

BOOK REVIEWS FOR 2023-2024 List

Compiled by: Dr. Roberta D. Wetzel

Grades 6-8 Chair

96 Miles by J.L. Esplin

Kirkus & SLJ Star:

Brothers undertake a desperate desert journey during a long-term power outage. While their preparation-obsessed father's out of state on a business trip, leaving 13-year-old John and 11-year-old Stew under the loose supervision of their neighbors, a complete blackout hits. Days pass and it doesn't let up; what little news they hear implies a massive scale. In the opening sequence, readers meet the brothers as they lower themselves to collecting toilet water to drink, as they were recently robbed of their father's entire (extensive) supply stash. They encounter a sister-brother duo, Cleverly and Will, and—even though John knows that they barely have the supplies to make the three-day, 96-mile titular journey to salvation—the brothers decide allowing the other kids to join is what is right to do. Along the journey, they face general hardships of desert hiking with insufficient water as well as human threats. Thankfully, these latter are given conflicting motives, which increases tension. Another conflict source is Stew's defeatist behavior, which is at odds with John's descriptions of him—and, in a twist, is revealed to have a very good cause. The story focuses on the themes of the kids' journey, and while the ending provides hope, readers looking for answers to the blackout will be disappointed. The characters default to white, though there's disability representation in the form of characters with Type I diabetes.

For readers thirsting for a fresh survival story. (*Adventure. 8-13*)

Born Behind Bars by Padma Venkatraman

Kirkus:

A young boy is forced to leave the Chennai jail that is the only home he's ever known. When Kabir is deemed too old to stay and is sent out into the world all alone, separated from his wrongfully imprisoned mother, he decides to search for the family of the father he has never met to try to save his mother from her unjustly long sentence. Armed with faith, instinctive wits, and the ability to run fast, Kabir escapes danger and meets Rani, a teenage girl from the marginalized Kurava, or Roma, people who are traveling with her parrot. She teaches Kabir, who has a Hindu mother and a Muslim father, about caste dynamics and survival on the streets. She accompanies him to Bengaluru, where Kabir eventually meets his paternal grandparents. Along the way, their experiences reveal the invisibility of low-caste people in Indian society, tensions between neighboring states over water supplies, and the unexpected kindness of helpful strangers. Kabir's longing for freedom and justice underscores bittersweet twists and turns that resolve in an upbeat conclusion, celebrating his namesake, a saint who sought to unify Muslims and Hindus. Kabir engages readers by voicing his thoughts, vulnerability, and optimism: While his early physical environment was confined within prison walls, his imagination was nourished by stories and songs. This compelling novel develops at a brisk pace, advanced by evocative details and short chapters full of action.

A gritty story filled with hope and idealism. (author's note) (*Fiction. 8-12*)

A Duet for Home by Karina Glaser

Kirkus Star:

New York City tweens June and Tyrell bond while living at a family shelter. After the unexpected death of her father, 11-year-old June Yang, her dog-obsessed little sister, Maybelle, and their depressed mother are evicted from their Chinatown apartment and relocated to a homeless shelter for women and children in the South Bronx. Sixth grader Tyrell Chee, who has been at Huey House for three years, thinks getting three hot meals a day and living in the same building as his book-loving best friend, Jeremiah, beats the uncertainty of life alone with his unreliable mother. Despite a messy first impression, June and Tyrell become fast friends—especially after they discover a shared love of classical music (she plays the viola, he appreciates their mysterious neighbor's nightly violin practice). The dual-perspective narrative offers alternating points of view on navigating life in a shelter. Although the author doesn't shy away from the trauma endured by children in the system and the various mental health, financial, educational, and social challenges the families face, this is a hopeful and inspiring story about the lives of children who are rarely represented in middle-grade fiction. The young people engage in activism that is both thought-provoking and profound. The wonderfully diverse multigenerational cast of characters includes Chinese American June, Chinese and Black Tyrell, and mostly Black and brown supporting characters. A powerful, heartwarming, and thoughtful tale of kids cultivating chosen families during challenging circumstances. (author's note, music list, note on Cantonese) (*Fiction. 9-13*)

Escape by K. R. Alexander

Kirkus:

A new virtual-reality theme park goes haywire on a crowd of young victims, er, visitors in Alexander's latest screamfest. Having scored one of just 100 coveted preview tickets to a cutting-edge, kids-only venue dubbed ESCAPE, budding amusement park fan and designer Cody Baxter is looking forward to a life-changing experience. What he gets is more of a life-threatening one, as games and rides with names like Triassic Terror and Haunted Hillside not only pit him against a monster and then zombies—or sometimes a monster *and* zombies—as well as ruthless competing players, but seem tailored to play on individual personal terrors. And, in some never explained way, the VR quickly turns into real battles that inflict real wounds even as the real settings shift with sudden, dizzying unpredictability. Teaming up with loyal new friends Jayson Torn and Inga Andersdottir, the former described as being Japanese and White and the latter as Norwegian, Cody (who seems to default to White) struggles for survival, learning ultimately that ESCAPE was created by an evil genius with an ulterior motive who is convinced that he can teach children a salutary lesson. The plot's no more logical in its twists and contrivances than the premise, but the author's knack for spinning out nightmarish situations is definitely on display here as the tale careens toward a properly lurid outcome.

Thrills galore for gamers willing to go along for the ride. (*Light horror. 9-12*)

Hush-a-Bye by Jody Lee Mott

SLJ Starred:

★ Gr 4-8—Is there anything creepier than a possessed doll? How about one that begins as a cracked and dirty head with a single gleaming green eye but does not end that way. One that whispers to Antonia and Lucy, and can makes things happen—bad things. Lucy and Antonia are sisters, but they are very different. Lucy lives her life in middle school by her personal code, which means she talks to no one and keeps her head low to avoid the bullies and whispers. Antonia walks to the beat of her own drum and collects odds and ends that she finds including Hush-a-bye, the doll head found on the riverbank. As the school year starts, Antonia insists

that Hush-a-bye speaks to her. At first Lucy doesn't believe her. But as time passes she can no longer ignore the events that keep happening whenever the doll is around. She can't ignore the whispers she begins to hear, or the growing danger as Hush-a-bye changes and her missing parts appear slowly, making her whole and more powerful. Can Lucy save Antonia from the lure of the doll? Or will she be too late to save both of them? Mott's deft prose and well-written characters will keep readers engaged from start to frightening finish.

VERDICT An age-appropriate, scary tale of sisters and the terrifying doll that haunts them. This is the perfect read for people who love the chill of terror running down their backs.

Linked by Gordon Korman

SLJ:

Gr 4-8—In a small Colorado town, lives are changed and secrets are unearthed when swastikas start appearing at the local middle school. Dana, the only Jewish girl, is on edge. Michael, the head of the art club, and Caroline, the class president, are organizing a paper chain six million links long in honor of Jewish Holocaust victims. Link, the most popular seventh grader, learns that as an infant his grandmother was saved in a Catholic nunnery from the Nazis. As the story unfolds, a popular YouTuber brings attention to the town, and Link, after learning about his Jewish ancestry, decides to have a bar mitzvah. All the while, everyone is trying to figure out who keeps drawing swastikas. In typical Korman style, this novel pulls readers in with its character development and engrossing, heartfelt story line. While the story tackles big issues such as the Holocaust and generational discrimination, the writing style remains upbeat and easy, making this a good choice for reluctant and avid readers. Five students and the YouTuber voice the chapters, bringing depth to each character's perspective. Struggles with challenging decisions, friendships, and self-discovery are common middle grade issues that readers will relate to. Some readers may be shocked to learn about the origin of the swastikas, and all will be elated by the celebratory ending.

VERDICT A must-purchase, especially where Korman books are popular

Scout is Not a Band Kid by Jade Armstrong

Kirkus:

Eighth grader Scout is desperate to meet her favorite author, who will be appearing at a festival in another town. The only way she can think of to get there is to join the school band, which will be performing at the festival. Trouble is, Scout doesn't play an instrument. So she lies and says she plays the trombone. The other trombone player, Merrin, a serious music student who has a lot at stake from the band's success, is excited to welcome her, but when she discovers that Scout can't play, she is actually upset. Thinking Scout is just rusty, their teacher assigns Merrin to tutor Scout, telling the girls they will both be kicked out if they don't get along better. Scout, meanwhile, shows little inclination to practice. Eventually, the two find common ground—a not unexpected development, but the twists and turns of the plot while getting there contain many lively and amusing moments. As a character, Scout is so flawed it's intriguing: Her self-centered behavior and lack of conscience about lying and using band participation to get what she wants are presented not as a growth opportunity but simply not a big deal, which makes her eventual success feel unearned, creating a less-than-impactful ending. Scout and Merrin present as White, and the book refreshingly portrays a school inhabited by kids and teachers diverse in ethnicity and gender identity and expression who accept one another.

A perky and mostly fun story. (character sketches, author's note) (*Graphic fiction. 10-14*)

Skandar and the Unicorn Thief by A. F. Steadman

Kirkus:

Unassuming Skandar Smith yearns to be bonded with a unicorn and must grow into the role he'll play in an epic battle with evil. Skandar's dad has told him that his deceased mum promised him a unicorn. Skandar, eager to escape bullies at school and his grieving father at home, hopes this promise will come true: Now 13, he is eligible to take the Hatchery exam, the first step in determining who will be paired with a unicorn. But he's inexplicably denied entry to the test. The intrigue deepens when a woman shows up to deliver him covertly to the Hatchery so he can try to open the door on the Island behind which are the unicorn eggs. She warns Skandar about the Weaver, an evil entity. Tension mounts as Skandar tries to determine the Weaver's plan; he's disconcerted when the first children who see his unicorn hatchling, Scoundrel, spot the mark of the forbidden, deadly spirit element—which is wielded by the Weaver. In fact, none of the unicorns in this tale are for the fainthearted. Even bonded, somewhat controlled unicorns are bloodthirsty. Wild, unbonded unicorns are immortal in death—murderous, rotting, and forever dying. It is these terrifying details, plus a terrible betrayal, that keep readers on knife's edge even as Skandar's bond with his unicorn deepens and his friendship with other riders solidifies—with them, Skandar brings about change. Skandar reads as White; the supporting cast includes diverse skin tones. Unexpected, suspenseful, and heartwarming. (maps) (*Fantasy. 9-12*)

Treasure Tracks by S. A. Rodriguez

Kirkus:

Freshly certified as a young diver, 12-year-old Fernando "Fin" Román loves to spend his days at sea around the Florida Keys alongside his strong Abuelo Kiki in search of legendary lost treasure. The treasure hunt, moreover, marks a thread through Fin's Cuban and Puerto Rican family heritage, starting with his great-grandfather. Misfortune strikes one day while Fin and Abuelo are at sea, and Abuelo has a stroke, requiring Fin to radio for help and pilot the boat back to the marina. With Abuelo in the hospital, Fin hatches a plan to find the treasure on his behalf, reminding himself: "Plot my coordinates. Chart my destiny. Save Abuelo. Find the family legacy." To do so, he needs to enlist the help of his father, whose safety-conscious attitude annoys and repels adventure-loving Fin. There's another catch: Certified adult guides must accompany Fin on his dives, meddling in (and perhaps threatening) his hunt. As Dad gets fed up with the hunt, time runs out for Fin even as Abuelo's health seems to fade. Fin and his dad must rely on and trust each other to overcome obstacles—seen and unseen—in search of the treasure. Rodriguez packs a ton of local historical know-how and genuine humor into a seaworthy debut adventure. Lighthearted yet solid prose and quirky, delightful characters round out this swell tale of plucky fun under (and above) the sea. Here be treasure indeed. (author's note) (*Fiction. 8-12*)

Valentina Salazar is Not a Monster Hunter by Zoraida Cordova

Kirkus:

Three siblings go on a road trip to find a mythical creature. Eleven-and-a-half-year-old Valentina Alexander Salazar is the youngest sibling in a family that used to be monster protectors, rescuing creatures who cross over from another dimension and sending them back before they are killed by monster hunters. But since Val's father's untimely death during a mission gone wrong, her mother has taken the family off the road and settled into a more normal (and in Val's honest opinion, dull) life. While her older siblings seem to be fully adapted to their new reality, Val struggles to fit in and secretly continues to track magical creatures. When the egg of a

mythical being appears on her radar, she manages to convince her older siblings Rome and Lola to join her in finding and protecting it (deep inside hoping she can convince them to carry on with the family's mission). This entertaining adventure novel is full of surprising twists and features a nice blend of science-fiction and fantasy worldbuilding. Ostensibly a story about monsters and how to deal with them, at its heart is the close-knit Salazar family, whose bonds are fraying at the edges of their shared grief, and their youngest child, who helps them with her fierce, earnest advocacy to remember who they truly are. The Salazars are originally from Ecuador, and most of the cast is brown-skinned.

Fun and heartwarming. (*Fantasy. 8-12*)

Wayward Creatures by Dayna Lorentz

Kirkus:

An angry seventh grader heals. Gabe Meyer is miserable. His parents, struggling with financial problems, ignore him; his older sister treats him like a pest; and his two best friends have begun to spend time with another, cooler guy. Trying to impress his friends, Gabe steals some fireworks and brings them to the park where the boys are hanging out. When they inadvertently set fire to the dry grass, the others run off while Gabe futilely tries to put out the fire—and is discovered and arrested. At a community justice meeting for people impacted by the fire, where Gabe is assigned community service and restitution, he begins to understand how his thoughtless actions have affected others. A parallel storyline, told in alternate chapters, is narrated by Rill, a young coyote who, like Gabe, is struggling with her place in the world. She is burned by the fire, after which she hides out in a small cave, where Gabe discovers and tries to help her. This riveting, many-layered story shines on all levels. Gabe's first-person narration brilliantly (and with humor) captures the tone of an angry, confused tween without being over-the-top, and his metamorphosis from powerless to empowered is both realistic and compelling. The coyote's story adds depth and poignancy. Gabe is Jewish and, along with other major characters, defaults to White. As a story about community, healing, and family—both human and animal—this is one of the best. (*Fiction. 8-13*)

Winnie Zeng Unleashes a Legend by Katie Zhao

Kirkus or Booklist:

Already overwhelmed with obligations, an 11-year-old Chinese American girl reluctantly answers the call for a hero. Fueled by parental expectations, Winnie has always strived to be the best. It doesn't help that her rival, David Zuo, bested her (again) at their last piano competition and has transferred to her public middle school from his fancy private one. As if things couldn't get worse, Winnie is still grieving the fact that her once-close relationship with her older sister, Lisa, has turned antagonistic. When the sixth grade homerooms hold a bake sale competition, Winnie finds her grandmother's old cookbook and bakes a batch of mooncakes. Taking a bite, she unwittingly unlocks both her shaman powers and the spirit of Lao Lao, her late maternal grandmother. The jampacked story reveals that Winnie is a descendant of a line of shamans who must train with Lao Lao to capture malevolent spirits before they grow more powerful and wreak chaos in the human world. As Winnie navigates demon-possessed teachers, conflict in family relationships, and academic pressures, Zhao provides space for her to sincerely question whether she can handle it all and to discover nuances within her family dynamics. The exact parameters governing the spirits' interactions with the human world are highly detailed, but the big picture feels hazy; a hinted sequel may provide more answers.

An ambitious fantasy outing. (recipes) (*Fantasy. 9-12*)

Invisible by Christina Diaz Gonzalez

SLJ Star:

★ Gr 4-7—When George, who is Puerto Rican, is assigned community service hours working in his middle school cafeteria with “other students like you,” he expects to be with the gifted kids, but instead, he finds out that the only thing he has in common with the volunteer group is that they are all Latinx students being unfairly stereotyped by their educators. There’s Miguel, the jock who secretly loves drawing, who is Dominican; Dayara, a Cuban girl who constantly gets in trouble and struggles in school; Sara, a loner, who is Mexican; and Nico, a Venezuelan boy with a reputation as a stuck-up rich kid. By the end of the week, they are all called into the principal’s office to explain how the five of them “conspired to do something.” As each student tells their portion of the story, readers are shown the complexity and individuality of each of their lives, shattering the stereotypes that the adults and other students in the story place on them. However, what makes this modern Breakfast Club story truly unique is the use of Spanish and English text to expose readers to the complexities of multi-language literacy. Each character has their own level of ability with English and Spanish, making their individual voices and communication methods unique, but ample translations of both languages make for an enjoyable reading experience. **VERDICT** A welcome addition to any graphic novel collection, *Invisible* skillfully explores the negative impact of stereotyping while also offering an entertaining and spirited reading experience.

Long Lost by Jacqueline West

Kirkus & Star Review:

A mysterious book leads a girl into a century-old supernatural mystery.

When Fiona’s family moves across Massachusetts to Lost Lake, a small town that’s far closer to her older sister Arden’s figure skating club, Fiona resents both being uprooted and the constant focus on her accomplished sibling. To avoid spending hours sitting at one of Arden’s practices, knowledge-loving Fiona opts for a morning at the library, where she discovers a book called *The Lost One* that begins, “Once there were two sisters who did everything together. But only one of them disappeared.” Reading this book within a book, Fiona learns about characters Hazel and Pearl—relating heavily to younger Pearl, especially when she starts getting left behind, and knowing their story won’t have a happy ending. Fiona better endures slights from her family because she has the book to look forward to, but when she finally gets a library card, the book’s gone and isn’t even in the system. In response to a heartbreaking moment of being her family’s lowest priority, Fiona doubles down on solving the book’s mysteries—having determined its setting is Lost Lake—and finds increasingly spooky pieces of the puzzle. Although the two sets of sisters have different relationships and dynamics, the complexity of sisterhood links both storylines, resulting in nuanced relationships. The gore-free supernatural elements are more haunting than terrifying, foregrounding the characters’ journeys. Main characters default to White.

Grab a flashlight and stay up late with this one. (*Paranormal mystery. 8-12*)

The Monster Missions by Laura Martin

Kirkus:

A talented young gadgeteer joins the defenders of humanity's scattered remnants against sea monsters of myth, legend, and prehistory. Fifty years after the event known as the Tide Rising turned Earth into an ocean planet, 12-year-old Berkley and her best friend, Garth, work as scavengers on the *Atlas*, the decaying former cruise ship that is their home. Life is hard: Child labor is a necessity, people are crowded onto ships, and the diet is monotonously fish-based. Scavenging is dangerous work that involves diving for materials in abandoned towns now underwater. The two friends are recruited to join the crew of the *Britannica*, a research submarine designed to study the resurgent flood of marine creatures formerly thought legendary or extinct. Martin positively pours the monsters into this action-oriented adventure, drawing on both outside sources and her imagination to engineer a nonstop series of brushes with boojums ranging from mighty megalodon and evocatively named *Hydramonsterus serpentinus* to a glutinous "hidden-fanged loogie" and Elmer, a gigantic octopus more mischievous than malign. As, along the way to a climactic rescue, the *Britannica* is rammed, swallowed whole, even attacked by pirates, Berkley plunges enthusiastically into both studies and narrow squeaks...leaving her well set up for future exploits and terrifying encounters. Berkley and Garth present as White; the supporting cast is varied in skin tone. All monsters, all the time...well, except for those pirates. (*Fantasy*. 10-13)