a diverse cast of characters, each navigating their own sexual identity and personal struggles. Goux's art soars with dynamic panels and beautiful, contrasting colors that bring this mystery to life, enhancing the tone. Fans of Karen M. McManus and Holly Jackson will devour this graphic novel. VERDICT Stunning illustrations coupled with a thrilling plot make this a standout title that belongs in all YA graphic novel

sections.—Angie Jameson --Angie Jameson (Reviewed 07/01/2025) (School Library Journal, vol 71, issue 7, p81)

- **Kirkus:** A new student unearths a tangled web of secrets after a popular girl is found dead. In this stand-alone graphic novel, Abby Kita is trying to adjust to life at Wilberton, an all-girls boarding school. Her roommate, Claire, barely acknowledges her, and Abby spends most days trying to ignore the unkind whispers of her classmates. The members of the Wilberton Theater Society stage a successful run of *Romeo and Juliet*—then the body of Elizabeth Woodward, who played Juliet, is found after a raucous cast party. Rumors run rampant, and Abby's tragic past seems to be coming back to haunt her as the other girls begin to speculate about her involvement in Elizabeth's death. Abby gradually builds a tenuous friendship with Claire. Together, can they find out not only the truth but its connection to a dark, shocking secret buried in Wilberton's history? With its stunning two-toned gray and pink illustrations that cue a 1980s setting through images such as a Walkman, phone booth, and clunky desktop computer, this collaboration between Tamaki and Goux isn't just a clever and heartbreaking mystery but a deeper examination of bullying, homophobia, and belonging. The central puzzle is certain to leave readers breathlessly enthralled, turning pages as quickly as possible to get to the shocking truth behind Elizabeth's demise. Abby presents Japanese American, and most other characters read white. Truly exceptional; a standout. (Graphic mystery. 12-18) (Kirkus Reviews, June 15, 2025)

Book Talk

This murder-mystery graphic novel opens with a performance of *Romeo & Juliet* at a special theater academy followed shortly by the death of Elizabeth, the lead in the play and the most popular girl in school. Abby, one of the newest kids in school was one of the last people to speak with her and believes that the circumstances surrounding Elizabeth's death just don't add up. This murder-mystery will take teens on a dramatic ride that will uncover so much more than what happened to Elizabeth including information that will leave the entire school in jeopardy. This book perfectly captures the struggles and drama of trying to fit in while also being yourself in a high school environment. Beautiful two-tone artwork brings the story to life and fits the mysterious mood of the story well.

The Thrashers by Julie Soto

Genre(s): Thrillers and Suspense

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 12 and up

Description: Welcome to the Thrashers, the elite friend group at New Helvetia High.

They're everything everyone wants to be.

Jodi Dillon was never meant to be one of them. Julian, Lucy, Paige, and the infamous Zack Thrasher are rich, sophisticated, and love attention. Jodi feels out of place, but Zack's her childhood best friend, so she's in.

Then Emily Mills, who desperately wanted to be a Thrasher, dies—and the whispers about the Thrashers begin. As Emily's journal surfaces, detectives close in, and Jodi faces an impossible choice: betray her friends or protect herself.

Reviews:

- **School Library Journal:** Emily died by suicide on prom night, and her journal claims it's the Thrashers' fault. Jodi never wanted to be a Thrasher, an "elite" group of five friends at New Helvetia High, but that comes with the territory of being Zack's longtime friend. With a detective going after the Thrashers for Emily's death, Jodi must dig to uncover her friends' secrets. On her journey for truth, weird messages and peculiar accidents keep happening to the Thrashers, leading Jodi to believe Emily isn't quite ready to let go. Soto successfully dives into the YA scene with a mystery thriller that keeps readers second-guessing until the end. Jodi struggles with self-esteem, which leads her to be an unreliable narrator battling truth versus fiction. Emily's strong characterization heavily influences the Thrashers as her manipulative and obsessive tendencies haunt their sense of morality. The supernatural element of flickering lights and freak accidents adds a creepy layer to the tale. By confronting her friends, especially Zack, Jodi learns that words are important, and honesty can be brutal or kind. Guilt is a spectrum, and end revelations leave Jodi accepting that friendship sometimes becomes messy and destructive when communication breaks down, but it can also surprise one in unexpected ways. While physical character description is minimal, there is some diversity present. VERDICT With a new-era Pretty Little Liars vibe, this cautionary thriller is the perfect drama for Karen M. McManus and Rory Power fans.—Emily Walker --Emily Walker (Reviewed 05/01/2025) (School Library Journal, vol 71, issue 5, p135)
- **Publishers Weekly:** Since second grade, Jodi Dillon, a senior at Sacramento New Helvetia High School, has been best friends with fellow student Zack

Thrasher, the charismatic and charming leader of their school's exclusive, popular friend group, the Thrashers. Jodi, who considers herself short and plain, is a longtime member of the Thrashers, along with cheerleader Paige Montgomery; "pretty badass," brown-skinned Lucy Reed; and gorgeous print ad model Julian Hollister. After sophomore Emily Mills makes a concerted effort to join their group—and the Thrashers rebuff her advances—she's found dead on prom night, which sets an unsettling series of events into motion. When Emily's diary turns up as evidence that implicates every Thrasher but Jodi in her death, Jodi endeavors to find out the truth. A prologue seemingly from Emily's first-person POV establishes immediate tension, which Soto (*Not Another Love Song*, for adults) carries throughout the novel to devastating effect. Examinations of self-worth are smartly interwoven into push-and-pull depictions of the Thrashers and their effect on their classmates in a fresh and clever mystery that puts a new spin on the popular kid trope. Ages 12–up. (May) --Staff (Reviewed 05/05/2025) (Publishers Weekly, vol 272, issue 18, p)

- **Kirkus:** When police investigate a teenage girl's supposed suicide, New Helvetia High's most exclusive friend group comes under scrutiny. The Thrashers are high school royalty. Zack Thrasher (the group's namesake), Lucy Reed, Paige Montgomery, and Julian Hollister are wealthy and attractive. Jodi Dillon, who feels ordinary by comparison, has been friends with Zack since childhood. Not just anyone can become a Thrasher, but that was Emily Mills' goal. After Emily is found dead the evening of prom, rumors circulate around school that she was Thrashed—socially ostracized—for trying to join the clique. Everything starts to unravel after investigators find Emily's journal detailing how she was bullied by all of them—except Jodi, who rebuffed her. Jodi feels compelled to seek the truth surrounding Emily's death without implicating her friends, but the more she learns, the more she doubts their credibility. The story's careful, highly effective pacing contributes to the increasingly unsettling tension as strange and terrifying incidents occur. Readers who empathize with insecure Jodi are kept in suspense until the end, feeling relief whenever the others show genuine care for her while nervously anticipating the possibility that harm may befall her. Main characters largely present white. Lucy has brown skin, and Jodi is cued as white and Latine. A haunting page-turner that smartly explores the complexities of teenage relationships and feelings of self-worth. (Thriller. 14-18) (Kirkus Reviews, March 1, 2025)

Book Talk

The Thrashers is a gripping young adult thriller centered on friendship, social hierarchy, bullying, and the consequences of trying to belong. Jodi Dillon has been best friends with Zack Thrasher since childhood, which makes her an unofficial member of the

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school's most exclusive clique. The Thrashers are wealthy, attractive, and powerful, but their privileged position comes under scrutiny when Emily Mills, a classmate who desperately wanted to join their group, dies by suicide. When Emily's journal implicates the Thrashers in her death, the group finds itself under investigation while Jodi begins questioning how well she truly knows her friends. Soto does an excellent job creating morally complicated characters whose relationships are at the heart of the story. Jodi's struggle with feeling like an outsider despite being part of the most popular group gives the novel an accessible emotional core. The mystery keeps the plot moving, while eerie messages and unexplained occurrences introduce a subtle supernatural element that distinguishes the novel from a straightforward high school thriller. The story explores peer pressure, toxic friendships, bullying, social status, guilt, and the ways teenagers can hurt one another while trying to protect their own place in a social group. This would be a great choice for readers who enjoy fast-paced mysteries and psychological thrillers. The themes of fitting in, navigating cliques, peer pressure, and questioning unhealthy friendships are relevant to teenagers regardless of the size or location of their school community.

Under the Same Stars by Libba Bray

Genre(s): Historical Fiction, Mystery

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 12 and up

Description: *It was said that if you write to the Bridegroom's Oak, the love of your life will answer back. Now, the tree is giving up its secrets at last.*

In 1940s Germany, Sophie is excited to discover a message waiting for her in the Bridegroom's Oak from a mysterious suitor. Meanwhile, her best friend, Hanna, is sending messages too—but not to find love. As World War II unfolds in their small town of Kleinwald, the oak may hold the key to resistance against the Nazis.

In 1980s West Germany, American teen transplant Jenny feels suffocated by her strict parents and is struggling to fit in. Until she finds herself falling for Lena, a punk-rock girl hell-bent on tearing down the wall separating West Germany from East Germany, and meeting Frau Hermann, a kind old lady with secrets of her own.

In Spring 2020, New York City, best friends Miles and Chloe are slogging through the last few months of senior year when an unexpected package from Chloe's grandmother leads them to investigate a cold case about two unidentified teenagers who went missing under the Bridegroom's Oak eighty years ago.

Reviews:

- **Booklist:** Libba Bray's masterful, heart-wrenching historical novel weaves together stories of love and resistance in three alternating time lines—World War II Germany, 1980 Berlin, and 2020 Brooklyn. Two 17-year-old best friends, Sophie and Hanna, disappear on Winter Solstice night, 1941, under the Bridegroom's Oak in their German village. Prior to their disappearance, Sophie, a romantic, held onto her belief in the matchmaking magic of the Bridegroom's Oak tucked away in nearby Dodauer Forest, even though her peers teased her for it. Hanna, pragmatic, athletic, and social, was more willing to participate in required girls' league activities but had secret messages of her own. Backtracking to 1939, their idyllic small town fractures after the German invasion of Poland. When SS Obergruppenführer Jaeger and his soldiers take up residence, everyone must choose between loyalty and resistance. Family members and friends are set against one another in their tight-knit community where little goes unseen. And yet, this is a story full of love—first love, forbidden love, and a love between friends reminiscent of Elizabeth Wein's *Code Name Verity* (2012). In contrast, there's Jenny and Lena in the summer of 1980. Jenny Campbell's father moves the family from Dallas to West Berlin for his work. Jenny, 16, is a good girl, classical violinist, and photographer. Quickly drawn to the punks in the broken-down Kreuzberg

neighborhood, she takes up with Lena, who lives in a warehouse squat. Lena gives Jenny a tour of the city, the Wall, and the building where David Bowie recorded her favorite song, "Heroes." Soon, Jenny is sneaking out to spend time with Lena and joining her band, Sophie Scholl, making it the "first all-girl punk band with violin." Lena's fury comes out in her songs, but what is at its root? Where is Lena's family? How did she end up alone? Even as their relationship deepens, Lena keeps secrets. But Jenny is naive; she doesn't sense the danger. Throughout, Jenny also visits her elderly neighbor, Frau Hermann, a retired trauma psychologist with bookshelves full of mythology and fairy tales. Frau Hermann tells Jenny The Tale of the Hare and the Deer, about two girls who save their kingdom from a mad king with the help of a magical tree. The tale reappears throughout the novel, growing darker, more fragmented, and tragic. It seems to offer clues to the fate of Sophie and Hanna. But fairy tales can be misleading. Flashing to a more modern moment, Miles is a Brooklyn high-school senior spending the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown playing online games with friends between Zoom classes. He is alone; one mom is a hospital nurse battling the virus, and the other is stranded in Europe. Bray's depiction of the first months of the pandemic is painfully realistic, grounded in loneliness, uncertainty, and isolation. When his estranged best friend, Chloe, asks for his help, Miles leaps at the chance to reconnect with her. Chloe's grandmother, Mormor, has sent a package of drawings and newspaper articles in German. Would Miles help her investigate and figure out why Mormor sent them? What they uncover wakes Miles up to his own potential, inspiring him to step up when the George Floyd protests explode across the borough. Untangling these threads to learn the truth of Hanna and Sophie's disappearance is absorbing and deeply moving. Using the COVID-19 pandemic as a strand in a novel connecting significant periods in history is a brilliant way to make today's teens feel seen. They are living through extremely challenging times, and they face a difficult future. Bray goes one step further and offers her readers a way to navigate and even confront the current moment with hope. Themes of forgiveness, resistance, and redemption braid the three time lines together. In each, the teen protagonists throw off their romantic blinders, overcome their complacency, wake up to what is happening around them, and choose to act against fascist ideals. And so the reader is encouraged to see the world as it is, with eyes and hearts wide open, and still believe in the possibility of a better future. Might it be a form of forgiveness to witness the worst moments in history and continue to strive to make the world better? Readers will come away motivated to be fully present, completely themselves, and to believe that courageous action matters. Because we all—past, present, and future—live under the same stars. -- Angela Carstensen (Reviewed 2/1/2025) (Booklist, vol 121, number 11, p90)

- **School Library Journal**: Three generations are connected by a tragic event in Nazi Germany. In 1939, Hanna and Sophie are two typical teenage girls searching for love. They send letters to the Bridegroom's Oak, a tree believed to possess magical matchmaking powers. Initially, they ignore the presence of Nazi soldiers in their village, but the brutal beatings and rising extremism soon become impossible to overlook. In 1980, Jenny moves from Dallas to West Berlin with her parents. There, she meets Lena, a member of the city's punk scene, who introduces Jenny to a world far removed from her parents' ritzy apartment. Lena also forces Jenny to confront long-avoided questions about her sexuality. In 2020 New York City, Miles and Chloe find themselves separated by the pandemic. Together, they begin researching a mystery mentioned by Chloe's grandmother—the disappearance of two girls, Hanna and Sophie, from their German village decades earlier. Their internet sleuthing reveals more than their online classes ever could, teaching them about the various forms of resistance and the price many paid to fight tyranny. Their discoveries unfold against the backdrop of rising anti-AAPI violence and the murder of George Floyd. While the long chapters and multiple points of view make it challenging to follow the narrative, the story remains a powerful testament to hope and resistance. Miles, who is white and Filipino, has two moms, while Chloe is white. VERDICT A moving love letter to courage, connection, and the long fight against oppression.—Cathy DeCampli --Cathy DeCampli (Reviewed 02/01/2025) (School Library Journal, vol 71, issue 2, p67)
- **Publishers Weekly**: A Three generations of teens find themselves while fighting for change in this inspiring historical mystery from Bray (the Diviners series). It's 1939 in Kleinwald, Germany, and best friends Hanna and Sophie would rather fantasize about an ancient mythical entity's purported matchmaking abilities than pay attention to world events—until Hitler invades Poland. In 1980, aspiring photographer Jenny and her preppy conservative family relocate from Dallas to West Berlin, where Jenny meets Lena, a queer German punk rocker who lives in a squat and vows to show smitten, closeted Jenny the “real” Berlin. And in 2020 Brooklyn, while navigating lockdown and learning about social justice movements, Miles agrees to help best friend (and secret crush) Chloe investigate a package from Chloe's grandmother containing mini-cassettes and a scrapbook featuring two Kleinwald teens who disappeared in 1941. Bray's intimate third-person narrative kaleidoscopes back and forth in time, interweaving the three story lines and highlighting their internal resonance. Though the setup is occasionally awkward, nuanced, gratifying character arcs and a harrowing, emotionally charged third act send this lengthy novel out on a high note. The cast is intersectionally diverse. Ages 12–up. Agent: Joanna Volpe, New Leaf Literary. (Feb.) --Staff

(Reviewed 11/04/2024) (Publishers Weekly, vol 271, issue 42, p)

- **Kirkus:** Three groups of teens are connected by a painful, decades-old mystery. In 1940s Germany, best friends Sophie and Hanna believe in the magic of the Bridegroom's Oak, which is said to help people find true love. Hopeless romantic Sophie, in particular, takes comfort in the protection of the Dodauer Forest where the oak grows—until World War II becomes a violent reality that tests not only the girls' friendship but also their conceptions of duty and justice. In 1980s West Berlin, preppy American transplant Jenny is a fish out of water—until she meets German punk Lena, who urges her to rebel against society's expectations. And in 2020 Brooklyn, Miles is trying to adjust to the radical changes brought on by Covid-19. When his best friend, Chloe, is gifted with her grandmother's scrapbook, the pair uncover a trail of secrets linked to long-ago disappearances. Bray's immersive third-person narrative seamlessly navigates past and present, weaving together themes of power, remorse, forgiveness, and hope. She crafts her characters with detailed precision; their emotions feel as alive as each well-rendered historical setting. Through the lens of these young people's lives, Bray emphasizes how much we're connected, offering a powerful depiction of transformative storytelling as an act of resistance and a harbinger of the future. Most characters are white; Miles is Filipino and white. A breathtaking journey that will leave a lasting impression on readers' minds and hearts. (Historical mystery. 13-18) (Kirkus Reviews, December 15, 2024)

Book Talk

Under the Same Stars starts with best friends Sophie and Hanna in 1940s Germany as World War II unfolds in their small town. Then, in 1980s West Germany, American teen Jenny is struggling to fit in until she meets Lena, a punk-rock German girl. And finally, in Spring 2020, best friends Miles and Chloe are barely surviving senior year in lockdown, until Chloe's grandmother leads them to investigate a cold case about two teenagers who went missing in Germany during

World War II. Three time periods, three different groups of teens who are struggling with identity and friendship. Can you figure out how these three time periods are connected?

We Could Be Magic by Marissa Meyer

Genre(s): Graphic Novel, Realistic Fiction

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 12 and up

Description: When Tabitha Laurie was growing up, a visit to Sommerland saved her belief in true love, even as her parents' marriage was falling apart. Now she's landed her dream job at the theme park's prestigious summer program, where she can make magical memories for other kids, guests, and superfans just like her. All she has to do is audition for one of the coveted princess roles, and soon her dreams will come true.

There's just one problem. The heroes and heroines at Sommerland are all, well... thin. And no matter how much Tabi lives for the magic, she simply doesn't fit the park's idea of a princess.

Given a not-so-regal position at a nacho food stand instead, Tabi is going to need the support of new friends, a new crush, and a whole lot of magic if she's going to devise her own happily ever after. . . without getting herself fired in the process.

With art by Joelle Murray, the wonder of Sommerland comes to life with charming characters and whimsical backdrops. *We Could Be Magic* is a perfect read for anyone looking to get swept away by a sparkly summer romance.

Reviews:

- **School Library Journal:** Tabitha (Tabi) is thrilled when she gets a summer internship at Sommerland, the theme park that has been her obsession since childhood. But once she arrives, the magic quickly fades. Her roommate is rude, the park's employees constantly complain about their minimum wage jobs, and she can't seem to find anyone who shares her excitement. Tabi's first assignment is Nacho Mama's Food Stand, where she wears an itchy uniform and anxiously awaits the upcoming character auditions. When the day arrives, her dream of becoming a Sommerland princess is quickly squashed. Doubling down on her goal, Tabi practices relentlessly and manages to get cast as Kitty Wise, the park's mascot. Though she appreciates her new position, Tabi realizes that no matter how hard she tries, the world may not be ready for a princess who doesn't fit the typical standards of beauty. But with the help of one of her only true friends there, and a new crush, she may be able to change that. This is a sweet, wholesome story about dreams, self-esteem, motivation, and pushing back against societal norms. The whimsical drawings are colorful and upbeat. While the plot is simple, it succeeds in capturing one teenage girl's unmatched determination and her power to change a small part of her world. Tabi is Black and full-

figured, and there is diverse representation from secondary and background characters throughout. VERDICT A charming story that is recommended for libraries that are looking for sweet, fun romances.—Karin Greenberg --Karin Greenberg (Reviewed 05/01/2025) (School Library Journal, vol 71, issue 5, p137)

- **Publishers Weekly**: Six-year-old Tabitha Laurie believes that love conquers all. Then her parents divorce, leaving her heartbroken. To help distract her, Tabi's father takes her to the Disney-esque Sommerland, where she meets Princess Madeline, a theme park character who renews her faith in true love. Now 17, Tabi plans to audition for a Sommerland princess role while participating in the park's seasonal employment program; she refuses to let her snobby summer roommate, pessimistic coworkers, and a less than desirable gig tending a nacho stand shake her resolve. Despite mean-spirited comments that she'd be better suited to a costumed animal character, she auditions for a princess role anyway. And when she doesn't get the part, she devotes all her efforts, energy, and free time to preparing for the next audition opportunity. She also bonds with James, a park character attendant who shares her love for the magic of Sommerland despite his own complicated past. Meyer (With a Little Luck) charms in this touching graphic novel tale about chasing one's dreams, overcoming obstacles, and believing in magic. Jewel-toned artwork by Murray (A Day at Abbott Elementary) evokes fairy tale vibes, making for a cozy and appropriately swoony read. Tabitha is Black; James is white. Ages 12–up. (June) --Staff (Reviewed 03/24/2025) (Publishers Weekly, vol 272, issue 12, p)
- **Kirkus**: Seventeen-year-old Tabitha Laurie has been a devoted fan of Sommerland theme park since she was a little girl. Tabi, who has dark brown skin and Afro-textured hair, believes in the magic Sommerland offers—including the promise of true love—especially after facing the shock of her parents' divorce. After securing a position in the park's summer program for high schoolers, Tabi is excited, declaring that "happily ever after begins with working at Sommerland." But she quickly learns that other employees don't feel the same enthusiasm and in fact have numerous complaints about the guests and work conditions. Despite this, Tabi dreams of becoming a character actor—in particular Princess Madeline, the brown-skinned princess she was thrilled to meet as a child. But she's assigned to a nacho stand instead. She auditions for one of the coveted princess positions but quickly learns that "there are no fat princesses in Sommerland." As Tabi navigates her feelings of insecurity, she tries not to lose her sense of the park's magic. The bright, colorful illustrations, which emphasize the characters' emotions, set the stage for a delightfully affirming story of learning to accept yourself despite what others may say. Even with the very quick pacing, the storytelling is

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strong. Meyer explores themes of body positivity and bullying as Tabi contends with cutting comments about her size but ultimately creates and spreads joy with support from those who value her as she is. A whimsical, enchanting, and celebratory read. (Graphic fiction. 12-18) (Kirkus Reviews, April 15, 2025)

Book Talk

Theme parks can be a truly magical place, and for 17-year-old Tabitha, landing a summer job at the famed Sommerland is just the magic she's been looking for. A lifetime fan of the Disney-style park, Tabitha is set on becoming a character actor for a princess role. But when auditions roll around, she realizes how under-prepared she is compared to everyone else, and just how pessimistic her coworkers truly are. Determined to achieve her dream role, Tabitha dedicates all of her free time and energy into perfecting her skills. It helps that James, a fellow park employee, shares her passion for Sommerland and gives her insight into the park's ins-and-outs. With whimsical illustrations, likeable characters, and a touch of romance, *We Could be Magic* is a delightful story of friendship and persistence.

When We Ride by Rex Ogle

Genre(s): Novel in Verse, Realistic Fiction

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 14 and up

Description: Diego Benevides works hard. His single mother encourages him to stay focused on school, on getting into college, on getting out of their crumbling neighborhood. That's why she gave him her car.

Diego's best friend, Lawson, needs a ride—because Lawson is dealing. As long as Diego's not carrying, not selling, it's cool. It's just weed.

But when Lawson starts carrying powder and pills and worse, their friendship is tested and their lives are threatened. As the lines between dealer and driver blur, everything Diego has worked for is jeopardized, and he faces a deadly reckoning with the choices he and his best friend have made.

Award-winning memoirist and poet Rex Ogle's searing first novel-in-verse is an unforgettable story of the power and price of loyalty.

Reviews:

- **Publishers Weekly:** While college-bound Mexican American Diego plays by the rules, Lawson, who is white, deals drugs to get by. Despite their perceived differences, both grew up in financially unstable homes without their fathers, a similarity that binds them together. As such, Diego feels it's his responsibility to persuade Lawson to pursue a less dangerous lifestyle; he bargains, cajoles, and even threatens Lawson as they drive around in Diego's 1980 Cadillac DeVille. As the work cycles on, Diego struggles with the idea of embarking on a future that could require abandoning his best friend. Using simple language with short lines and sparkling imagery ("fluorescent lights/ that break the dark of midnight"), Ogle (*Abuela, Don't Forget Me*) portrays the boys' circumstances with gritty frankness, positing on how, for some families, hard choices don't feel like choices at all: the money Lawson makes is the only thing paying his and his mother's rent. In this riveting, at times heartbreaking verse novel, Ogle delivers an affecting portrait of two "ride or die" friends in dire circumstances for whom the phrase becomes scarily literal. Ages 14–up. Agent: Brent Taylor, Triada US. (Mar.) --Staff (Reviewed 12/16/2024) (*Publishers Weekly*, vol 271, issue 48, p)
- **Kirkus:** A hardworking high school senior strives to keep his future bright while driving around his drug-dealing friend. Benny and Lawson, both raised by struggling single moms after their fathers left, are neighbors, best friends, and total opposites. Lawson, a white boy who's charismatic and popular, goes to school mainly to deal drugs—not to study. Mexican American Benny, who's quiet and studious, ranks near the top of their class. Lawson helps Benny

come out of his shell at parties and stands up for him against bullies, and Benny is there when Lawson needs a ride. Benny's mom holds down multiple cleaning jobs, works to stay sober, and encourages her son to go to college. By contrast, Lawson's mom, who's on welfare, depends on Lawson dealing marijuana to make rent. As graduation nears, the duo find themselves on dangerously different paths. Feeling trapped by his dependent mother and a new, violent drug boss, Lawson starts selling harder drugs. The risk of getting arrested or attacked because of Lawson's drug dealing terrifies Benny, who threatens to stop driving Lawson around. Written in swift, emotive verse from Benny's perspective, this work will leave readers empathizing with Benny's struggle to prioritize his own future while remaining loyal to the childhood best friend he genuinely wants to help. But it's the expertly paced plot twist at the end that makes Benny and Lawson's story heartbreakingly unforgettable. Achingly, beautifully written. (Verse fiction. 14-18) (Kirkus Reviews, January 1, 2025)

Book Talk

When Diego's best friend Lawson asks him for a ride one day, he can't see a reason to decline. Sure, he knows that Lawson is dealing drugs, but it's so his family can get by, so he figures it's worth the risk. But when Lawson starts dealing harder substances, Diego's dreams of going to college are put at risk. Unsure of if his ride or die friendship is worth losing it all, Diego grapples with how to help Lawson without losing their friendship. Through gritty prose, this novel in verse explores the pitfalls of poverty and the struggle to remain loyal when your friend is in the wrong. This book is perfect for fans of troubled characters, plot twists, and reluctant readers.

Where Wolves Don't Die by Anton Treuer

Genre(s): Realistic Fiction

Publisher Recommended Level: Ages 11 and up

Description: Ezra Cloud hates living in Northeast Minneapolis. His father is a professor of their language, Ojibwe, at a local college, so they have to be there. But Ezra hates the dirty, polluted snow around them. He hates being away from the rez at Nigigoonsiminikaaning First Nation. And he hates the local bully in his neighborhood, Matt Schroeder, who terrorizes Ezra and his friend Nora George. Ezra gets into a terrible fight with Matt at school defending Nora, and that same night, Matt's house burns down. Instantly, Ezra becomes a prime suspect. Knowing he won't get a fair deal, and knowing his innocence, Ezra's family sends him away to run traplines with his grandfather in a remote part of Canada, while the investigation is ongoing. But the Schroeders are looking for him...

Reviews:

- **Booklist:** Treuer (Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians but Were Afraid to Ask, 2021) immerses the reader in Ojibwe culture in this suspenseful novel of wilderness survival. At school in Northeast Minneapolis, Ezra tolerates Matt's bullying. But when Matt targets his friend Nora, Ezra snaps back. That very night, Matt's house goes up in flames. To shelter Ezra from a potentially racist police investigation, his father sends him deep into their Canadian tribal lands to work the trap lines with Grandpa Liam for the second half of ninth grade. Ezra welcomes the distance from his father, whom he blames for his mother's recent death from leukemia. And Ezra is excited to share his grandpa's small hunting cabin, learn the sacred ways of the harvest, and navigate a Ski-Doo around the isolated lakes and forests north of the Minnesota-Ontario border. Visits to their Nigigoonsiminikaaning community on the rez give Ezra a chance to Zoom with his teachers and text with Nora. The details and pure physicality of running the lines are vivid and fascinating, and Grandpa Liam is a character for the ages, filled with love, knowledge, and humor. The pace accelerates when treacherous terrain, threatening wildlife, family secrets, and Matt's vow of revenge spill into an extended fight for survival. Ezra's growth—in strength, skill, responsibility, and empathy—is hard-won. An essential illumination of contemporary Indigenous life. -- Angela Carstensen (Reviewed 5/1/2024) (Booklist, vol 120, number 17, p64)
- **School Library Journal:** Ojibwe teen Ezra stands up to Matt, the school bully for harassing Nora, his crush, and injures himself. The next day, he and Nora learn Matt's family perished in a house fire, and Matt, who survived, is blaming the fire on Ezra. Ezra's father Byron takes him up to "Red Gut," their reservation in Canada, to stay with Grandpa Liam and Grandma Emma. He is

told he will help Grandpa work the trapline—a dream come true for him to learn hunting and survival skills. Ezra is free from the tricky situation at school and begins to process his mom's death, which strained his relationship with his dad, at their isolated trapping cabin. A long-buried family secret is revealed, and he learns how far Grandpa Liam will go to protect their family and friends. The narrative is well written with Ojibwe language scattered throughout. Grandpa Liam constantly educates Ezra on their history and culture, which sometimes sounds like a textbook. Ezra's struggles with a crush, loss of a parent, and a bully will resonate with readers. Parts of the ending are predictable, but there is a twist. Stylistic sketches of a wolf begin each chapter, since Ezra's family is wolf clan, and a bear sketch starts each section. Ojibwe translations are included, along with an author's note.

VERDICT A great first purchase for all libraries, with a unique hero's journey for Ezra as he begins to assume adult responsibilities.—Tamara Saarinen -- Tamara Saarinen (Reviewed 07/01/2024) (School Library Journal, vol 70, issue 7, p72)

- **Publishers Weekly**: Ojibwe teen Ezra Cloud hates his Northeast Minneapolis home; he's tired of the bullying he endures from his peers regarding his heritage ("White people didn't have to live that kind of fear," Ezra thinks). He much prefers the surroundings of Nigigoonsiminikaaning First Nation, his reservation on the other side of the U.S.-Canada border. The taunting becomes more personal for Ezra when bully Matt torments Ezra's Ojibwe friend. That night, Matt's father and uncle die in a house fire, and Ezra is the prime suspect. To escape police suspicion, Ezra's father sends him to Nigigoonsiminikaaning, where he will work the winter trapline with his grandfather. While navigating the snowy wilderness, he learns about the animals of the area, as well as his grandfather's past. He also struggles with unresolved anger at his father over his mother's death while working at a dangerous lumber company. This leisurely paced novel by Ojibwe author Treuer (Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians but Were Afraid to Ask, for adults) contains immersive detail about trapping methods as well as Indigenous tales about the natural world, making for an intriguing if meandering adventure. Ages 12–up. (June) --Staff (Reviewed 04/22/2024) (Publishers Weekly, vol 271, issue 16, p)
- **Kirkus**: A fire changes a 15-year-old boy's life in this fiction debut by noted Ojibwe scholar and author Treuer. Ezra Cloud, a member of the Nigigoonsiminikaaning First Nation in Canada, lives in Minneapolis with his professor father, Byron. When the home of bully Matt Schroeder—"just the kind of colonizer who would've been a perfect fit in the US 7th Cavalry in 1890, trying to kill innocent Lakota children with a Hotchkiss gun"—mysteriously burns down the night after a public altercation between Matt and

Ezra, the police want to question Matt's classmates. Byron arranges for his son to give his statement over Zoom and takes him back to the rez, where Ezra is thrilled to learn he'll be working the trapline for the winter with Grandpa Liam. Ezra's a strong student who must still do his homework and check in with teachers when he has internet access, but otherwise he'll be focusing on wilderness knowledge. Alongside issues such as racism, Ezra's first-person perspective thoughtfully explores grief: His mother passed recently, and he's angry and has a rocky relationship with Byron. The novel positively portrays Indigenous characters through characterization that embraces and affirms the parallel paths of traditional ways and formal schooling. Byron is a caring father who wants to be involved in his son's life during a trying time. The Cloud family are wolf clan, something referenced in Pawis-Steckley's striking Anishinaabe woodland art-style digital spot illustrations. A nuanced adventure centering family and growth. (Ojibwe translations, author's note) (Fiction. 12-18) (Kirkus Reviews, April 1, 2024)

Book Talk

Where Wolves Don't Die is a thoughtful and suspenseful coming-of-age novel centered on fifteen-year-old Ezra Cloud, an Ojibwe teenager living in Minneapolis. After a confrontation with a school bully, a house fire leaves several people dead and Ezra becomes a suspect. His father sends him to stay with his grandfather on the reservation, where Ezra spends the winter learning traditional ways of life, working a trapline, and reconnecting with his family, culture, and the natural world. As Ezra navigates grief, racism, family conflict, and questions about his own identity, he begins to develop a deeper understanding of himself and his place in the world. Treuer's portrayal of contemporary Ojibwe life is a big plus, rather than focusing solely on historical trauma, the story emphasizes family, cultural knowledge, language, connection to the land, traditional skills, and the wisdom of elders. Ezra's relationship with his grandfather provides some of the novel's most meaningful moments, while the contrast between his life in Minneapolis and his time on the reservation allows readers to see how culture and connection to place shape his identity. The wilderness survival elements and mystery surrounding the fire add enough suspense to appeal to teen readers who might not typically seek out literary or culturally focused fiction. The novel also includes Ojibwe language. The novel offers an opportunity to encounter a contemporary Indigenous perspective rather than a story centered solely on historical events. Its themes of family, grief, belonging, racism, responsibility, and connection to the land can resonate with readers while also encouraging them to consider experiences and cultural traditions different from their own. The wilderness setting and emphasis on learning from elders may have particular appeal to readers in rural areas especially for readers interested in Indigenous literature, wilderness survival, mystery, and character-driven coming-of-age stories.