

D.C.F.

2007 - 2008

**BOOK REVIEWS
&
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

www.dcfaward.org

About This Guide

This guide was compiled by current members of the DCF Committee and one past member. Our intent was to provide a booklet that would support the use of the DCF program in schools and libraries.

For the guide to be most effective, we strongly suggest that the adult(s) supervising the program read all the books on the 2007-2008 list. Many public libraries will have the new list in and ready to go, often in a designated section, by the summer. These excellent books make a pleasant summer diversion for adults who may be overwhelmed during the school year. No synopsis can possibly take the place of reading a book. However, we recognize that reading and remembering the details of 30 books can be a challenge. It's hoped that the reviews will jog your memory!

Since many DCF readers choose and read books on their own, the intent of the questions is to promote discussion among readers of DCF books. This dialogue can take place between student/adult, student/student or in small groups of readers. Most, but not all, of the questions were written to promote critical thinking and to seek opinions...not “right” answers. None of the questions was designed for purposes of assessment.

In some schools the questions are put on strips of paper, laminated and used as bookmarks. Each question/bookmark is placed in the appropriate DCF book. Students are encouraged to read the questions before reading the book and consider their individual responses as the book is read.

The generic questions at the end of the booklet can be used in discussions in which readers have read different books. They are taken from Susan Zimmerman's book, *7 Keys to Comprehension: How to Help your Kids Read it and Get it!* (Three Rivers Press, 2003. ISBN – 0761515496)

Author websites, if available, are found at the end of the reviews. Some reviews include additional relevant websites. If there is no web address, check the website of the publisher of the book. Their author biographies are usually easy to access and often quite informative. Comments and suggestions are gratefully appreciated and should be directed to: Sally Margolis – salmargo@yahoo.com.

Tony Abbott

FIREGIRL

Little, Brown, 2006. ISBN 0-316-01171-1. \$15.99. 145 pages.

"A burned girl was in my class for a while. Once I brought her some homework. In class she said my name. Then she was gone." Tom's in seventh grade at St. Catherine's school with most of the same kids he's been with for a while. So, though he's overweight and sweaty in his uniform, he isn't quite as awkward and out of it as he might be. He has a friend, Jeff, who tells stupid jokes, hates his absent father and promises Tom a ride in his uncle's red Cobra – the ultimate vintage sports car. Tom, whose stable family life gives him a sense of himself and allows him to think for himself, isn't quite a loner. He does fantasize a lot about Courtney, the girl with perfect hair, perfect skin, perfect test scores who's even nice. He assumes that some day he'll be able to rescue her from a threatening situation and be her hero. More realistically, he plans to nominate her for class president, a bold move that leaves him terrified but determined. Into his fantasy world walks a new student, Jessica Feeney, who has moved to be near a hospital where she will receive treatment for the burns all over her body. Her ruined face and gnarled hands horrify the seventh-graders who don't know how to cope with her presence. Jeff's reaction is even stronger. His revulsion is so great that he refuses to hold her hand during prayers. Tom, who lives near her, takes homework to her one day and ends up spending time in her room having a real conversation. When he sees a "before" picture of her, it helps to put her loss in perspective. He realizes that she is not a freak but a very brave person. Sometimes, Jessica replaces Courtney in his fantasies and on nomination day, he tries to nominate her, but she is the only one who hears. She had nominated him. Hers was the only vote he got since he didn't vote for himself.

This short novel is about acceptance in general and the added difficulty of acceptance at the junior high level. Jessica's courage in coming to school at all and Tom's courage in befriending her are barely noticed by anyone but each other. But each has a dignity that sets them apart from the herd. The book has its funny moments, too. In one of the conversations which Tom has with Jessica, he tells her about his superhero theory, that they should have small powers, dumb powers...."something really dorky and useless like, I don't know, having one indestructible finger or something." After three weeks, Jessica must leave for more treatment and the class relaxes into its former patterns. But Tom's life has been permanently changed and his priorities and relationships, especially with Jeff, are forever altered.

Read-aloud hook: pp.21&22. Tom is certainly not the only boy in seventh grade who dreams about Courtney, the pretty, popular, nice girl in his class. But he certainly would never let any one else know of his fantasies. "Of course, Courtney.....many powers that helped me in my Courtney stories."

Discussion questions:

- During the time that Jessica is in his class, what does Tom learn about Jeff?
- Most kids find it hard to break from the rest of the crowd. Can you think of a time when a situation seemed cruel to you and yet everyone was doing it? This is a private question.
Were you able to object or did you go along with the crowd? If so, does it bother you?
- Put yourself in Jessica's place. How would you feel walking into a new classroom?
- Do you think it's always easy for Courtney to be popular? Do you think she's always as confident as she seems?

www.tonyabbottbooks.com

M. T. Anderson

THE CLUE OF THE LINOLEUM LEDERHOSEN

Harcourt, 2006. ISBN 0-15-205352-2. \$15.00. 243 pages.

Have you ever felt like this?

“I choose not to use my powers, because it would upset the balance of—good and evil. And left and right.” (p. 73).

“I am the next step in man’s evolution” (p. 56).

“Sooner or later, people [will] come to their senses and work together for the perfection of absolutely everything.” (p. 77).

“I’m totally tired of being chased and being hunted and picking up sticks to fight things off.” (p. 92).

If so, have no fear. M. T. Anderson is here to help. If not, how have you not died of boredom?

In this second of M. T. Anderson’s “Thrilling Tales,” we reunite with our heroes Lily Gefelty, Katie Mulligan, and Jasper Dash, who are taking a much-deserved weekend getaway at Moose Tongue Lodge and Resort. For those not already in the know, the real, the literary, and the otherworldly are close companions in this series. A host of children’s book characters has descended upon the Moose Tongue, such as the Cutesy Dell Twins, the Hooper Quints, the Manley Boys, and Eddie Wax (not to mention Katie and Jasper). But when the Hooper Quints disappear, the search is on! And when stuffed animal heads are “liberated” from the Lodge, the plot thickens. Finally, when a priceless necklace is lifted from Mrs. Mandrake’s room, our trio must unravel the clues to get to the bottom of the mystery. In short order, we meet many original characters, as well as entire crates of red herrings (p. 193). Is it a comedy? By all means. Is it a mystery? Without a doubt. Is it original? Yes, Yes, Yes! Cases in point: Katie finds herself hiking up a mountain in the dark with a screaming scientist obsessed with echolocation; Jasper faces death by mucus; and Lily has spectral visions of a ghost horse. But at its heart, and it has a big heart, this is a book about the mystery of friendship and its many powers. “We are all lost and confused in this way, so full of longing for things: This is why we need people who solve mysteries, whether they are the mysteries of bloodstains on the carpet, or the mysteries of space, or the mystery of who we are.” (p. 240)

Read-aloud hook: After the Hooper Quints go missing, search parties are formed. One of these is made up of Jasper Dash and the Manley Boys, Jank and Fud. Start at the beginning of p. 74 for a peek into their contrasting personalities and some hilarious dialogue.

Discussion questions:

- M. T. Anderson does his best to poke fun at a lot of classic mystery series characters. If you could spend a weekend at a lodge with 3 characters from any books you’ve read, whom would you choose? Why? (Characters should be from different books)
- Choose one group of book characters that appears in *Clue of the Linoleum Lederhosen*. Draw the cover of what you would have their next book be.
- In the chapter, “*The Search is On!*,” the author gives great advice to mystery readers. How does he then go about trying to deceive those very readers?

Mary Jane Auch

ONE-HANDED CATCH

Holt, 2006. ISBN 987-0805079005. \$16.95. 248 pages.

“This was the first Independence Day since the war [World War II] ended, so people were celebrating in a big way,” says narrator Norm Schmidt, 12, who is planning to set off fireworks once his day of work in his family’s meat market ends. But then Norm’s life changes in a heartbeat when he is rushed to the hospital, his left hand accidentally crushed in a meat grinder. M.J Auch was inspired by the experiences of her husband, Herm, who lost a hand in his youth, in portraying the challenges of Norm’s recovery and adjustment during the first year after his accident. Simple tasks like tying shoes or using a knife and fork to cut meat are now difficult and frustrating for Norm, and his goal of playing baseball seems unattainable. Norm is mistaken when he thinks he’ll no longer have to take out the trash. His Mom, who understands that everything is going to be harder for him, still expects a lot from Norm. Gradually he finds ways to adapt to his disability, and with hard work and a sense of humor, his skills and confidence grow. Even Leon, his teasing friend, shows support and encouragement under a brash exterior.

Over the course of the year, which incorporates many details of small town life in the 1940s, Norm attends a Boy Scout Jamboree, dresses up on Halloween, gets a new bike for Christmas, and practices his batting and pitching in the spring. He learns that he still excels in art and can even be a decent baseball player. With creativity and hard work, he has overcome his handicap and can now do most anything.

Read-aloud hook: p. 84 near the top - p. 87

Before reading, set the scene: It’s the opening day of school, and Norm, who has lost his left hand, and his friend Leon are starting the day in their sixth grade classroom. Miss Bean is their teacher.

Begin with these words: “Miss Bean started out...”

Discussion questions:

- Find examples to illustrate how Norm’s sense of humor is important.
- What do you think about the way Norm’s mother treats him? Would you want to be treated like that if you were in a similar situation?
- Can you think of a time in your own life when you thought something was impossible, but you were able to do it by persevering?
- Why does Norm want to wear his disgusting, old bandage until it falls off?
- Compare and contrast Norm’s two friends, Leon and Carl.
- If a kid with only one hand wanted to be on your baseball team, what do you think your reaction would be?

www.mjauch.com/

Frances O' Roark Dowell

PHINEAS L. MACGUIRE...ERUPTS!

Atheneum, 2006. ISBN 1-4169-0195-7. \$15.95. 176 pages.

Avocados, yogurt, anything purple, and girls – these are just a few of the 15 things budding scientist Phineas L. MacGuire, aka Mac, is allergic to. He's also the self-proclaimed world's expert on mold – how it looks (yucky) and smells (putrid). He's acquired this knowledge the hard way, cleaning out the family refrigerator, a veritable “museum of mold,” where all the healthy stuff rots in the back while the family eats junk food.

Disaster strikes just a few weeks into 4th grade, when Phineas's best friend, Marcus, moves away. His teacher partners him with the pugnacious new kid, Mac R., for the science fair, and Phineas sees his plans to take first prize fizzle. He's an expert on volcanoes while Mac R. just wants to draw dinosaurs, and that's *so* 3rd grade! How the boys resolve their differences, combine their talents and win over their classmates makes for a clever, funny and chatty narrative. Phineas's story sparkles with lists and guides for science experiments from erupting volcanoes to imploding marshmallows.

This fast-paced book is a great start to a new series, “From the Highly Scientific Notebooks of Phineas L. MacGuire.” Its eponymous narrator is a hoot, and the short chapters and witty black-and-white illustrations make this an ideal read-aloud.

Read-aloud hooks: Page 1: My name is Phineas Listerman MacGuire...I am allergic to fifteen things.

Page 3: We have made and erupted over eighty-seven volcanoes in our lifetime...to end of paragraph.

Page 45: When you drink milk and start laughing why does the milk automatically squirt out of your nose? Why do rotten eggs stink?

Discussion questions:

- This is the 1st book in a new series. If you were writing the 2nd book, what would happen next to Phineas?
- Why do you think Mac R. takes a fake name at his new school? Why do you think he acts in such an obnoxious way towards his new classmates?
- There is a saying, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” What do you think this means? How do Phineas and Mac overcome Mac's terrible first impression on his new classmates?
- Phineas tells us his story in his own words. Pick a scene from the book and retell it from another character's point of view.

<http://www.francesdowell.com/>

<http://www.simonsayskids.com>

Sarah Ellis

ODD MAN OUT

Groundwood, 2006. ISBN 978-0888997029. \$16.95. 162 pages.

The rules seem to be clear -- after all, they are written right on the walls of Gran's house. It's being demolished at the end of the summer, so twelve-year-old Kip and his five girl cousins are allowed to write on, paint over, and whack holes in any wall they like. But Kip, who usually lives an orderly life with his widowed mom, has to work out the unwritten rules of his father's unpredictable family for himself.

"Heaven on a stick" is how Gran sincerely describes the pleasure of having all of her grandchildren visiting for a month. But she realizes that Kip may need some private space, so she cheats a little during the bedroom lottery and ensures that he wins the attic where his father slept as a boy. So Kip has a place of retreat when the conversations of the "girlatorium" become too overwhelming, or when thoughts of his new stepfather become hard to sort out. He is taking out a wall in the attic when he discovers a binder that contains the very detailed records of something called "Operation Mitochondria."

Kip first interprets the notebook as a work of fiction created by his father. But when he reads a bit of it out loud, it literally gives Gran a heart attack. Her trip to the hospital is the first in a chain of events that reveal that, prior to meeting his mom, Kip's dad had suffered from schizophrenia. But learning to deal with the interactions of Gran and the girls has helped to give Kip the mental and emotional flexibility he needs to incorporate this news into his sense of self and even manage to figure out how to embrace the possibilities of life with a new dad.

Even more engaging than the plot of this book are the dialogue and the interplay of the characters. Kip's cousins are reminiscent of Hilary McKay's Casson family -- they do not consider being ordinary, or bored, an option. Gran encourages them to question authority, common wisdom, and nearly all the rules. Like Gran, this book encourages the reader to consider how easy it can be to transform the mundane into the intriguing.

Read-aloud hook: in this passage Gran introduces Kip, who has arrived at his grandmother's house in the middle of the previous night, to his five cousins, who are all girls: p.14 "Listen up . . ."

Discussion questions:

- Do you think Kip's mother should have told him about his father's illness earlier? How might that have changed Kip?
- What would you draw, write, or paint on the walls of your house if you could put anything you wanted to on them?
- Gran and the girls have many family rituals -- hobo dinners, dishwashing rules, beach picnics. What new rituals might they develop when Gran moves to the city?
- Which parts of Operation Mitochondria were based on Tristan's real life? Which parts were inspired by his mental illness?
- Gran, Kip, and the girl cousins spend a lot of time discussing Rarely Asked Questions -- What is the opposite of a pillow? Who doesn't know how to use a seatbelt? How do you get gelled hair to stand straight up? Why do you think they enjoy this kind of conversation? Do you?

Sid Fleischman

ESCAPE! THE STORY OF THE GREAT HOUDINI

Greenwillow, 2006. ISBN 0-06-08094-4 (Tr.); 0-06-085095-1 (PLB). \$18.99. 210 pages.

A Hungarian rabbi's son on a steamship bound for America. A starving vaudevillian stealing potatoes to feed his teenage wife. A world-class collector of antique books and papers. An egomaniac airbrushing superfluous acquaintances out of a picture taken with the President. A consummate performer whose show must go on, despite a lethal infection and a temperature of 104 degrees. Sid Fleischman introduces us to all of these incarnations of Harry Houdini, who remains to this day "the greatest magician in history."

Sorting out the facts of Houdini's life is a complex task. Houdini (born Ehrich Weiss) spent enormous amounts of time and energy creating his public image, but he was far more interested in a compelling story than in accuracy. Fleischman presents the legends and myths of the Houdini story, but carefully compares them to the documented evidence, which often contradicts Houdini's own assertions on stage and in print. As a magician himself, Fleischman's tone throughout is one of complete respect, and he explains plausible, if not admirable, motives for many of Houdini's alterations of the truth.

Readers who aspire to be magicians will benefit from reading about the sheer hard work that went into training for, and performing, some of Houdini's headline acts. They will also enjoy the numerous illustrations (some from private collections) and the bibliography, which notes which titles are the best sources for actually creating magic tricks.

Read-aloud hook: p.57, "Houdini caught onto the secret of fame.. " This passage describes a point early in Houdini's career when his genius at manipulating publicity began to catch up with his genius as an escape artist.

Discussion questions:

- Even though Houdini is clearly a hero to Sid Fleischman, he understands, and writes about, his hero's flaws. What are Houdini's most admirable characteristics? Most regrettable ones?
- What are some of the methods Ehrich Weiss used to control how he appeared in the media of the time?
- Early in his career, Houdini worked as a Spiritualist, performing séances and even opening a school to teach others how to fool clients into believing that they had spoken with lost loved ones. How did his attitude towards Spiritualism change later on?
- Which of Houdini's tricks would you most like to learn? Where and when would you like to perform it?
- In Chapter 3, Fleischman discusses how empowering it can be to learn magic. Why do you think magic tends to attract unpopular, non-mainstream individuals?

The site **www.sidfleischman.com** includes instructions for performing a card trick.

Sid Fleischman

THE WHITE ELEPHANT

Greenwillow, 2006. ISBN 0-06-113136-3. \$15.99. 95 pages.

“There, in old Siam, do you see the boy with dirty ears sitting proud as a prince on the tall old elephant?” With that opening line, Sid Fleischman invites us into a trickster tale that is at once ancient and original, both timeless and redolent of the particular scents and sights that set apart “old Siam.”

The poor young elephant trainer Run-Run finds himself at the mercy of his prince one day when Run-Run’s venerable elephant, Walking Mountain, chooses to empty a trunk full of water on the humorless monarch. The Prince surprises Run-Run by sparing his life and giving him a gift. Alas, it is a gift that is also a curse: a sacred white elephant that is not allowed to work for its keep, as ordinary, hay-gobbling elephants must. It is a gift the penniless Run-Run cannot afford – but dares not return to the giver.

How Run-Run saves his own skin while honoring the sacred needs of the pale pachyderm will have the downtrodden everywhere cheering. The secondary story of Run-Run’s search for the one-eared tiger who killed his mother is incorporated seamlessly and adds just the right thrill of danger. With soft illustrations, a straightforward, well-spaced text and a hero whose heart is as big as the elephants he loves, this one will appeal to all.

Read-aloud hook: Page 5: For the general flavor, start with “Elephant boy!” and end near the top of page 7 with “To the river, magnificent one!” (Or, to leave listeners in suspense, continue one more short page to the end of the chapter: “How was Run-Run to know?”)

Discussion questions:

- When Run-Run first meets the white elephant, Sahib, he looks down on him as a useless, pampered creature. By the time the prince decides to take Sahib back, Run-Run has come to love him. What happened to change Run-Run’s mind?
- Run-Run is a very poor boy at a time when one’s wealth was believed to be a measure of one’s worth. What are some of the ways Run-Run keeps his dignity in spite of his poverty and the prince’s cruelty toward him?
- The elephants, of course, never speak a word in this story. Both Walking Mountain and Sahib are full-fledged characters, however, with distinct personalities. What are some of the ways author Sid Fleischman shows us who these two elephants are?
- The phrase “white elephant” comes from the incident that inspired this book, in which a real king gave a member of his court a sacred white elephant, knowing its upkeep would ruin the man financially. The term is still used today to describe a burdensome object. Think of other expressions we use, and talk about how those phrases might have come to be (like “Let sleeping dogs lie.”). Consider writing your own folktale to explain it!

www.sidfleischman.com

Susan Fletcher

ALPHABET OF DREAMS

Atheneum, 2006. ISBN 0-689-85042-4. \$16.95. 294 pages.

Ancient lands - Desert caravans - Spies - Treachery - Dreams - An infant king. These elements are all part of this richly descriptive tale of adventure, danger and hope set in Persia at the time of the New Testament. Mitra, 14, and her little brother, Babak, 5, are of royal blood. Their father was killed for plotting to overthrow the evil King Phraates, and the children are now refugees, fleeing from the “king’s Eyes and Ears” who would track them down. Mitra, the narrator, has disguised herself as a boy called Ramin and is very protective of Babak, whose delicate health makes precious his dreams which hold the rare gift of prophecy.

One of Babak’s dreams, which describes a wandering star and the birth of a king, attracts the interest of three Magi - Balthazar, Gaspar, and Melchior - three distinct and somewhat competing personalities, who take the children on a journey by caravan toward Bethlehem. Along the way, the children are captured by spies, escape, and then are saved from an underground waterway by a rustic young man named Koosha. When the Magi arrive in Bethlehem to find “a carpenter’s baby in a tiny limestone dwelling in a backwater village of Judea,” Balthazar confesses, “I am mystified as to how to decipher God’s alphabet writ across the heavens.” Although Mitra had dreamed of returning to their noble kin in Palmyra, she learns they are all dead. And now Koosha, who saw through her disguise, has come to find the girl.

An author’s note at the end provides excellent background information in question and answer format.

Read-aloud hook: From the middle of p. 73 to the break on p. 76.

Before reading, set the scene and explain the following: Babak has been stolen away while Mitra slept. He’s been sold to a Magus heading west by caravan across the desert. Mitra, desperate to find her brother, sets off in pursuit, holding the kitten named Shirak and riding the old donkey Gorizpa.

Discussion questions:

- There are a lot of issues around trust in this book. Whom can Mitra and Babak trust? Have you ever trusted someone who let you down?
- If you were Mitra, would you have used Babak’s dreams for financial gains?
- How are animals treated in the book?
- Compare and contrast the three magi. If you had to choose one to spend time with, who would it be?
- Did you know this was going to be about the birth of the baby Jesus? When did you figure it out?
- How did the author make you feel like you, too, were in the desert?
- Would you have liked to live in this time period and place?

www.susanfletcher.com/

Russell Freedman

THE ADVENTURES OF MARCO POLO

Scholastic, 2006. ISBN0-439-52394-X. \$17.99. 60 pages.

According to Coleridge, "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree." Stately it certainly was, and more, and Marco Polo was there to see. Or was he? Whether Marco Polo actually traveled to China and spent several years as an honored guest and possibly a government official in the courts of Kublai Khan, or whether his insatiable curiosity and vigorous storytelling allowed him to internalize and synthesize all that he learned during his travels, his stories of the mysterious East were one of the primary influences which inspired explorations along the route of the Silk Road and brought knowledge of the area to Europe. He was the first great travel writer, aided by a man he met in prison after he returned from his travels. Russell Freedman draws a lively picture of the Polo family's life in Venice and the travels of Marco with his father and uncle. But it is the chapters on Kublai Khan and his impossibly luxurious life, a life that included benefits for all the people of China, which makes this a riveting story. The book opens when Marco is on his deathbed and members of his own family are begging him to recant many of his tales of adventures during the 24-year, 6500-mile journey to and sojourn in Kublai Khan's court. The book is a work of art as well as an analysis of the truths in Marco Polo's accounts. Thick creamy pages simulate parchment. The illustrator, Bagram Ibatoulline, has based his paintings on various European and Asian styles of the time. His own works are augmented by medieval illuminations from several editions of Marco Polo's story, *The Description of the World* or *The Travels of Marco Polo*. The combination of story and art, including helpful painted maps delineating the journeys from and to Venice, make for a rounded reading pleasure. There's plenty of information here, but it's never a dry history text. Did he or didn't he? On his death bed, all he would say is, "I have only told the half of what I saw."

Read-aloud hook: pp. 29-33. The riches of Kublai Khan were astounding. Here is a description of life in his palace followed by some of his socially enlightened practices. "As the Khan's guest...they may do whatever they please with their souls."

Discussion questions:

- Would you want to live as Kublai Khan did? What part of his life appeals to you and what do you think you would hate?
- Do you think Marco Polo really ever got to China? Why?
- Kublai Khan may have been a rich ruler but he also started reforms in China that made the lives of common people much better than they were in Europe. Read the passage that starts on page 31. Which of his many changes: education, health care, religious freedom seems to you to be most important? Do you think they lasted?
- What if Marco Polo never saw China and actually made it all up? Would his stories have any worth? Why or why not?
- Are there more worlds to explore? If you were Marco Polo, where would you go today?

Isabella Hatkoff, Craig Hatkoff, & Dr. Paul Kahumbu
OWEN & MZEE: THE TRUE STORY OF A REMARKABLE FRIENDSHIP
Scholastic, 2006. ISBN 0-439-82973-9. \$16.99. 40 pages.

Imagine a friendship between a 130-year-old tortoise and a baby hippo. It sounds like a fable or a fairy tale. But the story of Owen the hippo and Mzee the tortoise is absolutely true.

In December 2004 a violent storm called a tsunami flooded the Sabaki River in Kenya, east coast. During the storm a baby hippo was separated from his family and stranded on a coral reef. Many brave people tried to rescue him until finally one man named Owen successfully tackled him. The 600 -pound hippopotamus was named in his honor and taken to live in the Haller Park animal sanctuary near the city of Mombasa, Kenya. Once there, the frightened baby hippo immediately moved toward the other inhabitant of his enclosure, an ancient Aldabra tortoise, Mzee, whose name in Swahili means “wise old man.” At first, Mzee wanted nothing to do with Owen, but Owen persisted. As BBC photojournalist Peter Greste’s pictures powerfully illustrate, the two became inseparable buddies, eating together, swimming together, and even sleeping together. Although scientists speculate as to the reasons for this unexpected closeness between a mammal and a reptile, no one really knows what bonds Owen and Mzee. What we do know, however, is that they have a remarkable friendship.

Isabella Hatkoff was 6 years old when she learned the story of Owen and Mzee. She was so curious that she began e-mailing her questions about this odd couple to Dr. Paula Kahumba at Haller Park. Isabella’s dad, Craig, got involved, and the 3 of them published the story of Owen and Mzee as an e-book on the Internet. Soon it was printed and published by Scholastic.

Read-aloud hook: “Our most important friends are sometimes those we least expect.” Last sentence on the page facing the picture captioned, “Mzee and Owen play ‘follow the leader.’” Just about any picture in the book is sure to hook young readers!

Discussion questions:

- If you were going to write a sequel to this book, what would happen next to Owen and Mzee?
- Draw a picture for the story.
- One of the reasons that the friendship of Owen and Mzee is so surprising is the fact that they are so different. How are Owen and Mzee different? In what ways are they alike?
- How do Owen and Mzee help each other?
- What are some of the themes of the story (e.g. friendship, helping others, community) and where do these themes appear in the story? Do you believe that these themes are important in your own life? Why? Why not?
- What do you value most in a friend? What makes you a good friend?
- What feelings does this story give you?
- Isabella’s curiosity about Owen and Mzee led her to learn more about them. What is something you are curious about? How could you learn more about it?

OFFICIAL WEBSITE: <http://owenandmzee.com/omweb/>

Other websites of interest:

www.lafargeecosystems.com

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/kids/2005/03/owen.html>

Will Hobbs

CROSSING THE WIRE

HarperCollins, 2006. ISBN 0-06-074138-4 (Tr.); 0-06-074139-2 (PLB). \$15.99. 216 pages.

On a bus pulling out of Salao, Mexico, Victor Flores cries at the first notes of “Camion de Guanajuato.” The song represents all that he loves about his tierra, his land, and all that he is leaving. At fifteen, Victor is going north, following in the footsteps of his late father and so many other men from his village, to cross illegally into the United States.

Will Hobbs, author of many a good survival story, turns his keen eye to an international debate over 150 years old. Discussions of subsidies, “free” trade, border vigilantes, and international competition can sometimes make for dry reading. But in Hobbs’ hands, these issues propel Victor over the edge of desperation. When he leaves home, we know he does so with a heavy heart, not with swashbuckling dreams.

In his final attempts to help his family, Victor encounters great kindness and inhuman cruelty. He finds himself in hospitals, police stations, and toolboxes. He lounges in a Chevrolet Suburban, he sleeps in a bullfighting arena converted for the homeless, and he tries and tries again to cross the border. As he discovers, crossing is easy, but staying is difficult. Through the trials of Victor, his friend Julio, the old lobo Miguel, and Victor’s best friend Rico, Will Hobbs personalizes the issue of illegal immigration, taking it off the headlines and putting it in our hearts.

Read-aloud hook: Victor and his friend Julio arrive in the border city of Nogales. The following passage gives a good sense of the desperation to which many immigrants are driven. Start at: “The fourth day in Nogales, . . .” End at, “In seconds, without a look back, he disappeared into the blackness.” (pp. 76-78).

Discussion questions:

- There is no easy way for Victor to get over the border. Why not?
- Have you ever wanted something so badly that you kept trying over and over to get it? Did how much you wanted that thing change over time?
- Will Hobbs fills Victor’s story with many examples of economic irony. What purposes do these examples serve?
- Choose a couple of the sayings from Victor’s father to try to describe the kind of man he might have been. Now choose a couple sayings (any) to describe the kind of person you are, your teacher is, or your best friend is.
- Will Hobbs has obviously done his research on the issues his characters face. Can you find any real-life examples of these issues from newspapers and magazines?

<http://www.WillHobbsAuthor.com>

Cynthia Kadohata

WEEDFLOWER

Atheneum, 2006. ISBN 0-689-86574-9. \$16.95. 216pages.

Sumiko is a 12-year-old girl living in California in the 1940's, at the time of the Pearl Harbor attacks. Her life has been filled with events both happy and sad. She and her younger brother are orphans living with their aunt and uncle on a flower farm. Sumiko is always content to be amongst the flowers. Now she is thrilled to have been invited to a birthday party, only to be uninvited the moment she arrives--gift in hand. Her hasty departure is based on the fact that she is Japanese American. But this is nothing compared with the feeling of having to leave her home and move to a new place, somewhere the government has decided that everyone with her ethnic background should live.

Life in camp takes a bit of adjusting for everyone, her brother, aunt and cousins. But Sumiko makes the best out of a bad situation. She helps a neighbor start a garden and makes friends with Frank, a Native American boy from a nearby reservation. Throughout it all Sumiko is a girl with wishes and dreams, a girl who is able to make friends despite bleak situations. This hope filled novel is a chance to look at a time period of different cultures living side by side, the ups and downs of contained living. This is a novel that will inspire you to ask, "What if this happened today, who would I be?"

Read-aloud hook: Leaving everything behind reads like this: 'On the day they left their house forever, Sumiko put on her mint green school dress. She went outside to see everything for the last time. She wanted to sit among the kusabana, but didn't want to dirty her dress. The kusabana already seemed a little unruly, and the bathhouse seemed foreign. The shed just made her sad.' pp 78-83

Discussion questions:

- Sumiko is invited to a birthday party, and then asked to leave because she is a Japanese American. If you were in Sumiko's situation, what would you say? Would you ask for the present back?
- Have you ever had to leave everything behind? If you had to go for some reason, what would you take?
- One night at camp, Sumiko takes off with some other children. Would you have gone with them? Would you have been able to pluck the stolen chicken? How did you feel when the children buried the bird?
- Sumiko focuses on the garden while she is at the camp; she and Mr. Motot even win a ribbon. If you were in her situation what do you think would make you happy? Friends? Writing letters? Reading?
- Though the Japanese Americans have been forced to reside in the camp, they have electricity while the Native Americans do not. Have you ever had something while someone else has had to do without? How did it make you feel?

www.kira-kira.us/

Watt Key

ALABAMA MOON

FSG, 2006. ISBN 0-374-30184-0. \$16.00. 294 pages.

As ten-year-old Moon's father lies in the woods dying of complications from a compound fracture, he urges his son to flee from Alabama to Alaska. There will be other folks there who understand you can't trust the government, he explains to his son. Moon, who has been hiding in the woods with his war-damaged, survivalist father since infancy, pledges to undertake the journey. He never makes it to Alaska – in fact, he never even makes it out of Alabama, but he travels farther on his emotional journey than some adults ever do.

After a decade of solitude, Moon quickly encounters virtually every slice of humanity possible. There's the sadistic bully who wants to lock him up, Constable Sanders. (Sanders is so terrible even his own bloodhounds defect to join Moon, and the outcome of Sanders' moment in court will be very satisfying to readers.) There are Moon's fellow escapees from the Pinson juvenile home, the rough-edged Hal and the delicate but loyal Kit, as well as Hal's perpetually drunk but endearing father. The outdoor survival details are numerous and vivid, and Moon's introduction to civilization is not to be missed (he is quite possibly the only boy ever to find institutional food a culinary delight).

By the end, Moon comes to the realization his beloved father was wrong: he does need people, and some of them can even be trusted. As painful as Moon's journey is, he would not have missed meeting his fellow travelers for the world – and the reader will feel the same.

Read-aloud hook: Page 22 and 30-31: Moon's father had told him to avoid people and to write "smoke letters" if he got lonely, letters that he would write and then burn in the fire. These are Moon's first two letters to his father after his death.

Discussion questions:

- At the beginning of the book, Moon tells people, "Sure I know how to read. I can whip somebody three times my size, too. And I know everything I need to know to live on my own." After escaping from Pinson with Hal and Kit, Moon learns a few more things. What else does Moon learn, and how does that change how he lives?
- Moon's life is vastly different from our world of electronic devices and convenience food. Assuming you learned how to feed and clothe yourself, could you survive in Moon's world? Would you miss people?
- Think about other books in which the protagonist must live on his own; Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* and Jean Craighead George's *My Side of the Mountain* come to mind. What are some similarities and differences between those characters and Moon? In *Hatchet*, Brian is forced into a wilderness existence after a plane crash; in *My Side of the Mountain*, Sam runs away from civilization to seek nature. How does that make their outlook different from Moon's, who had known no other way of life?

www.wattkey.com

Mark Kurlansky
THE STORY OF SALT

Putnam, 2006. ISBN 0-399-23998-7. \$16.99. 48 pages.

“Please pass the salt.” “She’s the salt of the earth.” “He’s a salty dog.” “Take it with a grain of salt.” We take this common and inexpensive compound very much for granted. But in *The Story of Salt* author Mark Kurlansky carries us on a fascinating journey into the history of salt and, in fact, uses salt as the lens through which readers get a very different view of history. Based on his adult nonfiction book, *Salt: A World History*, this handsome, well-illustrated adaptation contains fascinating facts about history, science and technology for middle graders. Beginning with a personal anecdote, Kurlansky’s informal narrative is filled with information, from the chemical makeup of salt to its use in preserving everything from meat to mummies, to the fact that salt is the only rock human beings eat and that we need to eat it to live. Sidebars are scattered throughout the text. They include ancient recipes for soy sauce and ketchup; words based on the Roman word for salt; and the link between salt and the discovery of purple dye. Schindler’s ink and watercolor illustrations create historical settings while also adding humor to aptly amplify the text. One dramatic illustration shows Mahatma Gandhi leading thousands on his famous Salt March to the Arabian Sea in protest against being forced to buy salt from the British. An illustrated timeline at the end of the book sums up the broad sweep of salt’s history. *The Story of Salt* would make an excellent read aloud and a fine addition to the science section of your library.

Read-aloud hooks:

Page 7: “Salt is the only rock [we eat] ... and [we] need it to live.”

Page 21: “[In ancient Egypt] Dead bodies were ... cleaned and salted to be preserved for eternity. Without salt, there would be no mummies.”

Page 39: Sidebar: “Ketchup: In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a sauce made from salted anchovies became extremely popular. In England it was known as ketchup...By the nineteenth century there were many different kinds of ketchup. Some had fish or mushrooms or other ingredients. But every recipe contained salt. Tomato ketchup was an American idea... .”

Discussion questions:

- Buying a salt rock in Spain made author Mark Kurlansky curious about salt, its origins and its importance. He began to wonder and then he began to research and finally he began to write down all that he had learned. What is something that you wonder about? What would you like to know about it? How do you think you could begin to learn about it?
- What surprised you most about this book? Why?
- Why are the pictures in this book important? Why is the timeline at the end of the book important? How do the illustrations and the timeline help the author tell his story?
- Which part of the book was your favorite? Why?
- Would you recommend this book to a friend? Why? Why not?

Kirby Larson

HATTIE BIG SKY

Delacorte, 2006. ISBN 0-385-73313-5. \$15.95. 304 pages.

Inspired by the author's great-grandmother's homesteading experience in Eastern Montana, *Hattie Big Sky* is the story of an orphaned girl's opportunity to "prove up" – to make a go of an inherited Montana claim and to prove to herself that she is worth more than her relatives have given her credit for. Set during WWI, the story opens with a letter from Hattie to her pal Charlie, who is fighting in France. Immediately, we are taken with Hattie's humor and spirit. And when the next post contains a letter explaining the death of her long-lost uncle and Hattie's resulting inheritance, readers are hardly surprised at her determination to move to Montana. Life there is harsh. The winters are biting. The landscape vast and lonely. But Hattie does make friends with a unique cast of characters, including a German immigrant and his family who teach Hattie many of the skills she needs to live alone in Big Sky country. The novel is peppered with Hattie's letters and a column she contributes to an Iowa newspaper that offer more of the nitty-gritty of homesteading life. What makes this book a timely read, however, is the secondary plotline that follows the ever-increasing patriotism among many of the Montana locals, some of whom use fear of immigrants to their own gain. In the end, Hattie succeeds in proving herself a strong, intelligent, and principled young woman, but she does not "prove-up" on her claim. Still, readers will be certain that the life ahead of her will be bright and full of promise.

Read-aloud hook: Page 55, beginning with the line: "Hey there Mr. Whiskers" and ending on page 57 with "I let it fly." Hattie, out alone on the Montana prairie and still new to the dangers of living alone in the wild, is hanging her wash and completely unaware of the threat just yards away.

Discussion questions:

- The author, Kirby Larson, was inspired to write *Hattie Big Sky* after learning about her great-grandmother's homesteading experience. Consider your own family history and use a person or event as the basis for your own fictional story.
- Why were the settlers in Vida so worried about immigrants? Were their fears justified?
- Hattie's newspaper column describes the daily life of a Montana homesteader for an audience of city dwellers who have a life very different from hers. Write your own newspaper column describing the daily life of a Vermont student for an audience in a large city or in another country. What sorts of things do you think such a reader would find surprising about the way you live?
- Homesteading in the early 20th century could be very lonely. No telephones. No computers. No television. And long distances between friends and neighbors. If you were preparing for a winter as a Montana homesteader, what would you pack to keep you busy during those long lonely days?

www.hattiebigsky.com

www.kirbylarson.com

kirbylarson.podomatic.com

Iain Lawrence

GEMINI SUMMER

Delacorte, 2006. ISBN 0-385-73089-6. \$15.95. 261 pages.

In the mid 1960s in Hog's Hollow, a small patch of land in the middle of Toronto, each member of the River family has a dream: Mrs. River, who has never been to the American south, is writing a great southern novel; Mr. River is digging a fallout shelter because of what the Vietnam War may bring; the older brother, Beau, is planning to be an astronaut, and younger brother, Danny, just wants a dog. The River family is called "the hillbillies of Hog's Hollow" because of their idiosyncrasies and because Mr. River pumps sewage for a living, but the family is intact and loving, and the boys are very close. Then tragedy strikes: Beau dies in an accident in the hole that his father has been digging. Did the bully, Dopey Colvig, from down the road push Beau in, or did he just fall? Danny can't remember; he is too devastated by the loss of his best friend and hero. When Danny finally gets a chance to adopt a stray dog, he rejects him at first, thinking he does not deserve to have any happiness when Beau is dead. But, the dog worms his way into his heart, and soon they are inseparable. In fact, Danny becomes convinced that the dog IS his brother; that somehow Beau has been reincarnated. When Rocket, the dog, bites Dopey and is taken away by the police, Danny sets out for Cape Canaveral to save the life of the dog by enlisting the help of astronaut Gus Grissom (Beau's idol).

Read-aloud hook: The book opens with a scene in which Danny and his dog have been apprehended by a sheriff. Danny won't tell the sheriff his name or where he lives, so the sheriff decides to lock him up. Start on page 3 near the top of the page with, "You had your chance, sonny," and read to the end of the chapter. The next part of the book is a flashback that explains the incidents leading up to Danny's incarceration.

Discussion questions:

- What do you think of the idea of Beau being reincarnated as a dog?
- Beau idolized astronauts. Is there anyone in the public eye that you idolize, or any profession you aspire to?
- Kids are sometimes judged by what their parents do. Danny and Beau's father ran a business pumping out septic tanks. Would knowing that about a kid influence your opinion of him?
- Each of the Rivers has a dream that influences how they live their lives. Do you or someone you know have such an all-consuming dream?
- When Danny decides to leave with the dog, he thinks that is his only solution. What would you have done?
- Compare and contrast what the dog in *Listen* by Stephanie Tolan means to Charley and what the dog in this book means to Danny.

www.iainlawrence.com

Martine Leavitt

KETURAH AND LORD DEATH

Front Street, 2006. ISBN1-932425-29-1. \$16.95. 214 pages.

Middle schoolers may believe they are too old for fairy tales, but one look at the cover and title of this enchanting book will convince them otherwise. *Keturah and Lord Death* is a fairy tale, but it's what good fairy tales aspire to be when they grow up.

Keturah lives in the classic, poverty-stricken village of many European tales. Raised by a loving grandmother, she lacks for neither friends, nor beauty, nor talent as the village storyteller. In her sixteenth year, Keturah follows a legendary stag into the forest and becomes lost. In classic fairy tale chronology, she wanders through the woods for three days and three tormented nights. On the fourth morning, she awakes to find Death standing in front of her...that's *Lord Death* to us. In the tradition of Scheherazade, Keturah makes a bargain with Death: she will tell him a tale of love in exchange for one more day. Death ups the ante with a twist: if Keturah can find her true love in that one day, he will spare her life.

This is a story of fear, famine, plague, a magic eye and, of course, love. And then there's Death – he of the “beautiful face” and the “powerful thighs.” The tension between Keturah and her enigmatic nemesis is subtly charged and beautiful. How their relationship plays out will surprise many readers, and should disappoint none. This is not your great-grandmother's fairy tale, but it is the one she wished she had.

Read-aloud hooks: Page 22: Keturah has just tempted Lord Death with the beginning of her story. Read from Keturah's, “The end of the story I cannot tell” to the end of page 23, “so cold it burned my throat.”

Page 35: Keturah has just confessed to her friends that she has made a bargain with Death, and they are determined to help her find her true love in a single day. Read from, “I could not bear the hopeless look in Beatrice's eyes” to the end of page 36.

Discussions questions:

- Think of the fairy tales you read as a child. What are some similarities between those and *Keturah and Lord Death*?
- Keturah is said by all to be beautiful, yet her physical appearance is not described anywhere in the book. Why do you think the author did that? What parts of her beauty do we see?
- Lord Death himself acknowledges Keturah's beauty, but must have heard the pleading of countless beautiful maidens in his day. What makes Keturah so special to him?
- Reread the prologue and the ending. Explain what you think happens. If Keturah indeed dies at the end, then who is telling the story? Keturah says it is the “truest story” she has ever told...but is that the same as saying it is true?

www.martineleavitt.com

Janet Taylor Lisle

BLACK DUCK

Philomel/Sleuth, 2006. ISBN 0-399-23963-4. \$15.99. 252 pages

Framed as a series of interviews between a young teen and an old man, rumored to be the last survivor of Rhode Island rumrunners during Prohibition, this is an involving mystery, adventure and historical novel. Ruben (the old man being interviewed) and his best friend Jeddy find a dead body on the beach, but when they bring people to see it, it is gone. They are sure that the body has something to do with bootlegging, but to whom does it belong? And which side is he on? Almost everyone around is involved in bootlegging in one form or another, whether it be unloading cargo to make a little extra money to put a new roof on the house, or as a member of the Boston or New York mafia who are running huge operations. The boys' situation is further complicated by the fact that Jeddy's father is the police chief and therefore always must obey the law. Or does he? Ruben's father is the manager of a grocery store whose owner is almost certainly involved in the bootlegging. Are some people guiltier than others? Who is working with whom? Can the boys trust anyone? And, will their friendship survive the troubling answers?

Read-aloud hook: pp. 17 and 18. Jeddy and Ruben find a dead body. Begin at the beginning of the chapter called, "A Dark-rimmed Hole," and end on the bottom of page 18.

Discussion questions:

- Some of the people who became rumrunners did it "because everybody was doing it." What do you think of this reasoning?
- Some people think that keeping marijuana as an illegal substance is as foolish and ineffective as it was to outlaw alcohol during Prohibition. What do you think about that?
- If you don't agree with a law, do you think it is ok to break it?
- After all that happened with Jeddy's father, Jeddy could never go back to being friends with Ruben. Do you think that is realistic? Is there anything that Ruben could have done to bring them back together?
- Ruben's secret knowledge about the *Black Duck* and the people involved is important to law enforcement. Why does he keep silent?
- Some people claim the Coast Guard was just doing its duty when the *Black Duck* was fired on; others say they acted rashly and without due warning. Which opinion do you support and why?
- Could Ruben's father have done anything differently when he learned that his boss was running a bootlegging operation out of the basement of the store where he worked?

www.janettaylorlisle.com/

Providence Journal article about a big Rhode Island rumrunner and Rhode Island's view of Prohibition-
<http://www.projo.com/specials/century/month4/426roar.htm>

Cynthia Lord

RULES

Scholastic, 2006. ISBN 987-0-618-68550-9. \$15.99. 208 pages.

“Chew with your mouth closed.”

“If the bathroom door is closed, knock. (Especially if Catherine has a friend over.)”

“No toys in the fish tank.”

Twelve-year-old Catherine keeps a list of rules for her autistic eight-year-old brother David, rules she hopes will make her family a little more “normal” – a goal made doubly important by the appearance of her new next door neighbor, Kristy, who Catherine hopes will become her friend. But David makes even a simple barbeque difficult. What if he makes a scene? What if he starts screaming? “What if he spills something on his shorts and takes them off in front of everyone?” The only place Catherine doesn’t worry about David is at his weekly therapy sessions. There she meets Jason, a boy her age who is confined to a wheelchair and unable to speak, but who is able to converse by pointing to words in his communication book. Over time, Catherine adds to his vocabulary, printing up words that no grown-up would think to give him (Stinks a big one!., Gross. Whatever.), while Jason offers Catherine the sympathetic ear her parents cannot. Complex, honest characters populate this touching and funny novel and Catherine’s very “normal” concerns about friendship, family, and fitting in give this story universal appeal.

Read-aloud hook: Page 37, beginning with the line “Our new neighbor’s front door opens” and ending with the line “‘But I always look green’, said Frog, ‘I am a frog.’”: Catherine is watching her brother David, waiting for their father to come home from work. David has a history of spinning out of control when his father is late and appears to be on the brink of doing so now. Unfortunately for Catherine, her new neighbor, Kristy, whom she desperately wants to impress, has just come out her front door.

Discussion questions:

- If you had a communication book like Jason’s, what words would you want included?
- Every family has its own rules. What rules does your family follow? What rules do you wish you could have?
- Catherine wishes her family were normal. Do you think there is such a thing as a normal family? Why or why not?
- There are lots of funny moments in this book. Name one and consider why the author included it in the story. What role does humor play in the way we understand the character of Catherine?

www.cynthialord.com
cynthialord.livejournal.com

Lois Lowry
GOSSAMER

Houghton, 2006. ISBN 978-0-618-68550-9. \$16.00. 208 pages.

Littlest One is a dream-giver in training. Under the tutelage of Fastidious and Thin Elderly, she learns how to gather a person's memories by touching the things in their home (a long-ago kiss from an old photograph, a glorious day at the beach from a seashell), and bestow them upon sleeping humans in the form of dreams. Littlest One is clever and curious and particularly gifted at finding comforting memories, a skill that is about to face a serious test. The house to which Littlest One is assigned has long been home to a lonely Old Woman and her dog, but now the woman has invited a foster child into her life – an abused twelve-year-old boy named John. John's possessions are few and the good memories attached to them are even fewer. Littlest One's job is challenging enough, but soon the dream-givers learn that a hoard of Sinesteeds, dream-givers gone wrong who are responsible for our worst nightmares, are planning an attack on the house. Together, Thin Elderly and Littlest One gather the memories old and fresh that will do battle with the nightmare that comes. *Gossamer* is simple and straightforward enough for even the youngest readers, but in typical Lowry fashion, there are layers of story that will keep older readers thinking for a long time.

Read-aloud hook: The beginning of chapter 13, pages 54 and 55. Littlest, dream-giver in training, and Thin Elderly, her teacher, are in the Old Woman's house, collecting fragments for dreams when they hear something frightening approaching.

Discussion questions:

- *Gossamer's* chapters are a little like puzzle pieces. First we read a chapter about Littlest One, then one about the Old Woman. Later chapters focus on John, his mother, and even another dream-giver assigned to John's mother's apartment. The reader's job is to fit all these pieces together into a story. In what ways does this parallel the way Littlest One bestows dreams? In what ways is it different? Did you enjoy reading a story structured in this manner?
- Which objects in your home hold the happiest memories for you? Which make you remember sad moments? If a dream-giver were working in your house, which objects would you hope he would touch to create your dream?
- Littlest One is a student – a curious, wiggly, sometimes distractible student – who has special talents and wants to do well. What sort of student are you? What special talents do you have? In what ways is your learning experience like that Littlest One has with her teachers? What subjects are you most curious about and wish you could explore more?
- Near the end of the book, Littlest One notices that she is no longer transparent, as she was when she first started as a dream-giver. "What fills me?" she asks. Thin Elderly tells her, "Everything that you're a part of. Your own story fills you." What fills you? What things in your past make you the person you are today? What are you doing now that you think might be important to your grown-up self?

www.loislowry.com

http://loislowry.typepad.com/lowry_updates/

K. A. Nuzum

A SMALL WHITE SCAR

HarperCollins, 2006. ISBN 0-06-075639-0. \$15.99. 192 pages.

It's July in Colorado. The year is 1940. Will Bennon has spent his whole life on his family's ranch. He's been saddled with his twin brother's care since their mother's death and, having turned 15, all he wants to do is get out. He views the ranch as a metal trap, one that a hunter might use to protect his livestock: "I knew the trap would snap any second, but I could not help taking one more step." Though he is certain that his life lies elsewhere, he is torn between the rodeo and his devotion to his twin brother Denny, a boy who was labeled "simple" early on. Will's struggle lies between what he should do and what he wants to do. It is hard to think of himself first. Denny has always been first in his mind all these years. But if he doesn't change things soon, he'll surely die at the ranch never having made his way in the world. He won't ever help his father on the ranch, who thinks that his son is only good at playing nursemaid.

Plagued by doubts, and a nagging need to care for his brother, Will plunges on towards the rodeo. Convincing himself that Denny can survive, Will tries to send him home and continue on his original path--to the rodeo, freedom, and a new life free of family responsibility. But time and time again he is called back to help his brother.. He remembers words his mother once spoke to him, and so he trudges on, "As long as you can find the north star you can find your way in life." But her voice also reverberates in his head with these words, "Everything you need to make you happy is right here on our land—either over your head, under your feet, or in between." Life is complicated for Will, but it makes for compelling cowboy reading.

Having been born a twin, Will imagines himself as Denny throughout the story. Their lives are intertwined and entangled in ways different from everyone else, as the same blood runs through both their veins. Will keeps coming back to this question: What if things were different and he had been born that way?

Read-aloud hook: pp. 42-46 Will does take off for the rodeo, only to have a run of bad luck. His horse loses a shoe and Denny ends up following him: "We began backtracking, kicking through the dirt and grass. The smell of sage drew me, comforting me and making me breathe deep and long to capture its scent. Then suddenly, I wasn't smelling sage anymore. I was smelling rattlesnake."

Discussion questions:

- Have you ever wished and worked so hard for something that you felt was so important and then been disappointed? If so, what happened instead?
- A coyote kills Will's dog, Lucille, and he wants revenge. Denny steps in and doesn't allow Will to kill the coyote. Do you agree with Denny's or Will's point of view? Why?
- After Denny crosses the river, Will is in such a rage that he punches his brother. How does this one act change the brothers and their relationship?
- Do you think Will has changed by the end of the book? In what ways? Has Denny changed?
- If you were writing a sequel, what would become of Denny? Will? Their father?

Katherine Paterson
BREAD AND ROSES, TOO

Clarion, 2006. ISBN 0-618-65479-6. \$16.00. 272 pages.

In alternating chapters told from the points of view of Rosa, American-born daughter of a widowed Italian immigrant who works in the mills in Lawrence, MA in 1912, and Jake Beale, a native son whose drunken father has managed to fake the papers to allow him, also, to work in the mill, this historical novel faithfully recreates the story of the "Bread and Roses Strike" in Lawrence which gained national attention and led to many changes in working conditions. Jake calls Rosa "Shoe Girl" because he first meets her when he is sleeping on a garbage heap and she comes looking for a worn out pair of shoes she had thrown out hoping that she might get a new pair. Rosa takes him back to her tenement apartment where he sleeps on the kitchen floor and sneaks out in the morning taking a loaf of bread. When the workers go on strike, Rosa's teacher opposes the action and sees the strikers as mere rabble, anarchists. She doesn't fully understand the family lives and poverty of her students and assumes that parents have not bought schoolbooks for their children because they don't value education. Rosa is determined that her life in America will be different. She'll make something of herself. But she also appreciates her strong heritage, good Italian cooking and her mother's beautiful singing voice. When the strike turns violent and police and guards kill a young girl, parents and the national union arrange for children to be sent from the town.

The citizens of Barre, VT take in many of the children from Lawrence whose parents feel they will be safer away from the strike. Jake sneaks onto the train, believing it is going to New York City. He fears he will be blamed for not reporting his father's death from alcohol and cold and is running away. When Rosa finds him, it is too late for him to get off the train. They concoct a story, planning to pass him off as her brother Salvatore (Sal) although he knows no Italian. The old couple who take them in, Mr. and Mrs. Gerbati, give them unaccustomed luxuries – three full meals a day, comfortable beds and beautiful warm new clothes. Mr. Gerbati, whose artistry at stonecutting has earned him respect, owns a business and takes on the illiterate Jake (Sal) as an apprentice so that he won't have to go to school and embarrass himself. Rosa, who has been teaching her mother to read, teaches Jake after school. Jake repays Mr. Gerbati's kindness by trying to break into the safe at the factory, but he is caught. When he is finally forced to confess the truth, it is the beginning of a whole new life, one he never could have imagined.

Read-aloud hook: pp.145-147 Jake has a chance to go to New York City along with Rosa if he can get his father to sign a permission card. Reluctantly, he returns to the shack and the drunken man who has done nothing but beat Jake and demand whiskey from his mill wages. "He still had money.....had to get out of there."

Discussion questions:

- Why does Father O'Reilly help Jake? Is he in favor of the strike? Why?
- Rosa is torn between her dreams of an American life and her loyalty to her Italian immigrant family. Do you think she is a snob?
- Why do you think Jake felt he needed to break into the safe?
- Being a striker was dangerous. Why did they persist?
- If you were Jake, would you have continued to return to your father and give him your wages? Why or why not?

www.terabithia.com/

Susan Patron

THE HIGHER POWER OF LUCKY

Atheneum, 2006. ISBN 1-4169-0194-5. \$16.95. 134 pages.

At first glance, she doesn't seem lucky. At ten years old, she's been abandoned by her father and lost her mother who was killed stepping barefoot on a fallen electric wire after a rainstorm. Shortly after the funeral, Lucky answered the door to have an urn full of her mother's ashes thrust into her hands. Now, she must decide what to do with them.

Her father, a shadowy figure in her life, contacted his first wife, Brigitte, in France.

Astoundingly, she flew immediately to the U.S., set herself up in a series of small trailers in the tiny desert town of Hard Pan, California (Pop. 43) and made a life with Lucky and her dog, H.M.S. Beagle. Lucky has a lot of scientific interests and is interested in Charles Darwin. She collects insect specimens. She has one of the few jobs in town, cleaning up after the many twelve step meetings held on the patio of the Found Object Wind Chime Museum and Visitor's Center, sweeping up the cigarette butts from the alcoholics meeting before the smokers anonymous meeting and clearing away the beer cans before the alcoholics meet again. Behind the fence, she hears many interesting stories of lives reaching their lowest points and people getting in touch with their higher powers to turn their lives around. Because she knows that Brigitte is homesick for France, Lucky worries that she will leave even though there are signs of strong affection such as a ritual bed-time cuddle. She keeps a backpack filled with essentials, her "survival kit," with her at all times. She never knows when she may need to turn her own life around. Lucky has one close friend her age, Lincoln, who is obsessed with tying knots and even belongs to the International Guild of Knot Tyers. She is bothered by young Miles who adores Brigitte, who feeds him, and mostly Lucky tolerates him. In search of her higher power, she leaves home with her survival kit, her mother's ashes and her dog and heads for the dugouts, caves she knows of in the desert. But a blinding sandstorm disorients her, almost loses H.M.S. Beagle and brings them a surprise visitor.

Lucky is a survivor, partly because of her own originality and pluck and partly because the small world and its inhabitants that surround her give her what she needs.

Read-aloud hook: pp. 50-54 – Lucky is talking on the phone with her friend Lincoln when she hears Brigitte scream. "What happened?... (to)... highly evolved human being."

Discussion questions:

- Why does Lucky run away?
- Does Lucky mean to be cruel when she tells Miles about his mother?
- As you read the story, did you think that Brigitte would leave and return to France? What made you think so?
- Does Lucky's father care about her at all? What makes you think so?
- Why did Brigitte agree so quickly to come to America to live with Lucky?

Shelley Pearsall

ALL OF THE ABOVE

Little, Brown, 2006. ISBN 0-316-11524-7. \$15.99. 234 pages.

Mr. Collins' seventh grade math class in inner city Cleveland, Ohio feels like a waste of time, both to himself and his students. One day, in frustration, Collins asks the class, "What would make you care about being here?" Someone suggests having a contest, and the idea is born to start a math club that will build a rainbow-colored paper tetrahedron so huge it will earn their school a place in the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

So begins the after-school Tetrahedron Team, based on a true story. The team comes to life through the alternate voices of four African American students and their white middle-aged teacher. There's Marcel, the brash team president; scholarly Rhondell, who likes big words like "epiphany" and "metamorphosis" that she can use on college applications; Sharice, the one with a neglectful foster parent; James, the smart mouth artist; and the blandly analytical Mr. Collins. James' dynamic sketches illustrate the novel, which is also peppered with recipes for barbecue sauce, cornbread, and chocolate truth cake from Marcel's father's restaurant.

A sense of community grows within the group, so all are devastated when the partly built tetrahedron is destroyed by an act of vandalism. But refusing to give up, the team begins to rebuild the tetrahedron, comprised of little folded and glued tetrahedra, with help from several sympathetic adults, including Willy Q. (the barbecue king), a group of hairdressers, and the school custodian. With high hopes and a great sense of achievement, the team gathers before the media's cameras for the ceremonial unveiling of their almost 9-ft. rainbow tetrahedron.

Read-aloud hook: p. 133 -136

Before reading, set the scene: Marcel is president of the Tetrahedron Team, but his dad, Willy Q., hasn't even given Marcel permission to be on the team. You see, Willy Q., who owns and operates the barbecue place, had called Mr. Collins and said, "I need my son here every day, helping me after school."

Discussion questions:

- Does Mr. Collins have a sense of humor? Defend your answer.
- Brainstorm some other "college words" that Rhondell could add to her collection.
- How does James's attitude change over the course of the story?
- How does Sharice cope with her hard life? What would you have done differently?
- Using paper, create a tetrahedron and a pyramid. How are they both similar and different?

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Laura Amy Schlitz

A DROWNED MAIDEN'S HAIR: A MELODRAMA

Candlewick, 2006. ISBN 0-7636-2930. \$15.99. 389 pages.

Eleven-year-old Maud Flynn thinks that the charismatic Hyacinth Hawthorne is her savior. When the Hawthorne sisters visit the Barbary Asylum for Female Orphans and choose disobedient, uncooperative Maud to come and live with them, she feels that all of her wishes have come true. Her new home is so relatively luxurious that at first it does not bother her a bit that the sisters insist that her presence in their home remain a secret from everyone except Muffet, the housekeeper. But it does make life rather dull, so Maud is pleased when Hyacinth asks her to begin to help with the family “work”-- staging séances.

It becomes clear to the reader that Hyacinth's adoption of Maud was motivated purely by her need for a young girl to play the ghostly role of the drowned daughter of a rich and grieving mother. While Maud is reluctant to let go of her illusions about Hyacinth, she does begin to chafe at her confinement and to disobey some of Hyacinth's edicts. When Hyacinth chooses to abandon Maud in a burning house, rather than publicly acknowledge her Spiritualist deceptions, Maud realizes that she must confess to Hyacinth's current victim, even though it means that she will have to return to the orphanage. But in all good melodramas virtue is rewarded, and Maud is rewarded in the end with a loving and honest home.

Read-aloud hooks: p. 1 At the beginning of the novel, in which Maud Flynn is, as usual, in trouble, and is, as usual, making the best of it, Hyacinth explains the family business. p.108 “What's a séance? . . .” As Spiritualists, the Hawthornes use a variety of tricks to stage séances, and then take money from the grieving relatives of the dead. In this passage, Maude's savior, Hyacinth Hawthorne, explains to Maud how the family business works and exactly what her role in it will be.

Discussion questions:

- The Hawthornes were staging their séances at the beginning of this century. How might their techniques be different today? Is the attitude of potential clients different? What new technologies could be used to deceive clients?
- Many fictional orphans struggle constantly to remain with their siblings. Maud, however, seems to have resigned herself to the loss of Samuel and Kit. Do you think that she will seek them out when she has the means? What kind of a relationship do you think they will they have when they are adults?
- Besides being in the title, what does maiden's hair signify in the story?
- Who do you know who shares some of Hyacinth's personality traits? Anna's? Maud's?
- By the end of the book, Anna/Muffet has learned two new ways to communicate. Do you think she will remain a servant all of her life? What else might she be able to do now that she can express herself and understand others better?

Sharon Shinn

THE DREAM-MAKER'S MAGIC

Viking, 2006. ISBN 0-670-06070-4. \$16.99. 261 pages.

Although this is referred to as a fantasy, there is nothing in the romance that is really divorced from reality. Certainly, it takes place in a vaguely medieval country kingdom, town of Thrush Hollow, in which Truth-tellers, Safe-Keepers and Dream-Makers hold sway in ordinary lives of the citizens. But the progress of these lives can be explained in rational terms. Kellen, heroine of this, the third in Shinn's series, has a strange history. Her mother is convinced that when her baby was first presented to her, it was a boy. When she next awoke, it was to find a baby girl, and she has raised this child as a boy, waiting for her to change back again. At age 11, Kellen seems to have weathered life with her somewhat-mad mother, but her father has finally given up and left. When she starts school, she becomes friends with Gryffin, a young man with twisted legs who lives in a tavern with his careless aunt and abusive uncle. He's an excellent student and hopes to qualify for the university in the capital, Wodenderry. But when the old dream-maker, who is retiring, happens by the inn where he and Kellen are working, she identifies him as the one to take her place and everything changes.

After a year, in which Gryffin is established at the palace and becomes a celebrity visited by crowds of people who believe that he can make their dreams come true, Kellen moves to the city disguised as a boy, but postpones contacting Gryffin. The story follows Kellen and Gryffin's friendship and difficulties through her adolescence and growing sense of herself as a woman. Support characters lend depth to the story: Ayler, a safe-keeper who guards people's secrets and ultimately reveals Kellen's own; Raymond, a brilliant drunken lawyer who is given a chance to change his life; Chase, a medical student, whose startling good looks and gentle demeanor strike the adolescent Kellen dumb with desire. Sarah and Leona, in whose inns Kellen and Gryffin work and discover new strengths. Though cruelty, selfishness and greed play a part in this story, it is the strength of friendship, kindness and love which carry the day. First time readers will want to catch up on the series. All three books, though loosely connected through place and theme, stand alone as novels. [*The Safe-Keeper's Secret* (2004) and *The Truth-Teller's Tale* (2005), both Viking]

Read-aloud hook: pp 105-107 Gryffin, whose legs have been twisted since birth, has been missing all day and Kellen is worried. "It was late and I had just.....Kellen, I think I'm going to die!"

Discussion questions:

- Why does Gryffin stay so long at his uncle's when he is beaten so badly?
- What keeps Kellen disguised as a boy after she moves to Wodenderry?
- What are the signs that Kellen cares more for people than for money?
- Did it hurt Kellen to be raised as a boy? What did she lose? What did she gain?
- How did Kellen's mother make her own dream come true? What did Kellen do to add to that?

www.sharonshinn.net/

Nancy Springer

THE CASE OF THE MISSING MARQUESS

Philomel/Sleuth, 2006. ISBN 0-399-24304-6. \$10.99. 208 pages.

Did you know that Sherlock Holmes had a much younger sister? Her name is Enola (which is “alone” spelled backwards) and she lives at Ferndell Hall outside of London with her mother. And here’s where the trouble arises, for on her 14th birthday, Enola’s mom disappears - and Enola’s life changes forever.

Enola, no shrinking violet she, decides to start her own search. First she begins to decipher the clues her mother left behind. Rule Number One: “Know thy subject.” By decoding the meaning of the flowers her mother painted, Enola is able to find the money her mother left for her and then hightails it out of there - or as fast as one can go on a “dwarf” bicycle. By cleverly disguising herself as a widow, Enola is able to escape from her brothers, but she cannot turn away from the chance to locate a missing boy.

The first in a series, Enola’s quest will keep you turning the pages until the very end. This is also an intriguing addition to the 2007 summer reading program, “Get a Clue @ your Library.”

Read-aloud hook: Sherlock and Mycroft, the other brother, are summoned to care for their sister and to try and ascertain what exactly happened to their dear old mum. Upon their arrival, Enola hides herself from their disapproving glances and interrogations.

‘This cool nook was my secret hideaway, known to no one except me. Here I kept things I liked, things Mrs. Lane would have thrown out had I brought them into the house...

...All I could think about was what could have become of Mum, how I would have to go home eventually and she would not be awaiting me...’ p 53-57

Discussion questions:

- Enola makes a list of her own accomplishments after reciting her brother Sherlock’s good traits. What would your accomplishments be? Would you be brave enough to search for your own mother?
- Enola consoles herself by escaping to her secret place. Do you have one, and what do you keep there? If not, where would it be, and why?
- Have you ever solved a mystery? If so, what clues did you use? What makes Enola a good detective/ perditorian?
- Clothing traps both Enola and the Marquess (corsets and velvet). Does this happen in today’s society?
- Enola uses clues to discover a message left by her mother. Create your own cipher and send a message to someone.

www.nancyspringer.net

Stephanie S. Tolan

LISTEN!

HarperCollins, 2006. ISBN 0-06-057935-7. \$15.99. 197 pages

Twelve-year-old Charley faces a lonely hot summer while she's recovering from a car accident. Her best friend is away for the summer, and ever since her mother died two years earlier, her father works constantly, paying no attention to Charley. Forced to go walking in the woods by her "physical terrorist," Charley spots a starving wild dog with whom she makes a psychic connection. She determines to tame this golden dog. She studies him so closely, she begins to sense his feelings and imagine how he has become so wary of people. Is her neighbor right, shooting is the only solution for a dog who has never lived inside? She hears her dead mother's voice echoing in her ears: "What you hear, depends on how you listen." As she slowly, slowly, almost unbearably slowly, gains the dog's confidence, she is forced to revisit parts of the woods that she has avoided because of their strong association with her mother. She also begins to look at nature carefully and begin to understand the beauty and importance of the nature photography that her mother did.

The summer Charley had been dreading becomes a summer of healing, not only of her leg that was damaged in the accident, but of her heart that has been wounded since her mother's death. The feral dog that was just a nuisance to some, is the catalyst for love, trust and family renewal.

Read-aloud hook: page 12 Introduce Charley and her interest in the wild dog by beginning with: "Too many trees," Mrs. Davis tells him. End with "Maybe I could get him to come live with us."

Discussion questions:

- Do you think you would have had the patience or courage to tame the wild dog?
- In what ways are the dog and the girl alike?
- How does Charley come to terms with her mother's death?
- What does photography mean to Charley? Does she change her opinion over the course of the summer?
- Why do you think the title of the book is "*Listen!*"?
- Would Coyote mean as much to Charley if he had been easy to tame?

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Megan Whalen Turner
THE KING OF ATTOLIA

Greenwillow, 2006. ISBN 0-06-083578-1. \$17.89. 387 pages.

Eugenides is King of Attolia, but what sort of king puts up with sawdust in his meals, snakes in his bed, and ink stains on his royal clothes? What king would travel without bodyguards when the soldiers in his own pay would gladly see him overthrown? What kind of king sprawls over the throne while holding court, yawning for all to hear? Finally, what kind of king would pardon the soldier who punched him in the face, promote him to lieutenant, and appoint him as the king's own guard?

But wait. Before we write off Gen as just a bumbling monarch destined to be a footnote in history, remember this: prior to becoming King of Attolia, he was the Thief of Eddis, able to pocket anything on which he set his sights. Once his gaze fell on the Queen of Attolia, it was only a matter of time (and his right hand) before her heart and land became his. While those all around wait for him to fall, Gen has his eyes set higher than any might imagine.

Megan Whalen Turner returns to the story of Eugenides and continues to create a world unlike any other, with inhabitants who are wonderful, flawed, and deeply human. Crawling with palace intrigue, *The King of Attolia* rewards its readers with a rich look at a multi-faceted hero.

Read-aloud hook: Few Attolians understand their new king, and many see him as weak. Here Eugenides, showing some of his true fire, turns the tables on a thinly veiled barb. “There was a lull in conversation... Those who understood shifted uncomfortably in their seats.” (pp. 93-94).

Discussion questions:

- Is Eugenides a hero? Is he a fool? Why?
- Is it human nature to want to appear strong? How does Eugenides use people's perception of his weakness to his own advantage?
- Do you think Eugenides “gave up everything he ever dreamed of” to become King of Attolia? If so, why?
- Why is Costis a perfect foil for Eugenides?
- Guards are always trying to make the king feel lost. Draw a plan for the palace and its grounds.

<http://home.att.net/~mwtturner/>

Elizabeth Winthrop
COUNTING ON GRACE

Wendy Lamb, 2006. ISBN 978-0385746441. \$15.95. 240 pages.

In 1910, in a Vermont textile mill town on the Hoosic River, young Grace Forcier, a fictional character inspired by the Lewis Hine photograph seen on the cover, is the “second best reader” in her local one-room schoolhouse. The best is her friend Arthur who is more determined than Grace to stay in school and get himself out of the mill culture, which dominates the town. Both children are called to the mill to assist their mothers, doffing (changing bobbins) on the spinning machines, a physically demanding and potentially dangerous task. For Grace's family, all except her grandfather, working in the mill is an improvement over the hard life on a farm in French Canada. But their teacher, Miss Lesley, not only regrets losing these bright students to the mill, she is strongly opposed to the lax child labor restrictions in Vermont and determined to do something about it. While mill work is hard for Grace, her restlessness, which had gotten her into trouble at school, makes her swift at learning the new tasks and she is proud of the money she can add to the family and the increase in her skills. Arthur, whose home is literally at stake because the mill owns all houses and they will only allow productive families to live in them, is desperate to escape the dull routine imposed upon him. Only such desperation could lead him to jam his right hand directly into the gears of the spinning machine causing him to lose two fingers and leaving him useless for mill work. He and Grace had been studying on Sunday afternoons with Miss Lesley, but now he and his mother must leave the town. A letter composed by Miss Lesley with the help of the two children and sent to the Child Labor Committee brings photographer Hine to town to document the work conditions and ages of the children in the mill. He boards with Grace's family and promises to stay in touch and send Grace photographs and a small notebook like the one he had and she coveted. When Miss Lesley is fired from the school because of her interference in the mill's business, she suggests that Grace be an interim teacher, and the reader is left with the sense that there is life outside the mill awaiting Grace. Make sure that children who read this book are aware of the "Story Behind the Photograph." Winthrop's search for the real “Grace” is a fascinating addition.

Read-aloud hook: pp. 13-16 When French Johnny, the mill overseer, comes to school to get Arthur to work in the mill, Miss Lesley, the teacher, tries to prevent the loss of her best student. Arthur doesn't want to go and hides in an old shack by the river. Grace knows where to find him. "The mill needs the river...the only one I want near me."

Discussion questions:

- Why does Grace avoid French Johnny?
- Was Arthur right to try to escape the mill? What did he lose?
- How would you feel if you suddenly found yourself teaching kids you'd been in school with?
- Was Miss Lesley right to have Arthur and Grace write the letter to the Child Labor Committee? What were the consequences?
- Grace loves her grandfather, Pepe. She feels that she might be responsible for his death. Do you think she did the wrong thing by letting him go off on his own?

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Generic Questions that can be used for any book:

- Can you make any connections between this book and events in your own life? (text to self) What about connections between this book and other books you've read? (text to text) Can you make any connections between this book and experiences that people you know, or know about, have had? (text to world)
- What research do you think the author of this book had to do in order to write this story? (inferring)
- If this book were turned into a play and you could play any character in the story (without regard to gender) which character would you pick and why?
- Illustrate a scene from this book. (visualization)
- Having read the book, what connections can you make between the book jacket, the title and the story itself. (inferring)
- Design a new book jacket.
- While reading this book, did you make any predictions? What were they? Were they accurate? (inferring)
- **For non-fiction:** See your teacher/librarian, take a brief look at this book together and talk about how it is organized. (determining importance)
- What did you wonder about as you read this book? (questioning)



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