Between Shades of Gray


During such emergencies as wars and purges, people tend to look at the world in tones of black and white, but Ruta Sepetys’s *Between Shades of Gray* tells us that there is some bad in the good people and some good in the bad people. The book is a *New York Times* bestseller and was nominated for Britain’s 2012 Carnegie Medal. It is a personalized history of the Stalin purges that during the middle of the twentieth century allowed Russia to incorporate Eastern European countries into the Soviet Union. Fifteen-year-old Lina Vilkaite, tells the story of being taken from her home—still wearing her nightgown—in 1941 and forced into a crowded and dirty box car to be sent 6,500 miles to the coldest part of Siberia to work in the beet fields. She is a talented artist, who has only a pencil to draw with, which explains the literal allusion to *shades of gray*.

Chime


*Chime* is set in the town of Swampsea in northern England at the beginning of the twentieth-century. According to Celtish folklore, a child born on the hour when church bells are ringing is a *Chime Child*, destined to have second sight, i.e. the ability to hear and see ghosts and demons and also to have extra powers of healing. Being a Chime
Child was usually considered a good thing, but in the case of seventeen-year-old Briony, it turns out badly because she is apparently schizophrenic and sometimes thinks of herself as a Chime Child and sometimes as a witch. This old-fashioned love story, which was a finalist for the National Book Award, is a beautifully written exploration of what can happen when science and technology come face-to-face with superstitions and long-held feelings of guilt and self-hatred.

**Daughter of Smoke and Bone**


Seventeen-year-old Karou is an art student in Prague, who is gifted, charming, attractive, and, seemingly, a little eccentric. Her best friend, Zuzana, a puppeteer, and her ex-boyfriend, Kaz, a street performer, think she is delicate and naïve, and give little thought to the constant interruptions and disappearances that she appears victim to. They never question her weak explanations or ask where she is really rushing off to. Not until an otherworldly visitor battles Karou high in the sky over Prague, do they suspect something is paranormally strange about this young woman. Who is she, really? There is no sexual content, obscene language, or graphic violence in this fantasy, making it an acceptable read for younger students, but readers, fourteen and above, may be better able to handle some of the gruesome details describing lost souls and stolen teeth.

**Dead End in Norvelt**
Most middle school students hope to have exciting summer vacations, but they couldn’t be as exciting as the partly true/partly fictional one that Jack Gantos had back in 1962 when he lived in the town of Norvelt, Pennsylvania. It was a small, planned community named after Eleanor Roosevelt, who in the 1930s fought to get such towns built as a way of helping American families recover from the Great Depression. *Dead End in Norvelt* is a comedy of Humors with enough eccentric characters to keep readers smiling all the way through. It won both the 2012 Newbery Medal and the Scott O’Dell Award for Historical Fiction.

*A Monster Calls*

Patrick Ness, inspired by Siobhan Dowd, cover and illustrations by Jim Kay. Somerville, MA:


*A Monster Calls* is a many-layered novel, which was to be Siobhan Dowd’s fifth book. She had created the basic idea and the characters before she died from cancer at age forty-seven. When Patrick Ness was asked if he wanted to try putting her work into a finished novel, he said yes, but only after he made it clear that he would not try to mimic her voice. He had to be free to make it his own book, which indeed it is, although Siobhan’s life and death haunt its darkly surrealistic pages. The protagonist is a British teen, Conor O’Malley, whose mother is in the late stages of cancer. Conor is amazed one night when the giant yew tree that grows just outside of his bedroom window comes for
a midnight visit and begins speaking in a kind of riddles than Conor only gradually begins to understand.

**Okay for Now**


Schmidt got the unusual idea and organizational pattern of his book from the public library in Flint, Michigan, which owns one of only 118 complete copies of John James Audubon’s drawings of *Birds of America*. The oversized drawings are kept in a table-sized glass display case, with a different page shown each week. In Schmidt’s fictional upstate New York town of Marysville the library is open only on Saturdays because the town is so poor, and in fact has already razored-out and sold a few pages from the Audubon book. Thirteen year-old Doug is the protagonist, who sees Audubon’s drawings as the one good thing in town and takes it on himself to get the whole book back together. The setting is 1968, and the Vietnam War is an integral part of the troubles in Doug’s family, especially after his older brother, Lucas, comes home terribly damaged. A strength of the book is the skill and respect with which Schmidt portrays the array of adult strangers who befriend Doug as a counterbalance to the troubles he has, especially with his father—a man who “has lost his way.”

**The Scorpio Races**

The little island of Thisby, somewhere off the American coast, holds quaint charm for visitors from the mainland, who come every year to buy local art, enjoy local food, and steep themselves in the culture of the island as they enjoy the events leading up to the annual horse races on the beach, the Scorpio Races. But here’s where Maggie Stiefvater’s fantasy takes a surprising turn. These are horse races like no other and involve a breed peculiar to Thisby, the capaill uisce (copple ooshka), giant, meat-eating water horses that live in the sea and come on land during storms to hunt, when and where enterprising stable owners capture them and attempt to train them for racing.

**Where Things Come Back**


The most surprising book on the Honor List was written by 28-year-old John Corey Whaley, who won not only the William C. Morris Debut Award for a new writer, but also the Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature. The book is narrated by seventeen-year-old Cullen Witter and takes place over a spring and summer in the small town of Lily, Arkansas, where every one of its 3,947 residents is affected in one way or another by the supposed sighting of an ivory-billed woodpecker that has been extinct for the past sixty years.

**2010**

**Nothing**

Janne Teller, translated by Martin Aitken.

Janne Teller’s 2010 *Nothing* would be a good companion-read to William Golding’s 1955 classic *Lord of the Flies*. It is set in Denmark and is about a group of young teens—both male and female—who purposely isolate themselves from the adults in their community and become so emotionally involved that they lose control and do terrible things to each other and to themselves. The catalyst for the events, which are spread out over several months, is the leaving of school by Pierre Anthon, an unusual boy who sits high in a plum tree and day-after-day taunts the dutiful children who pass by on their way to school. He tells them “Nothing matters,” and when they have had enough of his taunts, they set out to prove to him that there really are some things that matter. The book was published in Denmark in 2000, where it won the “Best Children’s Book Prize” from the Danish Cultural Ministry, and later *Le Prix Libbilit* for the best young people’s novel published in the French-speaking world.

*Please Ignore Sarah Dietz*


Vera Dietz has lived next to her best friend Charlie since forever, but when they become teenagers, nature takes its course and their romantic feelings for each other are hard to hide. For better or for worse—actually for worse and worse as it turns out—they know everything about each other, including some very dark secrets. Charlie’s father is physically abusive to Charlie and his mother. Vera’s secret is that when she was young, her mother left to became a stripper. Enter Jenny Flick, the iconic school “bad girl” who is the essence of aloofness and selfishness. Jenny’s actions set up a plot that is both sad
and funny, but on the way readers learn that when things go out of control, it is how we view them and what we do with them that makes or breaks us.

*Revolution*


ISBN 978-038573

*Revolution* is a YA book not because it is a quick and easy read, but because it is two stories in one—both about mature teenage girls who lived two hundred years apart—one in contemporary Brooklyn and one in Paris during the French revolution. Both girls are musically gifted. The contemporary girl, Andi Alpers, lives a life that to outsiders would appear to be luxurious and pampered, but is actually terrible—at least when the book begins. The historical girl, Alexandrine Paradis, is part of a family of street performers in Revolutionary Paris. The skilled way that Donnelly shows the cross-over between the lives of Andi and Alex is so fascinating that curious readers may be inspired to search the Internet for more information on DNA testing, the Paris catacombs, the French revolution, and controversies over what actually happened to the young crown prince. They will also appreciate the many contemporary and historical musicians that Andi refers to as she works on her senior thesis about the historical roots (what she calls the DNA) of a fictional modern musician.

*Revolver*

Revolver is short and easy-to-read, but at the same time packed with suspense and questions of morality. It begins in 1910 outside of Giron, a small community located at 68 Latitude North in the Arctic wilderness where the protagonist, 14-year-old Sig, lives with his older sister, Anna; his step mother, Nadya; and his father, Einar. They are part of a rag-tag group who were lured to the Arctic by dreams of gold. The second chapter is a flashback to 1899, when the family first came to Nome, Alaska, which is two latitudes south of Giron. The young children attracted attention because their father was the only adventurer who came with a wife and two children. They were saved from starvation when the most important man in Nome gave Einar the job of assaying the gold that the prospectors would bring in. The man figured that Einar would be honest because he had a family and, therefore, had more to lose than did any of the other men. As it turns out, Einar is far from honest, but Sig does not find this out until the terrible events that take place on a weekend in 1910, several years after the children’s mother has been murdered and their father has remarried a woman named Nadya and moved even further north.

Ship Breaker


Paolo Bacigalupi is an acclaimed science fiction and mystery writer, who won the Printz Award with his first book for teen readers. It is a post-apocalyptic story that may not be as far in the future as we would hope. The setting is on the Gulf Coast with some of the events taking place in sections of The Orleans, a spread-out area divided by waterways and differing levels of destruction caused by greed and mismanagement, as well as by
flooding. References are made to “the flooded cities up north,” so readers know that since Hurricane Katrina worse things have happened to the United States. The book reminded us of a Sixty Minutes segment where cameras had been smuggled into a forbidden port city in China which showed heart-rending pictures of the poorest and the sickest (including children) working in terrible conditions to pull anything useful from shiploads of old computers, phones, and miscellaneous machinery and other junk coming from America. Even without cameras, Bacigalupi painted an equally chilling picture, plus a cast of characters that readers will remember.

*The Things a Brother Knows*


Seventeen-year-old Levi Katznelson is the narrator of *The Things a Brother Knows*, which is the story of Levi and his older brother, Boaz. Three years ago Boaz left home to join the marines. He served in the Middle East and has now returned to a kind of local hero’s welcome. He looks like his old self, except stronger and a little more “high and tight,” as befitting a marine. However, he is far from being the same brother that went away. Reinhardt is skilled at observing powerful details that communicate the dynamics of this American Jewish family. Another strength is that it does not simplify the issue of war. At the beginning Levi and Boaz are literal brothers but by the end of the book, they are also “archetypal Brothers,” with a capital B.

*Trash*
When Raphael Fernández finds a leather bag containing a map, a wallet, and a key in a monstrous dumpsite called Behala, where he lives, he is ecstatic over the 1100 pesos inside, but has no idea of the mystery he is about to encounter or the repercussions of attempting to solve it. Mulligan’s descriptions of life in an impoverished country among the poorest of the poor are moving and seem fairly accurate. He says that Behala is loosely based on an actual dumpsite village he visited in the Philippines. It is a place where “there really are children who will crawl through trash forever.” Older high school students and adults are the appropriate readers of _Trash_, in which _Slumdog Millionaire_ meets _The Goonies_ and _All the President’s Men_.

2009

**Charles and Emma: The Darwins’ Leap of Faith**


While her book was released as part of the yearlong celebration of Charles Darwin’s 200th birthday, Heiligman focuses equally on Emma and Charles and their marriage. Each chapter is prefaced with a quote from either Emma’s or Charles’s journals or letters. The book won the first YALSA Excellence in Nonfiction Award and was a finalist for the National Book Award, the Michael L. Printz Award, and the _L. A. Times Book Prízé_. Teachers who are depressed because teenagers are getting their ideas about love and romance from the Twilight books or from so-called reality shows, would
do well to introduce this carefully researched, and beautifully written, book to their students.

**Claudette Colvin: Twice toward Justice**


In March of 1955, Claudette Colvin was “a bespectacled, studious looking” 15-year-old school girl, who was forced off a Montgomery City bus, arrested, and chargee with violating segregation laws, disturbing the peace, and “assaulting” a police officer. She refused to plead guilty, and was given considerable help from black leaders, but still she was found guilty on all counts. The verdict contributed to a feeling of rebellion and unrest that led to Rosa Parks, who was chosen as a more “appropriate” symbol to push forward the issue. Claudette Colvin’s story has always been a “footnote” in the Civil Rights movement, but Hoose’s book, which won the National Book Award, moved her story to the front lines. She accompanied Hoose when he was presented the Award.

**Fire**


In her fantasy, *Fire*, Cashore explores the kingdom of the Dells, which is the land beyond the seven kingdoms, the setting for Cashore’s popular 2008 *Graceling*. *Fire* is a powerful book about a young girl “blessed” with some magical powers of destruction. But with the help of others she begins to see that her giftedness does not
mean she has to become evil. She observes that a son can “choose the man he would be” just as a daughter monster can “choose the monster she would be”

**Going Bovine**


This winner of the Printz award is a *surreal* book in the sense of a *surcharge* or a *surtax* being something that goes “above and beyond” or “over the top.” Sixteen-year-old Cameron is the protagonist, who is diagnosed with Creutzfeldt-Jacob, aka the incurable “mad cow” disease, which turns brains into something like sponges. Cameron is grateful that at least he won’t have to finish reading *Don Quixote* for his English class. But the *Quixote* story is nevertheless a big part of this darkly humorous and original book in which Cameron and a hospital mate named Gonzo, embark on a quest that readers gradually realize is made up of hallucinations anchored both to real life and to pop culture images swarming around in Cameron’s mind.

**Marcelo in the Real World**


Seventeen-year-old Marcelo Sandoval is heading into the summer just before his senior year of high school. He loves his summer job, caring for the Halfling breed ponies that are a part of the Paterson School, a private institution for young people with special needs. Marcelo is autistic, and has always gone to Paterson, but his father, who is a financially successful, lawyer thinks it is time for Marcelo to get adjusted to the real
world and so arranges a summer job for Marcelo at his law firm. As it turns out, the father learns just as much as does Marcelo.

**The Monstrumologist**


This is a horror story told in a journal left to the author by a dying 133-year-old man who thinks his longevity is due to his being a teenaged apprentice in the late 1800s to a monstrumologist, a man who haunted graveyards in hopes of finding a “specimen of the genus anthropophagi.” The monsters are thought to have been brought to the United States by a scientist hoping to become as respected as Charles Darwin for his controversial work. The language is colorful and sometimes blistering, which in a strange way makes an essentially unpalatable story palatable.

**Punkzilla**


Fourteen-year-old Jamie Wyckoff is called *Punkzilla* or *Punk* because of his love for punk music. He is a runaway trying to get from Portland, Oregon, to Memphis, Tennessee in time to say good-bye to his gay brother who is dying. Jamie’s father had sent him to a strict military school in hopes of preventing him from becoming gay. Jamie is not gay, but he hates the military school and becomes a runaway, who falls in with a bad crowd. When he learns about his brother’s illness, he heads out and, along the way
writes letters, which he never mails, to his brother. As with most of Adam Rapp’s books, teachers and librarians need to be well acquainted with a young reader before handing over *Punkzilla*. They also need to be ready to answer questions about drug use, homosexuality, androgyny, violence, and transgender identity.

**Wintergirls**


Best friends since third grade, teenagers Cassie and Lia are now caught in severe cases of anorexia. The book is a tragedy, and Anderson’s writing surpasses anything she’s done before—which is no small feat. She experiments with writing techniques such as inserting the number of calories in parenthesis whenever a piece of food is mentioned. She also has Lia writing what she really thinks, and then when she changes her mind, Anderson leaves in the initial statement, but crossed out. The book is a must-read for every parent, teacher, counselor, adult, and child who has ever struggled with anorexia or struggled to understand the plight of a person with anorexia.

2008

**The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation, Volume II: The Kingdom on the Waves.**


Anderson is a master storyteller. In this long and complicated second volume about the African American boy named Octavian Nothing, readers see the horrors of war and
disease through a portrayal of the Revolutionary War that is a terrible contrast to anything we read in school. At the center of the story is a boy who readers learn to care about.

Chains


Chains would be a good companion book to Octavian Nothing because it too is set during the Revolutionary War and portrays a different set of African American characters and what they experienced during the Revolutionary War. It was a nominee for the National Book Award and is a fulfillment of Anderson’s stated commitment to “tell the stories of the human race that need to be told and haven’t been.” It was one of the books cited by the American Library Association when they honored Anderson with the Margaret A. Award for a long-term contribution to books for young adults.

The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks


Lockhart’s book is a delightful exposé of private schools, privileged social castes, and the weird relationships between best friends and their respective girl and boy friends. Lockhart has a wonderful sense of humor, expressed through Frankie, a smart and ambitious girl (her real name is Frances) who goes to the same private school that her father went to. Only recently have girls been admitted. Consequently, Frankie has a lot of barriers to break down.
**Graceling**


In Cashore’s first fantasy, Gracelings are people “graced” with special skills. They are marked by having different colored eyes. Katsa, the protagonist has one blue eye and one green eye. When she is eight, Katsa discovers her special skill, which is that she is strong enough to kill with her bare hands. This makes her a prize catch for evil forces—especially her tyrannical uncle, King Randa, who wants her to “work” for him.

**The Hunger Games**


Mix one part Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery,” two parts Reality TV, three parts American Idol, and four parts heroic quest (as described by Joseph Campbell and others) and you might come up with something close to Suzanne Collin’s The Hunger Games, which within three years after its publication became part of the popular culture. It has an old-fashioned feel to it, even though it is set in a dystopian future. Katniss, the heroine, is skilled with a bow and arrow, and she is such a popular heroine that the owners of bow-and-arrow ranges have a new clientele. Girls are coming to them for lessons—or more likely just to get photographed—posing with a bow and arrow.

**Nation**
Pratchett is a British author whose fantasy books have sold more than sixty million copies. In 2008, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth for his contributions to literature. This Printz Honor Book, featuring two teenagers, is set in a dystopian world. In an author’s note, he warns that even though the book appears to be set in the Pacific Ocean, “Nothing could be further from the truth!!!! It is in fact, set in a parallel universe, a phenomenon known only to advanced physicists and anyone who has ever watched any episode of any SF series, anywhere.”

What I Saw and How I Lied


This winner of the National Book Award gets catalogued under such terms as coming of age, secrets, Florida, and 20th-century history. It is set in 1947 just after World War II, when Evie’s stepfather, Joe, has come home to reunite with Evie and her mother, along with Joe’s mother. The women do not get along, and Evie and her mother are hoping that they can soon move out into a house of their own because Joe is doing so well in the new business (selling appliances) that he set up for himself. But things get complicated when a much younger soldier who had served under Sergeant Joe, shows up. Joe doesn’t want to see him because the money that Joe used to set up his business really belonged to both of them; that is, if you can say stolen money belongs to the thieves. The young soldier is
not to be deterred and so he steals a car and follows them to Florida, and the exciting mystery continues with Evie playing a role way over her head.