The 2005-2007 Honor List

2007

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian


In this winner of the National Book Award, Junior, aka Arnold Spirit, has had a hard first fourteen years of life. Born hydrocephalic, he has suffered through a series of brain surgeries, seizures, vision problems, debilitating headaches, and excruciating oral surgery (to remove the ten extra teeth in his mouth). He has been picked on his whole life for his long, scrawny body, oversized head and speech impediment. Nevertheless, as Junior arrives for his very first day at Wellpinit High School, on the Spokane Reservation, in Wellpinit, Washington, he is excited and hopeful for all the things he imagines high school has to offer. Alexie tells this story with his special skill for handling tragedy with humor. Perhaps the best and most articulate tribute comes in a blurb from young adult author, Chris Crutcher, who wrote, “I know Sherman is on his game when I’m reading his book, laughing my ass off while my heart is breaking.” Some things just hurt too much to tell without laughing, but in the end this is a story about hope and choices and refusing to accept what life throws at you without a fight.

Dreamquake

Since pre-history, humans have been fascinated with their dreams and the concept of dreaming. And in today’s world where scientists are working to harbor all kinds of energy, why not that of dreams? Doing exactly such harvesting is the foundation for Elizabeth Knox’s two fantasy novels: *Dreamhunter* in 2006 followed by *Dreamquake* in 2007. The books are set at the turn of the last century in a country different—but too different—from our own. The plot of *Dreamquake* centers around the Hame family and teenager Laura Hame. Laura’s father, Tziga Hame, is perhaps the best known of all the dreamhunters, but he has disappeared, and Laura suspects that he is under the control of government agents who wish to use his power. In fact, the major part of the story centers around the uncovering of how greedy and corrupt officials are using nightmares, as well as contentment dreams, to control a large segment of the population which has been unfairly sentenced to hard labor.

**Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows**

J. K. Rowling. Scholastic, 2007. 739 pp. $34.99. Grades 6 and up. ISBN 078-0-545-01022-1 What’s left to say about this decade’s—perhaps this century’s—most heavily anticipated and reviewed book? When the final Harry Potter book came out in the summer of 2007, both readers and critics agreed that in its 739 pages, Rowling managed to do what Louis Sachar did in his concluding chapter of *Holes*, which he appropriately entitled “Filling in the Holes.” She brought the many elements of the series together and left most of us feeling satisfied but already a bit nostalgic about closing the door on one of the most memorable reading experiences we’ve ever had.
Tamar: A Novel of Espionage, Passion, and Betrayal


The opening paragraph of Tamar reads, “In the end, it was her grandfather, William Hyde, who gave the unborn child her name. He was serious about names; he’d had several himself.” The name that the grandfather suggests is Tamar, the name of a river in the west of England. But the little girl isn’t being named after the river, she’s being named after a British soldier whose code name was taken from the river. In 1944, he and another soldier named Dart had been dropped into Holland as spies and communications experts for the Allied Forces. The story ends over 400 pages later by talking about the name Marijke, which is the name of the Dutch woman whom Tamar and Dart worked with and who eventually became the grandmother of the girl named Tamar. In the epilogue to the story set in 2005, Tamar is in her twenties and is planning to name her own unborn daughter, Marijke.

Twisted


Tyler Miller, aka Nerd Boy, has experienced a lifetime of being picked on at school. So has his best friend, Calvin, aka Yoda, who lives for all things Star Wars (and for the possibility of dating Tyler’s younger sister, Hannah). But with nearly the whole world seemingly against him, including his own father, Tyler will attempt to set the world right. Laurie Halse Anderson has done a remarkable and insightful job of outlining what
it really means to be a man, to make hard choices, to do the right thing and to live a life to be proud of. Tyler has little or no help as he faces situations in which Fate seems to be against him. There are no easy answers in this narrative and Anderson avoids any temptation to take the reader down a saccharine path to a happily ever after ending. She does leave the reader with hope, however, and a sense that even though life isn’t perfect we can have control over our own actions and thus over some of the consequences.

**what they found: love on 145th street**

Walter Dean Myers. Random House, 2007. 256 pp. $15.00, Grades 7 and up. ISBN 0385321384

Myer’s new short story collection is delicious and funny and sad. It begins by reminding readers of his *145th Street: Short Stories* (Delacorte, 2000) and Big Joe’s odd funeral, which others in the story thought was just stupid or weird. Myers starts the new book with another funeral story: “the fashion show, grand opening, and bar-b-que memorial service” (he has chosen not to capitalize his titles). The Evans’ family has purchased the LaRose Beauty Salon when the father, Troy Evans, finds he is dying. Not one to miss an advertising trick, Troy tells his daughter, Abeni, that he wants his funeral to be a “little light,” which for him means changing the name of the shop to the Curl-E-Que and hosting a bar-be-que along with the funeral. Myers’s stories show that he knows what love is like and what it can be--or sometimes fails to be. It’s a grand book worth any readers’ time.

**The White Darkness**

*The White Darkness* is unlike any book we’ve ever read. It’s a strange, contemporary story of adventure and madness and almost unbelievable darkness of the mind. The protagonist is fourteen-year-old Symone (or Sym), a near outcast at school who is fearful of kissing and of anything related to sex. Her strong and continual love is reserved for Capt. Lawrence (Titus) Oates who was with the 1911 Scott Expedition in Antarctica. As she explains, even though he’s been dead for ninety years, “In ninety years I’ll be dead, too, and then the age difference won’t matter.” When the Scott Expedition was stranded in Antarctica, without food or any likelihood of rescue and it became obvious that Titus could no longer pull his share of work, Titus Oates told his companions on March 16, 1912, his thirty-second birthday, “I am just going outside and may be gone sometime.” Dr. Bill Wilson wrote in a note tucked into his diary, “I have never seen or heard such courage as he showed from the first to last…Never a word or sign of complaint or of the pain” (369). McCaughrean, who won England’s Carnegie Medal for *A Pack of Lies*, was described by one reviewer as “a bit verbose,” but we prefer a different word as used by the reviewer for the British *School Librarian*, who wrote “There is such a thing as virtuoso writing, and this is it.”

2006

**American Born Chinese**

Jin Wang is a third grader when his family moves from San Francisco’s Chinatown to the typical, White, middle class, American suburbs. As a first generation American of Chinese heritage, Jin suffers from the stereotypes and the prejudices of his peers and teachers as he starts at the Mayflower Elementary School and goes all the way through high school. Meanwhile, in a parallel story told in alternating chapters, Danny is an apparently run-of-the-mill, White suburbanite attending Oliphant High School. His attempts to have a normal high school life are plagued by the annual intrusion of his cousin, Chin Kee, from China. In a third (presumably unrelated story), Wong Lai-Tsao is a legendary Chinese monk, whose good deeds for the poor lead the immortals to entrust him with three packages to deliver “to the West” (139). He has the help of the Monkey King, a fabled creature whose attempts to be something other than what he is lead him on a journey of self discovery across whole dimensions. These seemingly unrelated stories accelerate to a common ending that illuminates all three. The pacing has the quickness afforded by a graphic format that facilitates and adds to the reading. Gene Yang is not only a brilliant storyteller but a gifted cartoonist, and the synergy of these two talents make American Born Chinese more than it could have been as just a print text book. This is another great offering from the Roaring Brooks innovative imprint, First Second Books.

An Abundance of Katherines

Colin Singleton grew up in Chicago as a child prodigy, complete with Suzuki violin lessons, television appearances on KranialKidz, mastery of a phenomenal number of ancient and modern languages, and the almost unconscious ability to form anagrams. His mind runs rampant with trivial details of history and science, all of which he finds fascinating and retains for instant retrieval like the human supercomputer that people have come to expect. But his intellect has always left him powerless over the apparent randomness of life, so powerless, in fact, that after failed love affairs with a long line of girls named Katherine (18 or 19, depending on how the counting is done), he attempts to create what he calls the Theorem, a mathematical equation that will allow him to predict the outcome of any new relationship. When Katherine XIX (the nineteenth) dumps Colin on the day of his high school graduation, he and his best friend, Hassan Harbish (aka Captain Funnypants), take off on a road trip from Chicago and find themselves welcomed and even comfortable in a culture/society which Colin can understand only by reading Foxfire, a publication put together by Appalachian kids starting in 1966 to explain the traditions and ways of life in the hills of rural Tennessee. As a study of human nature, Green’s novel is every bit as complex and intriguing as is his Printz Award winner, Looking for Alaska.

The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation, Volume I. The Pox Party

This astonishing mixture of political and social history in the 1760’s and 1770’s could as logically have been called “The Education of Octavian.” It is narrated, mostly, by the young Octavian who lives with his mother, the lovely Cassiopeia, and the faculty of the Novanglian College of Lucidity. Mr. Gitney, and members of the college, divine the secrets of the universe by writing poetry, drawing, and performing sundry experiments, among them taking a dog in, showing affection to it, and then drowning it to see how long the dog takes to die. While the College may remind readers of Swift’s Grand Academy of Lagoda with all its madness, their experiments are more cruel. Octavian has no idea who he is, but Mr. Gitney’s valet, Bono, makes the boy see that Octavian is as African as Bono. With this realization, Octavian understands that he is nothing more than a zoological experiment to the college. Anderson is a born storyteller. His plot, full of convolutions, horrors, and, surprisingly enough, humor, will keep readers alert. Most of Anderson’s readers will follow him through Volume II. Certainly, we will.

**The Book Thief**


*The Book Thief* is about many things. It’s about Death and all the people it folds so kindly unto itself in World War II. It’s about some decent people that 12-year-old Liesel learns to love. It’s about bad (and some evil) people that Liesel learns to fear. It’s about the profane Rosa Hubermann and her love for Liesel. It’s about Hans Hubermann and his unquestioning love for Liesel. It’s about Rudy Steiner and his desire to kiss Liesel. It’s
about the horrors of war and the terrors of bombs raining down. It’s about cruelty and anti-Semitism gone mad. It’s about Liesel and her love for books. Zusak tells a long and rich story. Readers will care about many people in the story, they will be horrified by some events, but the one they will not forget is Liesel.

The Rules of Survival
“‘The survivor gets to tell the story,’” is part of the dedication as well as a line in Werlin’s taut novel about three children whose manic-depressive mother is so scary that by the end of the four years that are covered in the book, readers along with the children are still in fear of her. Matthew, the oldest child, is the narrator. He was thirteen when the story began and at the end he is getting ready to go off with a scholarship to the University of Texas. As he prepares to leave, he explains in a preface, written in the form of a letter to the younger of his two sisters, he is writing everything down so that maybe when she is seventeen, as he is now, or even twenty or thirty—whenever she wants or needs to know the story of their family’s life she can read it. But by the end of the book, Matthew is mature enough to realize that he did not write the letter for his little sister; he wrote it for himself. “‘So. Emmy. Little sister. You’re never going to read this, are you? I’m never going to give it to you. I didn’t write it for you. I wrote it for me. . . . to work my way through the story of what formed me. . . . to examine the past and figure out . . . who I was. . . who I am and how I ought to act in the world. I think I have made a beginning.

Sold
Sold is a terrible--but beautifully told--story. Before Patricia McCormick went to Nepal and India to interview victims, survivors, rescuers, and sex workers all along the chain, she did some serious research on the conditions and customs that in various parts of the world allow over half-a-million children to be trafficked each year into some kind of sex-related business. She chose to tell the sad story of Lakshmi, a thirteen-year-old girl from the mountains of Nepal. Lakshmi is instructed to tell people she is twelve because the younger a girl is, the more excited the customers are, and by the end of the story she is probably fourteen, but in her new life such details as birthdays are no longer thought of. Each time Lakshmi is sold, the price is considerably higher, but Laksmi is left out of the dealings. She is thinking about other things as explained in the chapter entitled “What I Carry.” Inside the bundle Ama packed for me are:

my bowl,

my hairbrush,

the notebook my teacher gave me for being the number one girl in school,

and my bedroll.

Inside my head I carry:

my baby goat,

my baby brother,

my ama’s face,

our family’s future.

My bundle is light.

My burden is heavy.
The layout of the free verse poetry provides white space which provides readers with breathing space and time to settle their emotions. The ending is hopeful, but by the time readers get to the final page they, along with Lakshmi, are considerably more enlightened about the problems of the world.

Surrender


The author of surrender does not use a capital letter in the title, which left us pondering whether she named the book after Surrender, the dog, who plays a major role in the story, or whether she named both the dog and the book after the mental state of the main character, who at the beginning of the book is dying. He is twenty-years-old, and the further readers get into the story, the more clearly they see that the boy is mentally—as well as physically—ill, and they rightly wonder whether he was ever a reliable narrator. Hartnett’s book, which reviewers describe as a “psychological thriller,” is the story of the boy’s alienation and the way he sold his soul to a wild boy. The boy’s name is Finnigan and the first day the boys meet he brags:

Everything here belongs to me: I reign; I infect this town. I’m the unexplained noises, each mislaid bit and piece. I’m the murmur, the shadow, the creaking floor. I’m the blackout, the echo, the scratcher-at-the-door.

2005

Criss Cross

In this Newbery award winner, Criss Cross is the name of a radio show (something like Mad TV) that fourteen-year-old Debbie and her lifetime friends, Phil, Lenny, and Hector listen to as they congregate in and around an old pickup truck. It is also the plot vehicle for Lynne Rae Perkins’s novel which follows the movements of the members of a small community (and one outsider) as they cross each other’s paths, occasionally making important connections that will change their lives, but more often “inadvertently sidestepping each other, unaware, like blindfolded elephants crossing [a] tiny room.” It is a good read for seventh grade and up, and it is even better for personal reading by anyone old enough to wonder why the universe seems to have such a weird sense of humor, or as one character puts it: “They say, ‘God works in mysterious ways.’ Although, no one wants to be the one He’s working on that way.”

Elsewhere.


All of us are curious about the hereafter, and Gabrielle Zevin offers us a glimpse into what may be coming. The Prologue begins with a hit-and-run death. Aboard a ship, The Nile, Liz Hall awakes in a strange bed near a strange companion, Thandiwe (Thandi) Washington, who has a small red wound at the base of her skull (from a drive-by shooting that killed her). Liz discovers that she has almost no hair (from the operation where doctors tried vainly to save her life), but since all this is a dream and she’ll wake
up soon, she doesn’t worry about all the confusing things that happen around her.

Unfortunately she doesn’t wake up from the bad dream but things get less confusing and more interesting.

**Inexcusable**


When Ken Donelson read this book, he wrote, “I’m a man of advanced years (that’s a nice, if reasonably vague way of putting it), and this book bothered me. It bothered me a lot, and I’m sure Lynch’s novel would bother a far younger male even more.” The book hit home with me, not because I ever raped a girl; but because I was a nice boy, a good boy raised by parents who were proud that I was a good boy and maybe even prouder that they were constantly reminded by people in our small town about my goodness. No one ever told anyone, as far as I knew, of my dark side. But I knew. And it’s not clear that Keir knows about himself. When he starts to rape Gigi, she says no. He refuses to admit that he hears anything that would stop him. As this powerfully moral book ends, Gigi has escaped, and Keir is left to “wait for whoever is going to come for him,” knowing, but not understanding, the consequences of his action.

**John Lennon: All I Want Is the Truth**

Partridge admirably reports most of the incidents in Lennon’s life that would interest readers. She summarizes Lennon’s childhood—sad and confused—the founding of the group that ultimately became the Beatles—troubled and angry—and the changes in Lennon when he met Yoko Ono—many and puzzling. We’re not sure how to sell this book to teens. If a student gravitates towards this book, will it be because of the student’s love of music? Will the student even know about the Beatles? Will the story of a disturbed and puzzled man grab students? The book is not quite a coffee table book though it comes close to it.

**Looking for Alaska**


John Green’s story of high school juniors at Culver Creek a small but reputable southern Georgia boarding school, is for our times what the Catcher in the Rye and A Separate Peace were for their times. The characters are complex and memorable, and their life experiences provide an accurate chronicle of how convoluted and confusing growing up has become. The literary quality is impeccable as it invites readers of all ages to join in the characters’ search for life’s answers. Although upper middle school students could read and understand the plot, I think high school students will be better able to comprehend the issues of self-governance, searching for spirituality and dealing with tragedy. (JB, Jr.)

**Peeps**
Peeps is another vampire/love story, which fits into the literary definition of a “romance” in that the good parts are like daydreams while the bad parts are like nightmares, but based on how most high school readers define “romance,” Peeps is at the opposite end of the spectrum from Twilight. Nevertheless, if we’re worried about how Stephanie Meyer sets girls up to expect miracles from their boyfriends, we should be equally worried about the way Scott Westerfeld portrays both his male and female characters. But in my own mind, Peeps was so far removed from reality that I viewed it more like a science fiction horror movie or a video game than a cozy novel. Peeps is slang for people who are “Parasite Positive,” a euphemism for vampirism. However, as in the case of the narrator, 19-year-old Cal Thompson, a New Yorker recently from Texas, some Peeps can maintain an almost normal life if they keep their parasites fed with red meat and exert utmost control over their actions. They can also save the world from mutant creatures that are much worse than the old alligators in the sewers.

Twilight

Stephanie Meyer’s Twilight takes place mostly in the small town of Forks in the Olympic Peninsula of northwest, Washington. Because the sun shines less often in Forks than in any other community in the United States, a very old, affluent, and accomplished family of vampires has settled in the area. Isabella (Bella) Swan’s parents have been divorced
since she was an infant, but she has regularly visited her single father who is the Forks police chief, and now she is moving to Forks from Phoenix, Arizona to attend her junior year of high school. Bella is an ordinary enough high school girl, but coming to Forks from her big-city life in the American Southwest, she finds a new kind of popularity based largely on the fact that Edward Cullen—the most beautiful boy in school and, yes, he is one of the vampires—falls madly in love with her.

A Wreath for Emmett Till


The construction of the text in this book was an admirable feat in many ways. Marilyn Nelson, an English professor at the University of Connecticut, took an affecting and powerful subject, the 1955 racially motivated murder of Emmett Till, a gentle teenage boy from Chicago visiting family in Mississippi, and illuminated it through a rare literary form, the heroic crown of sonnets. Nelson explains that the form of the poem provides “a kind of insulation” from the intensely disturbing and painful subject matter. Although the readability might be suitable for younger students, high school students will be best equipped to handle the allusions, as well as handle the truth about the ugliness of what human beings are capable of. )