Tween Time: Titles to Share with Readers Ages 9–12

Grace Enriquez, Mary Ann Cappiello, Katie Egan Cunningham, and Erika Thulin Dawes

This column features a selection of children's literature for tweens.

As tweens grow toward adulthood, traditional discourses focus on the chaos of hormones, peer pressure, and changing identity (Lesko, 2012), often positioning tweens as "individuals without agency and autonomy, particularly in instances where adults perceive them as being irresponsible and lacking in good judgment" (Davies, 1993, as cited in Alvermann, 2001, p. 678). The books we recommend below, however, challenge those assumptions by presenting tweens who are navigating their experiences with agency and even aplomb. Within their pages, we see tweens learning about responsibility and reality, but also holding onto imagination, invention, and play. We see them testing out new paths while staying steadfast to what they trust and love. We see them making and learning from mistakes, and we see them growing awareness and growing purpose. It is our hope that by sharing these titles with your tween readers, you'll be able to help them steer well through these years, too.

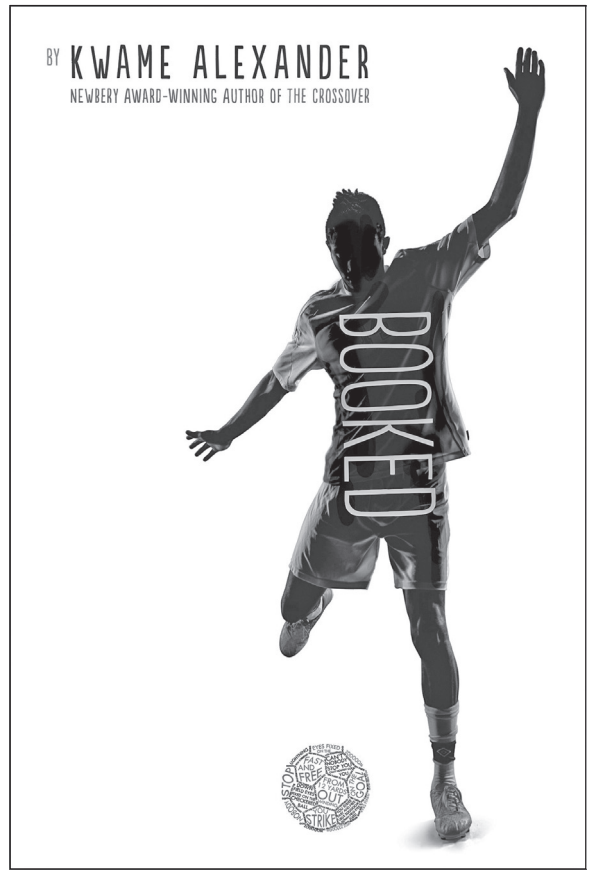
References

Alvermann, D. E. (2001). Reading adolescents' reading identities: Looking back to see ahead. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 44*, 676–690.

Lesko, N. (2012). *Act your age!: A cultural construction of adolescence* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Booked

Written by Kwame Alexander
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016, 320 pp., ISBN 978-0-544-57098-6



Eighth grader Nick Hall is trapped "in a prison/ of words" (p. 5). His father, a linguistics professor, insists that he make his way through the dictionary, even though Nick would much rather spend his time playing soccer, hanging out with his best friend Coby Lee, or trying to talk to his crush, April Farrow. When his parents suddenly separate,

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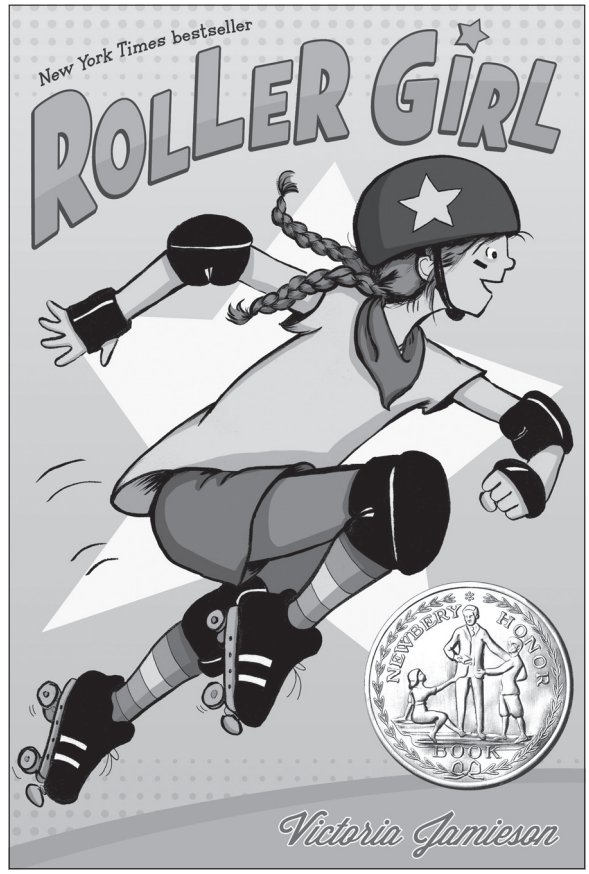
and his mother moves to Kentucky to train horses, Nick is forced to reevaluate every aspect of his everyday life. Alexander's now signature style of verse fiction affords tween readers a front-row seat as Nick battles bullies, deflects excess enthusiasm from his English teacher and school librarian (a rapper turned teacher), and attempts to adjust to his father's rigid expectations. Alexander models a range of poetic forms and stylistic choices, and allows readers the opportunity to stretch their vocabularies along with Nick in carefully punctuated footnote definitions. Readers, along with the protagonist, witness the power of narrative to know ourselves at a deeper level and connect to others. The quick pace of this verse novel assures access to a range of readers who, like Nick, may just wind up getting "booked." (MAC)

Roller Girl

Written and illustrated by Victoria Jamieson
Dial, 2015, 240 pp., ISBN 978-0-8037-4016-7

Jammers, Blockers, wild hairstyles, derby names, warfaces, bouts, and bruises—roll along with Astrid into the world of "Rrrr-roller Derby." On the cusp of junior high school, 12-year-old Astrid finds herself falling out of sync with her best friend Nicole; shopping malls, boys, and make-up are just not her thing. When the two girls attend their first Roller Derby, Astrid is hooked, while Nicole is simply bored. A gulf opens up between the girls as they head off to different summer camps—Nicole to ballet camp and Astrid to Derby camp. Astrid's first day is brutal; the sport is more challenging than she ever imagined, yet she perseveres. Her struggles on and off the rink are palpable in this visual exploration of the emotional turmoil of the preteen/teenage years. As she learns to push the limits of her own endurance, Astrid also learns valuable lessons about identity, honesty, and the nature of friendship. Jamieson utilizes rich color, creates visual imagery, breaks panel frames, and employs smart spacing to effectively enhance the text. With its fast-paced plot, relatable main character, and engaging look at a less familiar sport, this Newbery Honor-winning graphic novel is sure to generate a fan club. (ETD)

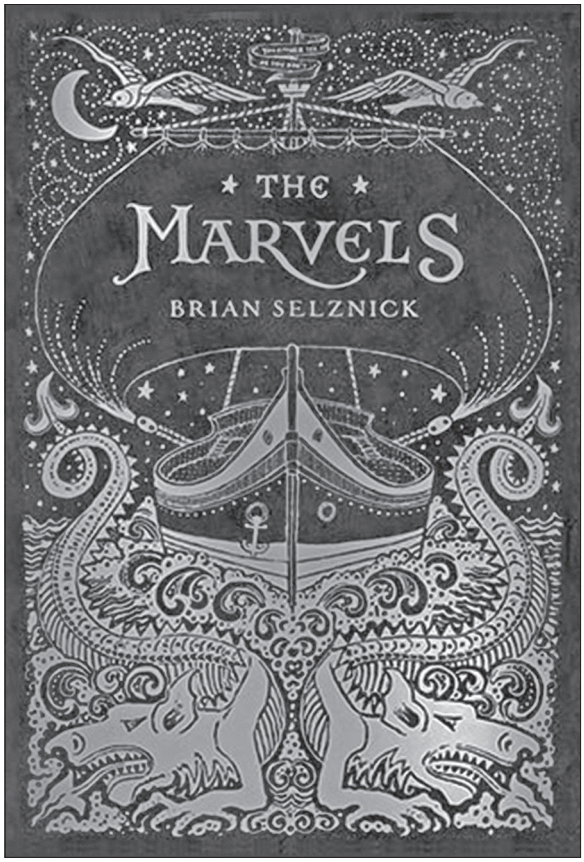


The Marvels

Written and illustrated by Brian Selznick
Scholastic, 2015, 665 pp., ISBN 978-0-545-44868-0

Once again masterful, Brian Selznick's new inventive novel, *The Marvels*, begins with nearly 400 continuous, illustrated pages chronicling the Marvel family from 1766 to 1900. The maxim "you either see it or you don't" invites readers in from the opening page and challenges them to linger on each page to gather details from facial expressions, changing settings, characters' actions, playbills, and newspaper headlines. The Marvel family journey begins with a shipwreck of which Billy Marvel is the sole survivor. He finds work at the Royal Theater in London, and for subsequent generations the Marvels take the London theater scene by storm. The story shifts from the breathtaking, wordless pages to 200 pages of prose that begin in the year 1990, at which time we meet 13-year-old Joseph who has run away from boarding school to find his Uncle Albert in London. At once gripping and mystifying,

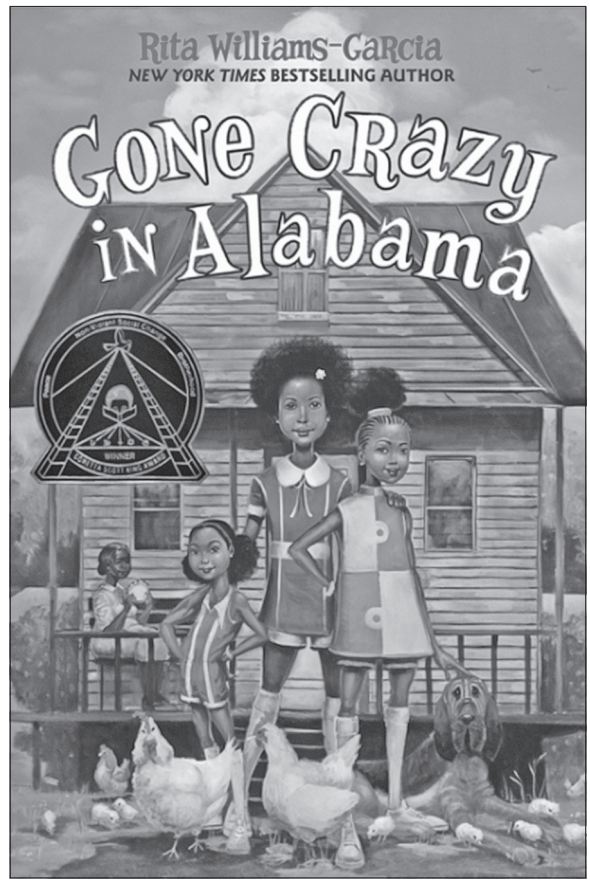
The Marvels inspires readers to search for clues to Joseph's family history. Readers will be immediately drawn to the majestic gold and purple cover with its gilded edges, but it is the arresting black-and-white pencil illustrations that truly make this book feel like a gift. While it is tempting to turn the pages quickly, given the cinematic nature of the collection of illustrations, there are subtle details that beckon readers to linger on each page. The two stories read like puzzles to be solved and invite more questions than answers. The power of story is championed in this creative work that begs to be read and reread. (KEC)



Gone Crazy in Alabama

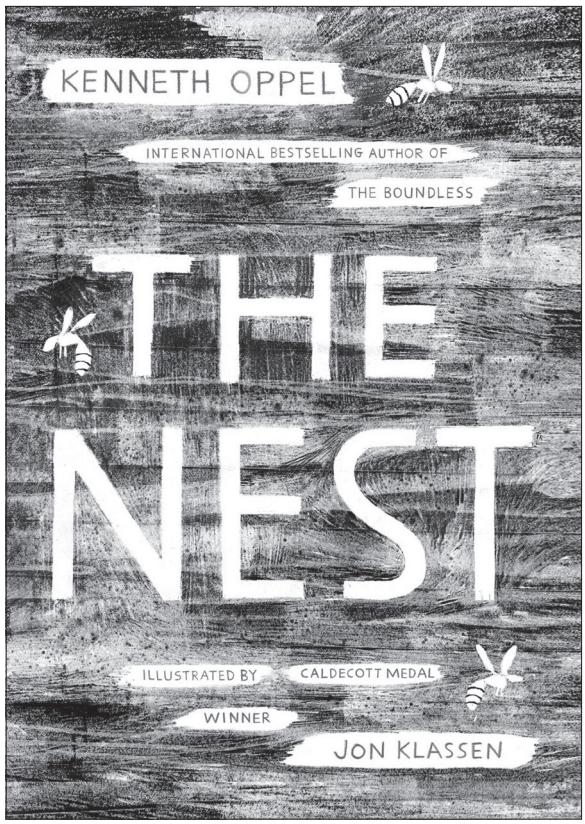
Written by Rita Williams-Garcia
Amistad, 2015, 304 pp., ISBN 978-0-06221-587-1

Fans of Rita Williams-Garcia's *One Crazy Summer* and *P.S. Be Eleven* have another installment of funny, heartwarming antics by Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern in this bittersweet farewell to the Gaither family. In *Gone Crazy in Alabama*, the three sisters leave Brooklyn for a summer at the family farm in Alabama under the care of Big Ma and her mother, Ma Charles. Thanks to the exacting prose of Williams-Garcia, readers will feel as though they are on a journey alongside the girls from the first pages. Delphine is once again responsible for her sisters, but Vonetta is ready to forge her own identity as she stirs up family rivalry across the creek between Ma Charles and her estranged sister, Great Aunt Trotter. When a devastating tornado strikes the rural community, relatives across the creek and across the country come together as they face near tragedy. Both sorrowful and humorous, the Gaithers' story offers an important American family story that brings the historical context of 1969 to life through the authentic struggles and triumphs of the characters. Readers new to the Gaither girls will find that they are not at a loss for context as the work can stand on its own as a powerful contribution to the genre of historical fiction for middle grade readers. (KEC)



The Nest

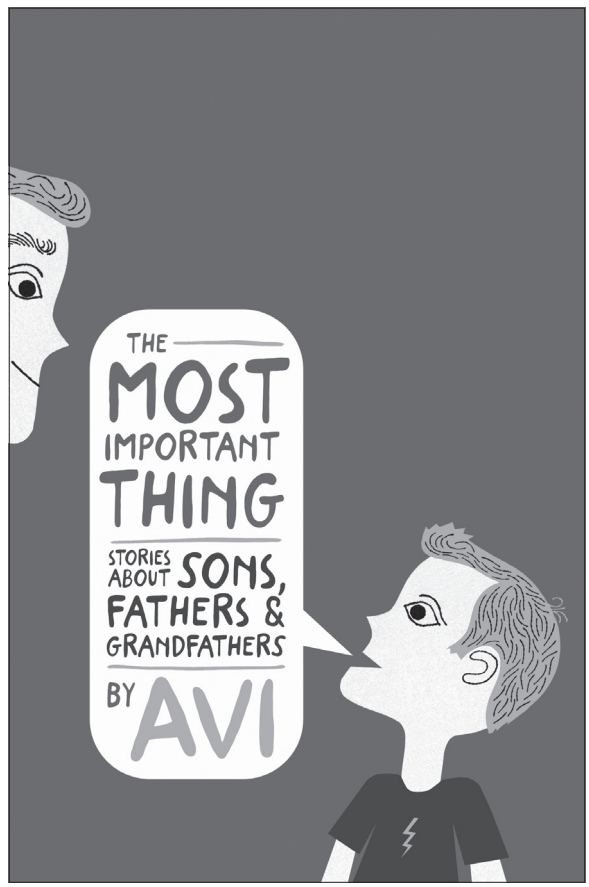
Written by Kenneth Oppel
Illustrated by Jon Klassen
Simon & Schuster, 2015, 272 pp., ISBN 978-1-481-43232-0



"Yes" is a little, but powerful, word. All Steve has to do is say "yes" to the angelic wasp queen that appears in his dreams at night and promises to help "when people are scared or in trouble. We come when there's grief" (p. 20). At first, this proposal sounds wonderful, especially since his newborn brother has a congenital health issue and his worried parents spend all their time at the hospital. Perhaps it will even help alleviate his growing anxieties about the enormous wasp nest growing outside his brother's window or the mysterious phone calls from a "Mr. Nobody" that only he and his sister can hear. The wasps' plans, however, involve replacing his baby brother with a perfect new one that they are building in their nest. Moreover, the longer Steve vacillates, the more impatient and sinister the wasps become. Oppel explores questions of normalcy, family, and sacrifice in a narrative that begins with Steve's quiet, inner turmoil and then crescendos into a page-turning, psychological thriller. Klassen once again proves his Caldecott worthiness with shadowy, graphite illustrations that reflect the family's fear of the unknown. Middle grade fans of *Skellig* and *Coraline* will quickly consume this story, but anyone who says "yes" to this book will find a haunting, compelling, and powerful tale of conquering the darkest reaches of the imagination. (GE)

The Most Important Thing: Stories about Sons, Fathers, and Grandfathers

Written by Avi
Candlewick, 2016, 224 pp., ISBN 978-0-7636-8111-1

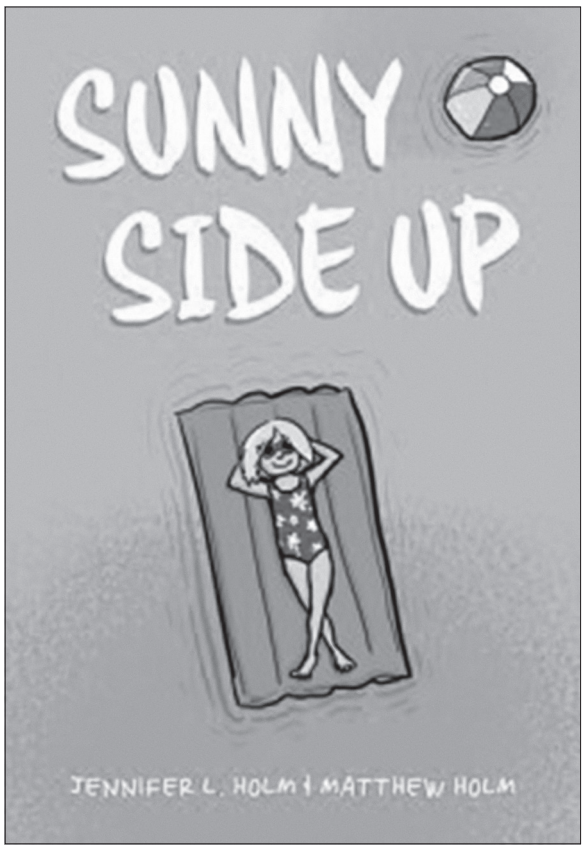


Avi's latest short story collection begins with a question: "What's the most important thing you can do for your son?" (unpaged). While the question is directed at fathers, the seven short stories that follow are most definitely written for their tween sons and daughters. Fathers and sons, grandfathers and grandsons, and sons and soon-to-be-stepdads are the featured characters.

In fiction, as in life, some fathers and grandfathers disappoint while others inspire. In one story, a grandson serves as the very dream catcher for whom his grandfather has been searching for more than a generation, unlocking the secrets of his tour of duty in Vietnam. In another, the protagonist and his brand new stepmother are each surprised to discover that the other exists. One son mourns the loss of his father too soon, while another, the victim of bullies, must publicly admonish his father, the ultimate bully. The stories range from happy to complicated to downright devastating, offering readers a range of boys and men to empathize with, recoil from, and admire. The prospective stepfather in the concluding story perhaps says it best when he is asked the question from which the title originates: "The first thing is to love him. The second thing is, convince him that you *do* love him" (p. 213). (MAC)

Sunny Side Up

Written by Jennifer L. Holm and Matthew Holm
Graphix, 2015, 224 pp., ISBN 978-0-545-74166-8



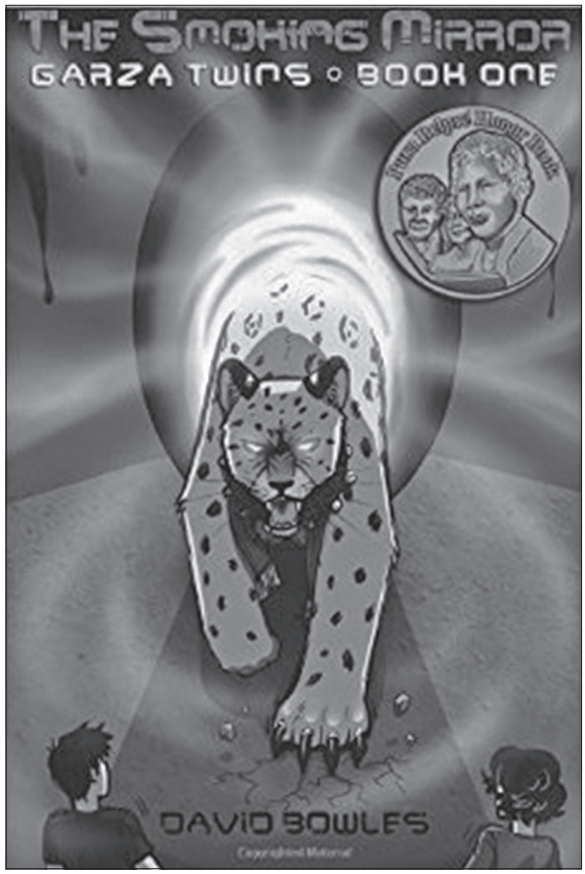
It's the summer of 1976 and instead of taking a family beach vacation with her best friend, ten-year-old Sunny finds herself packed off to spend August in her grandfather's Florida retirement community. As she adjusts to a creaky hide-a-bed, early bird dinners, cranky old folks, and large alligators, Sunny struggles with memories of the experiences that precipitated her trip. Dated flashbacks offer readers growing knowledge of her older brother Dale's struggles with addiction and Sunny's sense of guilt and helplessness. Some relief arrives in a newly formed friendship with the groundskeeper's son Buzz, who introduces her to the joys of comic books and the powers of superheroes. But it is Gramps in whom Sunny ultimately confides. Speech bubbles and wordless spreads combine to effectively convey emotion, and a varied pallet expresses changes in mood. In this semi-autobiographical and multilayered graphic novel, Jennifer and Matthew Holm (*Babymouse* and *Squish*) tackle the topic of addiction with both humor and empathy, encouraging their readers to reach for support when they feel confused or scared about the behavior of a loved one. (ETD)

The Smoking Mirror: Garza Twins Book One

Written by David Bowles
IFWG Publishing, 2015, 226 pp., ISBN 978-1-925148-64-0

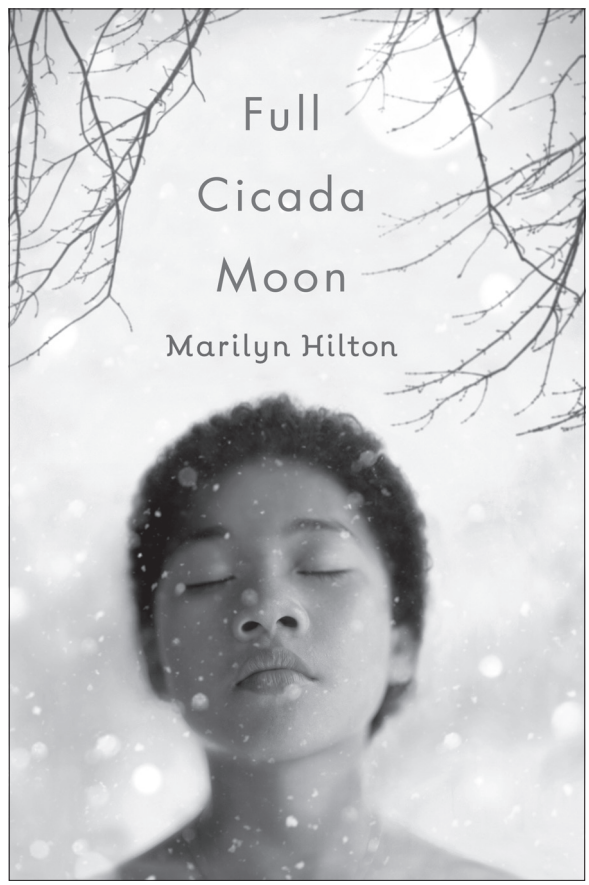
Fantasy lovers have a new family to follow in the Pura Belpré Honor Book *The Smoking Mirror*. Carol and Johnny Garza are 12-year-old twins who learn their mother is a *nagual*, a shapeshifter, and that they have inherited her ancient powers. Readers will be enthralled by the twins' dangerous quest through the Aztec underworld to find their mother following her unexplainable disappearance from their home in Texas. The language is both rich and at times mature as the tweens engage in sibling banter that is typical for this age group. Carol and Johnny feel real in their near-teen angst and in their stubborn willfulness toward one another as they unite on their search. Layered with rich references to cultural life in Mexico, this book

offers a compelling, fast-paced new addition to the world of fantasy. Part folklore, part mythology, this first in a series of stories about the Garza twins will leave readers with a more nuanced understanding of regional histories from Mexico and a desire to read more of the Garza twins' mystical adventures. (KEC)



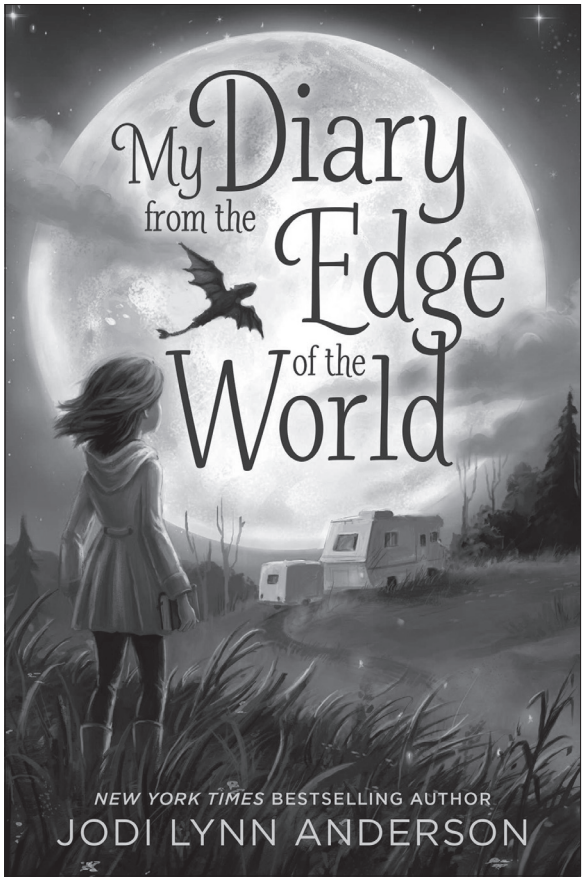
Full Cicada Moon
Written by Marilyn Hilton
Dial, 2015, 400 pp., ISBN 978-0-525-42875-6

In 1969, the Apollo 11 astronauts head for the moon, US involvement in the Vietnam War is at its peak, and Mimi Oliver is the new girl in town. Half-Japanese, half-Black, Mimi stands out in the small, mostly White college town of Hillsborough, Vermont. What's more is that with a keen interest in science and power tools, Mimi questions the status quo at her new school and resolves to challenge local conventions, particularly those about what girls can and can't do. In the face of daily microaggressions and blatant racial and gender discrimination, Mimi's approach is to always be kind and respectful but persistent –"*drip, drip, drip/*until the granite cracks" (p. 31). In fact, despite the monumental events of history that happen that year—some of which inspire plot turns and make for some tight symbolism—it's the slow changes that make the most impact on Mimi's life, "like the cicadas growing/underground for years—/until they burst from the ground—" (p. 370). Told in lyrical verse, Mimi's story is both a triumphant and imperfect one. She wants to fit in at the same time she wants to break the mold. But wanting desperately to gain social acceptance, pursue one's dreams, and change the world is a dilemma at the heart of tween-hood. Hilton's attempt to represent that predicament through a voice not often heard is a refreshing one. (GE)



My Diary from the Edge of the World

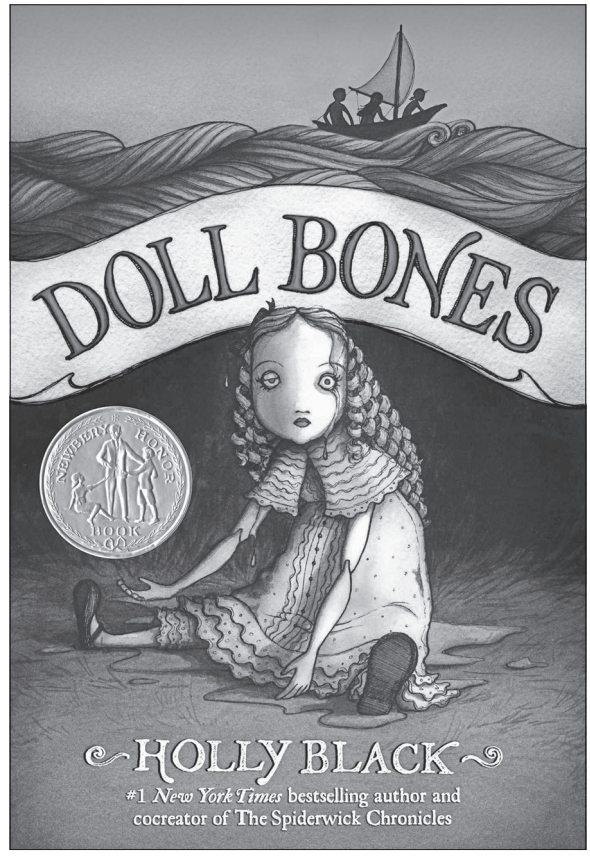
Written by Jodi Lynn Anderson
Aladdin, 2015, 432 pp., ISBN 978-1-442-48387-3



Twelve-year-old Gracie lives in a world both like and unlike ours—a world where "nothing terrible or exciting ever happens . . . . [o]nly baseball games and lying on the grass . . . collecting earthworms in the puddles after rain or hunting for dragon scales in the fall" (p. 9). In Gracie's world, dragons, vampires, ghosts, and sasquatches live alongside ordinary humans who live in regular houses, shop at T. J. Maxx, and eat at McDonald's. But something terrible does happen to Gracie: a dark cloud, a harbinger of death, appears in the sky above her backyard. Gracie's weatherman dad studies the cloud with trepidation and decides to take drastic measures. Dad has long been a much-laughed-at believer in the Extraordinary World, a parallel dimension where magic does not exist, proffering quantum physics-based descriptions of its existence. Fearing that the cloud has arrived to collect his ailing youngest son Sam, he packs his family into a Winnebago and sets out for uncharted territory inhabited by vindictive magical creatures. Gracie narrates this high-action adventure by writing in her diary, describing her older sister Millie, Oliver (an orphaned classmate along for the ride), her parents, and Sam with honesty and growing insight. Tweens will find this coming-of-age novel equally rewarding, heart-rending, and redemptive. A surprise ending will leave readers agreeing with Gracie, who writes: "Maybe the world is a mystery to everyone, even the smartest people or the oldest people . . ." (p. 277). (ETD)

Doll Bones

Written by Holly Black
Margaret K. McElderry, 2013, 256 pp., ISBN 978-1-416-96398-1

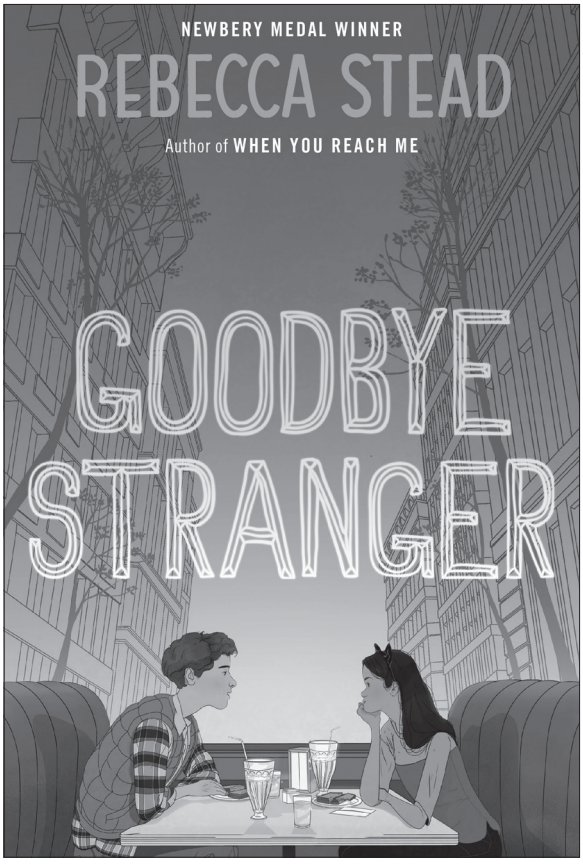


When are you too old to play? Can you like a girl and still play with action figures? Zach Barlow is on the edge of change; "the mysterious thing that had stretched other boys like taffy had started to happen to Zach" (p. 21). As a result, boys

and girls alike are treating him differently. An excellent basketball player, Zach also loves to play "the game" with childhood friends Poppy and Alice. When his father throws out all of his action figures in order to force him to grow up, Zach is too devastated to even speak of it; instead, he tells Alice and Poppy he no longer wants to play, hurting them both. But a real-life quest awaits them as the trio embarks on a journey to find the burial plot for "the Queen," an antique china doll Poppy's family has kept for years in a glass case. The trip grows frightening as the Queen begins to speak to them in their sleep. Winner of a 2014 Newbery Honor Award, *Doll Bones* is a story of friendship and trust, imagination and truth—a story about leaving the tween years behind. It offers a model for how we can continue to play as we grow older, and it asks us to consider what is real: the stories we invent or the actions we take? (MAC)

Goodbye Stranger

Written by Rebecca Stead
Wendy Lamb, 2015, 304 pp., ISBN 978-0-385-74317-4



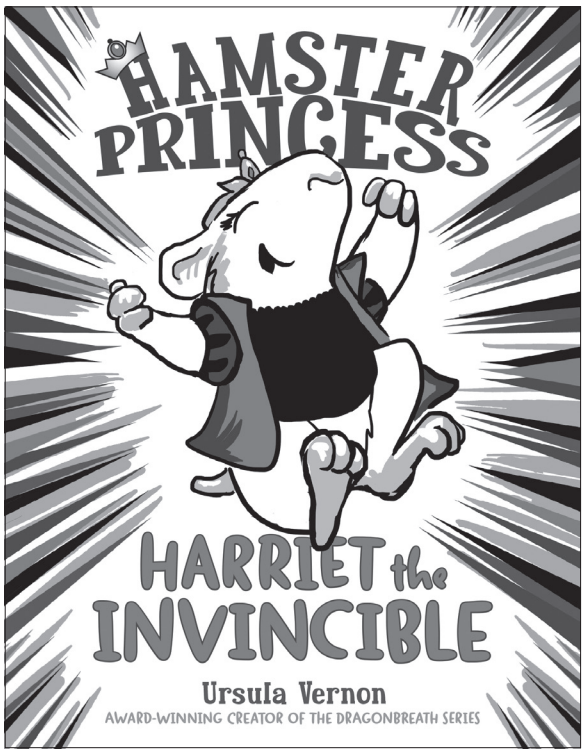
Ah, middle school—where tweens find themselves awkwardly traversing their past identities as children and emerging identities as adults. Friendships suddenly become complicated, and the notion of love takes on a deeper, surprising meaning. In three entwined and alternating narratives, Newbery Award-winning author Rebecca Stead shows once again her astute perception into that world. There's the tale of a tight trio—Bridge, Em, and Tabitha—who cling to their mantra of "no fighting" even as their diverging interests and experiences put new strains on their longstanding friendship. There's also Sherm's story, which is penned in angry, confused, hurt-filled, and unsent letters to his suddenly estranged grandfather. Then there's the Valentine's Day account, told in second person, of an anonymous teenager who struggles with a shameful act of betrayal and searches for redemption. Stead elegantly weaves together these stories, revealing how the tween years are a time of making mistakes and amends, growing apart and toward one another, and learning to love anew and differently. Full of nuance and grace, *Goodbye Stranger* will resonate with readers. (GE)

Hamster Princess: Harriet the Invincible

Written and illustrated by Ursula Vernon
Dial, 2015, 256 pp., ISBN 978-0-80373-983-3

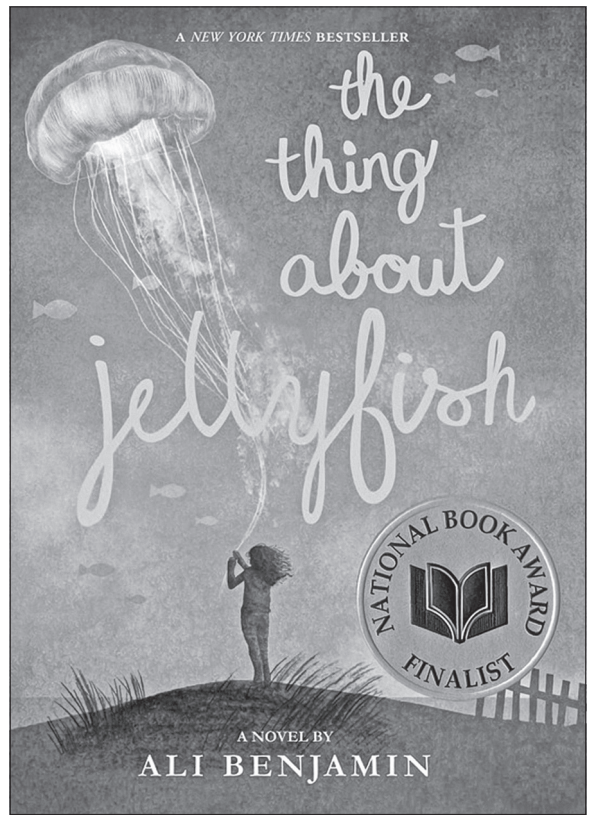
Younger tween readers initially attracted by the pink and purple glitter-embossed cover will find much to admire in heroine Harriet Hamsterbone, a hamster princess who defies all expectations. Disgusted with deportment lessons, Harriet prefers riding her quail, Mumfrey, across the countryside pretending to slay dragons. Upon learning that she has been cursed by the evil fairy Ratshade to fall into a deep sleep following a hamster wheel mishap, Harriet is undaunted. Rather, she is delighted to discover that until the foretold day (her twelfth birthday), she is invincible. After two years of cliff-diving, fighting Ogrecats, and hunting dragons, she returns home to face her nemesis. When the curse backfires, it's up to the still-awake Harriet to save the kingdom from the consequences. Spot illustrations and dialogue in speech bubbles

make this a hybrid title with strong appeal to graphic novel devotees. Read this clever retelling of *Sleeping Beauty* aloud, so that all your students can experience the girl power of a princess who takes charge of her own destiny. (ETD)



The Thing about Jellyfish
Written by Ali Benjamin
Little, Brown, 2015, 352 pp., ISBN 978-0-316-38086-7

"Sometimes things just happen *is not an explanation. It is not remotely scientific*" (p. 19). At the start of seventh grade, Suzy Swanson faces the unbearable loss of her best friend, Franny, following a drowning accident. While on a school field trip, she learns about a deadly jellyfish and becomes steadfast in her belief that this must explain how her friend died. Poignantly told in first person, the book chronicles Suzy's quest to solve the mystery of her friend's death. The book is astutely divided into the parts of the scientific method and weaves scientific facts into Suzy's narrative as she simultaneously searches for scientific answers, strives to escape her own grief, and seeks self-forgiveness. Complex in its structure and storyline and utterly captivating, *The Thing about Jellyfish* is a noteworthy debut novel and National Book Award finalist sure to resonate with middle-grade readers who themselves are likely to be navigating the waters of evolving friendships as well as identity-forming life decisions. (KEC)



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