

D.C.F.

2010 - 2011

**BOOK REVIEWS
&
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

www.dcfaward.org

Vermont Department of Libraries

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About This Guide

This guide was compiled by members of the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award Committee. Our intent is to provide a booklet that will support the use of the DCF program in schools and libraries.

For the guide to be most effective, we strongly suggest that the librarian or teacher supervising the program read all the books on the 2010-2011 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.

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 – 0-7615-1549-6).

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.

Compilers:

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- Lauren Chabot
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- Mary Linney
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Nora Raleigh Baskin
ANYTHING BUT TYPICAL

Simon & Schuster, 2009. ISBN 978-1-4169-6378-3. \$15.99. 195 pages.



Jason Blake is not your typical 12 year old boy; he is autistic and has his own way of seeing the world that differs from the way you or I see it; he would refer to the rest of us as being neurotypical. In first person narrative, Jason tells the reader the story of his life, as he sees it. The ironic humor in this story comes from Jason's slightly skewed perception. His response to the world around him is a source of frustration for both himself and others. Since Jason processes stimuli differently, he is viewed in a negative way by classmates and teachers. At home, Jason has an adoring little brother, a loving father, and an overprotective mother. Jason is a gifted writer however, and looks forward to posting his latest stories to the Storyboard website. On Storyboard Jason can be anonymous and let his writing speak for him in ways that he cannot and he can make friends online with people who are unaware of his disability. When a fellow writer, a girl named Rebecca, responds to his writing, Jason is hopeful that a friendship, even a cyber-relationship might be possible. When his parents offer Jason the chance to attend a conference sponsored by the Storyboard website, Jason is excited until Rebecca reveals that she'll be attending as well. Jason's emotions yo-yo; he wants to meet this girl, but is terrified that his disability will turn her away.

For everyone who has ever felt different, lonely, and misunderstood, this title will have you cheering for each step that Jason takes towards independence.

Read-aloud hooks:

- “When Jeremy was born, everyone was afraid I would hurt him....”(pages 22-25)
- “A narrator can be unreliable....” (page 63)

Discussion questions:

- Why does Jason choose to write stories on the Storyboard website? Have you ever contributed to a similar site?
- Do you consider Jason to be a brave character?
- Why does Jason choose to write about a dwarf named Bennu?
- How does Jason's relationship with his mother change over the course of this story?
- His younger brother treats Jason like a normal brother. Why?
- Do you know students on the autism spectrum at your school? Do they have special gifts like Jason's ability to write?
- Look at the TAAP website and try to decide what Jason means when he refers to everyone else as being “neurotypical.”

<http://www.norabaskin.com>

<http://www.taaproject.com> (The Autism Acceptance Project)

Ann E. Burg
ALL THE BROKEN PIECES

Scholastic, 2009. ISBN 978-0-5450-8092-7. \$16.99. 219 pages.



It's been two years since Matt Pin was airlifted out of war-torn Vietnam, but in some ways he hasn't left it at all. He is still haunted by his mother sending him away and by a terrible secret involving his little brother. Now in America, adopted by a loving family, he struggles with reconciling the two lives. Is he responsible for his Vietnamese brother's accident? Did his mother send him away as a punishment? What if his new family decides to give him up, too? Was his birth father as callous as he always assumed? Can he really fit in to this new life?

His father plays baseball with him almost every day, and impressed with his throwing arm, he encourages Matt to try out for the middle school baseball team, thinking this will give him the self confidence that he badly needs. Matt does make the team, but with that comes new problems: bullying and taunting, and an especially cruel accusation flung from a teammate: "My brother died because of you."

Matt's baseball coach doesn't put up with racism and bullying, and he helps make Matt a part of the team. Then, Matt's piano teacher, a Vietnam war vet, and Matt's dad decide to take Matt to a local weekly meeting of Vietnam vets. There Matt begins to understand the pain and hurt that the vets are suffering, too, and he finally understands that his mother sent him away out of love, not hatred.

Read-aloud hooks:

- Memories of leaving Vietnam: page 2, "I hear her voice..." through end of page 4.
- Learning about Vietnam: pages 21-23.

Discussion questions:

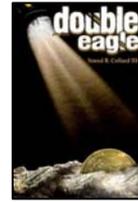
- What are the two Vietnams that Matt talks about?
- Imagine that you have to move to another country by yourself where you don't speak the language. What would be the hardest things? How would you cope?
- Did you like the fact that this book was written in verse? Why or why not?
- Matt gets bullied and taunted by his fellow baseball players. Why do you think this is?
- How are Rob's and Matt's feelings about their brothers the same? Different?
- Matt's dad says everyone deserves a second chance. Do you agree with this?

<http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/contributor.jsp?id=163578> (Author Biography)

Sneed B. Collard III

DOUBLE EAGLE

Peachtree, 2009. ISBN 978-1-5614-5480-8. \$16.95. 245 pages.



Mike has almost gotten used to the kid-of-divorced-parents summer routine. When he arrives in Florida to see his father this time, however, his father informs him that instead of their Pensacola trip, they will be spending the summer in a marine station on rural Shipwreck Island in Alabama. Once there, amidst unhappy bickering with his father, Mike meets a boy named Kyle with whom he strikes up a friendship. Mike shares his fascination with coin collecting with Kyle and Kyle shares his penchant for sneaking around by taking Mike to explore old Fort Henry the “back way.”

Once there, the boys make an incredible find: a golden “Double Eagle,” a Confederate coin that supposedly never existed. As the boys begin a secret search for more coins, they encounter an old gentleman named Mr. Dubois who offers them help through information, advice, and the pages of a rare old diary. Not everyone is so kind, however. Ruthless treasure hunters have set up shop off the coast in a search for the same treasure the boys are looking for, and they soon begin to suspect that Mike and Kyle are hiding something. A secret relationship back at the station indicates another type of trouble brewing. As Mike and Kyle frantically follow the clues to locate the gold, they finally find themselves in a race for time in the midst of a powerful hurricane that threatens to wipe out everything they’ve been searching for.

Read-aloud hooks:

- Mike and Kyle find the coin, pages 79-80. *Read from* “I...carefully reached into the sand for the mystery object.”...*to*... “Because they don’t exist.”
- Mike discovers the gold during a hurricane. (warning: slight spoiler), pages 204-206. *Read from* “‘Kyle,’ I panted, out of breath.”...*to*... “‘Of course!’ he shouted. ‘Man, it was starin’ at us the whole time!’”

Discussion questions:

- The author did much research on the Civil War and southern Alabama, but he chose to change two major things in history: he created a Confederate Double Eagle coin, and he made up Hurricane Elsa. Did you believe these things as you read the book? How does an author make something believable through detail?
- Mike meets many people who have an opinion about the “War Between the States” that differs from the account of the Civil War that Mike has been brought up with. Are there differences in “truths” based on where we live? What do we believe about the Civil War, living in Vermont rather than living in Alabama? Are there other US or world issues that people may feel differently about, living in different locations?
- The treasure hunters in the book will stop at nothing to obtain gold. How are Mike and Kyle similar or different to these people in their own quest for the Double Eagle?
- If you found a valuable coin in a place like Fort Henry, what would you do with it?
- In the beginning of the book, Mike describes constant fights with his father. How does their relationship change by the end of the book? How do you think they will behave toward each other the next summer?

<http://www.author-illustr-source.com/Sneed%20Fiction.htm> (The author discusses his inspiration and research for *Double Eagle*)

Audrey Couloumbis & Akila Couloumbis
WAR GAMES

Random House, 2009. ISBN 978-0-3758-5628-0. \$16.99. 229 pages.



Based on Akila Couloumbis's boyhood in a small village in Greece in 1941, this shows how war affects everyone whether they are soldiers or not. At the beginning, even though their village is occupied by Italians, war seems far away to twelve-year-old Petros, and he is more concerned with playing marbles and fighting with his older brother, Zola, who always has to win. But when the Germans come to his town, the war is all-consuming. Anyone with American ties must hide the evidence; people begin to keep secrets and neighbors become enemies. Worst of all, the German commander is lodged in Petros's family's house—the enemy is living under their own roof.

For the first time, Petros has the chance to show Zola that he's not just a little brother but that he can truly be counted on. Soon, what were once just boys' games become matters of life and death as Petros and Zola begin their own wartime resistance by passing notes in the village. Even more risky is what everyone has to do when they hide their resistance fighter cousin Lambros in the well.

In spite of a violent conflict in the town, which ends with a cousin being seriously wounded, the book's ending is hopeful. Family ties have triumphed, and love and caring will continue.

Sadly, Akila Couloumbis (Petros in the book) did not live to see this book published.

Read-aloud hooks:

- Page 95: “The next afternoon....” to page 97, “It could just as easily have been a soldier he hadn't noticed.”
- Pages 126-127: four men wearing filthy Greek uniforms walk into Petros' house while the family is having dinner. They are looking for news of Lambros, Petros' cousin.

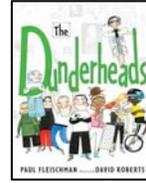
Discussion questions:

- Why does Petros' family have to hide the fact that they lived in America?
- Petros' family is forced to allow the German commander to live in their home with them. What would you do if you were forced to live with your enemy?
- What do you think about the notes that Zola wants Petros to distribute? Are the boys being foolish or brave?
- How do the authors show that the German commander is a complex man, not just “the enemy”?
- Petros and the other villagers consider Lambros to be a hero, but Lambros says he has succeeded just through luck and circumstances. What do you think a hero is? What is a war hero, specifically?

<https://www.randomhouse.com/kids/catalog/author.pperl?authorid=5825>

Paul Fleischman
THE DUNDERHEADS

Candlewick, 2009. ISBN 978-0-7636-2498-9. \$16.99. 56 pages.



Imagine a hybridized tale, joining elements from the Bremen Town Musicians with *Matilda*. You'd wind up with a team of misfits outsmarting a wickedly cruel teacher, thanks to cleverness and talent. In *The Dunderheads*, Fleischman capitalizes on the universal appeal of these familiar motifs, adding completely unique elements of authoritarian awfulness and underdog ingenuity.

“One Friday she went too far,” confiscating the most innocent of treasures from the most unassuming of victims. An insult, under appreciation, an outrage, and a dare set up Miss Breakbone's dunderheads for their toughest challenge yet. Our narrator, nicknamed Einstein because he's a whiz at solving problems, is on the case. Even before rallying his team, Einstein gets Wheels to tail Breakbone to her house, and Pencil figures out how to map its floor plan. By the next day, Einstein is ready to set the kids to work, assigning to each a task uniquely fitted to his or her talents.

Can they evade the guard dogs? How will they gain entry? Each page reveals a seemingly insurmountable problem and then a cunning counter-strategy. Along the way, David Roberts' caricatures of both villainess and eccentric victims provide a perfect visual counterpoint to Fleischman's story. As with the best illustrated books, these drawings expand the tale with details not found in the text. Sometimes the drawings are simply fun – note the oddball fashion sense. Sometimes important information is revealed; for instance, Spider's family are mountaineers.

It is absolutely true that the plot, characters and coincidences of *The Dunderheads* are outlandish and improbable. But suspend your disbelief and enjoy this sly page-turner.

Read-aloud hooks:

- The book is so short it could be read in its entirety as a hook to the whole DCF list, exemplifying many skills of writerly craft, or simply for fun!
- As a hook to entice individual reading, try pages 16-18, “...something told me that this would be tougher.... I was going to need help. Lots of it.”

Discussion questions:

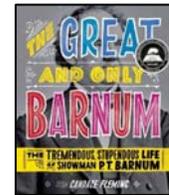
- What other books or stories does this one remind you of?
- Describe the character and his or her talent that you thought was the most interesting or extraordinary.
- From her alligator purse on the title page, to the studded whip on page 11 to the nose-picking gate gargoyle on page 32, *The Dunderheads* is full of David Roberts' illustrated exaggerations. Which ones did you like the best? How do they complement the story?
- Why do you think the DCF Committee placed this long picture book or very short adventure story as one of this year's 30 best books for kids in grades 4 – 8?

<http://www.paulfleischman.net>

Candace Fleming

**THE GREAT AND ONLY BARNUM: THE TREMENDOUS,
STUPENDOUS LIFE OF SHOWMAN P.T. BARNUM**

Schwartz & Wade, 2009. ISBN 978-0-3758-4197-2. \$18.99. 142 pages.



When most people think of P.T. Barnum, they think about the circus. After all, that is what he did with his life, right? Not exactly. He actually didn't work with a circus until after he had "retired" at age 61. It was then that he and James Bailey teamed up to make the greatest circus ever. However, everything that Barnum had done in his professional life had prepared him for this. From an early age, he figured out how to entertain people, and how to make something out of nothing. At age 15 after his uncle (his employer) was mad at him for buying a load of useless small green bottles, Barnum made a killing selling lottery tickets. The prizes? Small green bottles that 550 customers took happily home. The lesson? Everyone likes winning, no matter how insignificant the prize.

The original spinmeister, Barnum was a born showman, a fabulous entrepreneur, a master of PR and psychology. And, although some of his shows were definitely hoaxes, people had such a good time that they would come back for more. "Most people enjoy a harmless hoax," he decided. His first show was of a slave woman who was supposedly 161 years old. Toothless, blind, almost completely paralyzed and weighing only forty-six pounds, she lay on a cot in an exhibit hall for eight hours a day, six days a week as people came to see her, examine the historical documents proving her age, take her pulse and ask her questions. Of course, it was later discovered that she was not really that old, but it is not known if Barnum was as duped as the general public.

After that he opened the American Museum in New York City which featured wild animals, human curiosities and astounding displays of all kinds from around the world. Other business ventures included introducing Jenny Lind to America, making her a celebrity in the process, and founding a second museum when the first burned to the ground.

Barnum's life is indeed fascinating, but just as fascinating are the photos, copies of playbills, cartoons and advertising posters that make the book an exciting exhibit itself.

Read-aloud hooks:

- Page 16, "It was up to Tale..." to end of page 17.
- Making of a star attraction: pages 64-65.

Discussion questions:

- What do you think of P.T. Barnum's methods of entertaining people? Was he a swindler or an entertainer?
- Barnum featured many human "curiosities" in his shows. How do you feel about this? Was he exploiting them or just giving them jobs?
- This book says Barnum created the concept of "celebrity." What is the difference between a celebrity and a star?
- Have you ever been to a circus? If yes, what did you like about it? What did you dislike?

<http://www.candacefleming.com>

Mary Downing Hahn CLOSED FOR THE SEASON

Clarion, 2009. ISBN 978-0-5470-8451-0. \$16.00. 182 pages.



Logan Forbes hasn't even entered the door of his family's new home when he learns, from his eleven year old neighbor Arthur, that his house was the site of a murder three years before. While Arthur appoints himself Logan's tour guide, information about the town is not all the boys encounter; they research the murder and soon meet Nina, who introduces herself as a reporter who is also interested in the unsolved murder. The story of Mrs. Donaldson, who was pushed down the stairs before her house was ransacked, opens wide a mystery of embezzlement involving the local Magic Forest Amusement Park, a corrupt businessman, and multiple unsavory characters who come in all-too-close contact with the boys. When Logan discovers a hidden note from Mrs. Donaldson to her daughter, Violet, the boys become more deeply embroiled in the mystery of the murderer's identity, the motive, and the whereabouts of the hidden money. The twists and turns of the case finally lead them back to the abandoned amusement park, which is not so magical in the darkness with a killer on the loose.

Read-aloud hooks:

- Logan meets Arthur and learns about the murder. pages 4-6. *Read from* "Grandma and I didn't think anyone was ever going to buy Mrs. Donaldson's place"...to... "Now it had a sinister look, as if it were hiding behind the overgrown trees and bushes, keeping dark, scary secrets."
- Logan, Arthur and Danny sneak back into the Magic Forest Amusement Park. pages 146-147. *Read from* "Avoiding the main gate, we followed the fence into the woods"...to... "Every monster who'd ever lain in wait under my bed or in my closet had found its way to the Magic Forest – the nightmare forest."

Discussion questions:

- What does Logan think he will have to do to fit in when he first arrives in Bealesville? How do his feelings about fitting in change by the end of the book?
- Logan's mother wishes he would be like Anthony DiSilvio – more athletic, popular and well dressed. Have you ever felt like people expected you to be a completely different person? Did you change to please them? Which things are okay to change about yourself and which things are not?
- At first, Arthur seems like an annoying kid to Logan, but he eventually comes to see him as a friend. What causes this change? Have you ever been in a friendship that started this way? What caused you to see the person differently?
- Like *Closed for the Season*, many mystery stories contain houses that have a mysterious or frightening past. Are there any legends near you about haunted or mysterious buildings? If so, write them down and add your own details to on the story. If not, create a story around a building that you know.
- Mystery novels often rely upon clues that are often difficult to understand. In this book, there two letters from Mrs. Donaldson, the first of which is the boys' major clue in the mystery. After reading the first letter, create a letter of your own that includes three creative clues to the location of something important (and imaginary). Now, switch papers with a classmate. They will build a quick mystery plot around your clue. Trade back and see what happened to your story!

<http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/mdh/>

Brent Hartinger
PROJECT SWEET LIFE

HarperTeen, 2009. ISBN 978-0-0608-2411-2. \$16.99. 282 pages.



Ever had a day when things just didn't go your way? How about the entire summer? For friends Dave, Victor and Curtis, their summer break begins when all three of their fathers mandate summer jobs. Faced with three long months of minimum wage work, Dave, Victor and Curtis make a decision to fake some summer jobs and earn the money another way, thus putting Project Sweet Life into motion. While Victor is supposedly taking orders for drumsticks at KFC, Dave is assumed to be lifeguarding, and Curtis is thought to be doing yard work, the boys are really hanging out in Curtis's plush bomb shelter, plotting their money-making futures.

Here is where things begin to go wrong: that garage sale where they sell all their favorite possessions? Didn't quite go as planned. The plot to catch bank robbers and collect the reward worked a little too well – for the wrong person. Jellybean counts prove to be disappointingly unreliable. When the boys begin a search for buried treasure, however, they also learn about a shameful piece of history about their city, complete with hidden fortunes, tunnels in the sewer, nursing home beauties with secrets, and a family legend. As lies spin out of control and funds dwindle, the boys discover that they are putting more effort into pretending to have jobs than they would have if they were actually working.

While each attempt to find the treasure fails, each failure necessarily weaves together into a final discovery that turns out to be in front of them the whole time. The boys find their happy ending but, more importantly, reinforce their ideas about integrity, responsibility, and friendship.

Read-aloud hooks:

- The boys come up with their decision to create summer jobs. pages 9-10. *Read from* “First they say we’re just kids,”...*to*... “What he was suggesting – lying to our parents – was A Very Big Deal.”
- The boys reflect on the plan so far. pages 31-35. *Read from* “Tuesday was the Fourth of July,”...*to*... “How do you put a price on freedom?”

Discussion questions:

- Is it ever all right to tell a lie? If so, when is it okay? Were Victor, Curtis, and Dave justified in creating fake summer jobs? Support your reasons why or why not.
- For every moneymaking scheme in Project Sweet Life, something goes wrong. As a reader, does this make you discouraged or interested?
- The book discusses the removal of Chinese people from Tacoma in the 1880s, and the issuance of a formal apology and creation of the Chinese Reconciliation Project in 1993. The boys donate much of their money to the Chinese Reconciliation Project. Do we need to help right past wrongs, even if we did not commit them? What might we be able to do to help?
- In many ways, Project Sweet Life is filled with events that would not be typical in real life. As Victor, Curtis and Dave do, brainstorm creative ways to make money.

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

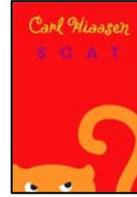
<http://www.brenthartinger.com/discussionpsl.html> (Project Sweet Life Discussion Guide)

<http://www.harperteen.com/author/microsite/about.aspx?authorid=21453> (Author Bio)

<http://www.crpftacoma.org/tacmet.html> (Information on the Tacoma Method and Chinese Reconciliation Project)

Carl Hiaasen SCAT

Knopf, 2009. ISBN 978-0-3758-3486-8. \$16.99. 384 pages.



Florida biology teacher Mrs. Starch takes her students on a field trip to the Black Vine Swamp, but a fire in the swamp cuts their trip short. When the students get back to school, Mrs. Starch isn't with them nor does she return to school the next day or the day after that. Rumors abound about her disappearance, but the school headmaster insists she is away on a "family emergency." The police think that the school delinquent Duane Scrod Jr., aka Smoke, knows something about her disappearance, but students Nick and Marta aren't so sure.

Meanwhile, two oilmen from the Red Diamond Energy Company are setting up a drilling operation in the swamp. Unfortunately for them, the State of Florida owns the piece of land on which they want to drill. Compounding their problem is an environmentalist who is camping in the swamp, searching for evidence of the endangered Florida panther. The oilmen are determined to get the oil no matter who or what is standing in their way.

Needless to say, Nick and Marta have their hands full when they set out to solve the mystery of Mrs. Starch's disappearance. Meanwhile, Nick's father returns from Iraq injured and Nick must come to terms with the fact that nothing in his personal life will ever be the same again.

Read-aloud hooks:

- Nick and Marta playing detective, page 138: "The glow from the car's headlights lit the edges of the window shades...."
- Saving Florida, page 164: "Twilly Spree had good intentions but a rotten temper...."
- The panther, page 343: "Nick could see her silhouetted against the fog...."

Discussion questions:

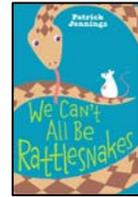
- Are there bullies in this book? Dr. Dressler and the police label Smoke a bully but Nick says he doesn't really bother anybody. Is Smoke's father a bully? Does Mrs. Starch bully Smoke? What characteristics make a bully?
- There are different father/son relationships in this book. Contrast Nick's relationship with his father to Smoke and his father. What about Twilly Spree? How does his relationship with his father shape the life he has chosen to lead?
- What lessons do Nick and Marta learn about preserving the land and protecting endangered animals? How does their quest to do the right thing expose greedy grown-ups?
- There are many characters in this book who display courage. Which character do you think is the most courageous? What do Smoke and Mrs. Starch teach Nick and Marta about courage?
- Nick's father joins the army reserves in order to have extra money so Nick can attend the Truman School. What is his ultimate sacrifice? Other people in this story make sacrifices too. What sacrifices are made to save the panther and by whom? What do making sacrifices reveal about a person's character?
- Think about Smoke's feelings of abandonment. How do these feelings contribute to his past criminal record? What other characters deal with abandonment?

www.carlhiaasen.com/faq/faq-scat.shtml

Patrick Jennings

WE CAN'T ALL BE RATTLESNAKES

HarperCollins, 2009. ISBN 978-0-0608-2114-2. \$15.99. 128 pages.



Crusher, the gopher snake who narrates this amusing story, has been captured from his desert home by an “oily, filthy, fleshy human child” named Gunnar. Gunnar is a bored young boy who spends most of his time playing video games and capturing reptiles, snakes, and other desert creatures. He brings Crusher back to his room where the snake meets Gunnar’s other captives – a tarantula, a desert tortoise, and an alligator lizard.

Communicating telepathically, the other captors advise him to accept his fate. But Crusher plans to escape. First he tries an angry approach, hissing at Gunnar and pretending to attack. He refuses to eat, befriending his breakfast, a white mouse who becomes Breakfast, an unlikely companion. When his plans fail, he decides to be nice to Gunnar, hoping to catch him off-guard.

Gunnar is ignored by his parents and obsessed with video games. He rarely does his homework and is behind in school. His not-very-nice friends like to come over so they can poke and prod his pets. Crusher starts feeling a little sorry for him.

How will Crusher turn the tables on his captor? Will he ever get out of his glass box?

Read-aloud hooks:

- Setting the tone/the capture, page 2: “The creature approached. It was an oily, filthy....”
- Hunger strike, page 34: “I found I had a visitor. It was another mouse....”
- Second thoughts, page 63: “I had nothing to do but think....”

Discussion questions:

- This story was told from the point of view of the snake. How would it be different if Gunnar had narrated the story? Imagine a chapter from Gunnar’s point of view.
- Gunnar’s parents, especially his mother, fail to discipline or interact with him. What are the consequences of this behavior? Is Gunnar happy that his mother always gives in?
- Crusher learns to care for and be friends with creatures that are normally his prey. Are there other changes in behavior that occur in the book? What part, if any, does Gunnar’s friend Matthew play in bringing about any change of attitude toward the animals?
- Have you ever captured a wild animal? Have you ever killed a snake or a spider? Do you have an exotic pet? Does this story make you think twice about how to treat the natural world?
- Were you surprised by the ending? Have your feelings toward Gunnar changed?
- When did Crusher’s feelings change toward Gunnar? Why?

www.patrickjennings.com

www.classroom20.com/video/5thgraders-interview-author (Author interview)

Jacqueline Kelly EVOLUTION OF CALPURNIA TATE

Holt, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-8050-8841-0. \$16.99. 338 pages.



11 year-old Calpurnia Virginia Tate lives in rural Texas with her parents, housekeeper, six brothers and reclusive grandfather. During the summer of 1899, Calpurnia discovers that she can find some peace and solitude by escaping the confines of the house during the midday while her family members dose. She spends her time exploring the river near her home and observing the details of the natural world around her. Her curiosity about the plants, animals and insects leads her to her grandfather, Captain Tate.

Calpurnia and her grandfather develop a special relationship through their mutual affection for scientific inquiry and the environment. He provides her with a copy of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, a book she tried unsuccessfully to procure through the public library. They spend many hours outside collecting specimens and in his laboratory examining and recording observations. They even discover a new species of plant and send their findings to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C.

Calpurnia is a spunky, precocious, inquisitive girl who dares to consider attending university and becoming a scientist. Her natural inclinations are at odds with the societal pressures of the time. Her mother wants her to excel at the piano and knitting and come out as a debutante, but Calpurnia has no interest in those pursuits. She wonders, "Could I be blamed for my nature? Could the leopard change her spots? And if so, what were my spots?" (pages 192-193). *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate* is a sweet, sensitive, and realistic portrayal of a young girl ahead of her time.

Read-aloud hook: Calpurnia and her family sit on the front porch in the evening. Callie is proudly holding (in a glass jar) her live moth specimen in preparation of freeing it. Just as the moth leaves the jar the family dog comes around the corner and a wild chase of moth, dog and Callie ensues. Read (page 128) "At dusk, we gathered on the lawn to await the first firefly...I prefer a happy ending" (page 130).

Discussion Questions

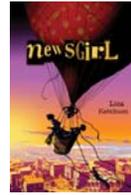
- Why do you think Calpurnia's grandfather takes an interest in her above all the boys in the family? How does their relationship develop throughout the novel?
- During the cotton harvest Callie must work in the kitchen and watch the younger children. She questions her assumed role and lack of pay. "Why do *I* have to mind the babies? Why can't *I* run the messages? Why can't *I* earn money?" (page 199). What else is Callie expected to know and do as a girl in the time period? How does she feel about these expectations and how does she respond to them?
- What do you think Callie does in the future?
- Callie is fascinated with observing nature and would love to be a scientist. What fascinates you?

<http://www.jacquelinekelly.com/index.html>

<http://media.us.macmillan.com/discussionguides/9780805088410DG.pdf> (Discussion Guide from Macmillan)

Liza Ketchum
NEWSGIRL

Viking, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-6700-1119-3. \$17.99. 317 pages.



The sounds and sights of San Francisco during the Gold Rush come vividly alive in this adventurous tale of three women starting a new life. Twelve-year-old Amelia travels by sea to San Francisco with her mother and her mother’s friend. They arrive nearly penniless, with no place to live and no immediate source of income. Amelia quickly meets people willing to help her family and discovers a way to make some money selling newspapers. People are desperate for news from beyond California and they pay a lot of money for old newspapers that arrive on ships. Amelia sells some of the newspapers her family used as packing material, but runs into trouble with competing newsboys. The newsboys don’t want to partner with a girl, so Amelia disguises herself as a boy, calls herself Emile, and begins a semi-lucrative career selling newspapers.

Amelia’s adventures continue during her days disguised as Emile. She ends up accidentally taking off in a hot air balloon and landing in a gold rush community far away from San Francisco. She works as a scribe writing letters and in the local newspaper office to earn money to return to San Francisco and eventually makes her way back.

From beginning to end, *Newsgirl* is an engaging, humorous and fast-paced novel.

Read-aloud hook: *Amelia (disguised as Emile) and Patrick are helping Mr. Beale (the hot air balloon man) by holding some lines from within the basket...* Read from page 181 “Mr. Beale turned to stare at her just as a gust of wind tore the piece of paper from Amelia’s hand...Patrick shook her. “Look! He cried. “This is brilliant! We’re flying!” (page 183).

Discussion Questions

- What is the importance of news in this story? Is this different from how we get news today? How?
- Describe the setting of the story. What did you learn about San Francisco during the Gold Rush? What techniques does the author use to create a sense of place and time for the reader?
- How does Amelia help her family get settled and survive? What challenges does she face?
- What challenges does everyone face in order to survive in the place and time in which this story is set? Would you like living in that time? Why or why not?
- What do you think the future holds for Amelia and her family? How about Patrick?

<http://www.lizaketchum.com/books/newsgirl.htm#about>

<http://pbskids.org/wayback/goldrush/index.html> (*Gold Rush* from PBS Kids. An interactive website for kids to learn more about the California Gold Rush)

Michelle Knudsen
THE DRAGON OF TRELIAN

Candlewick, 2009. ISBN 978-0-7636-3455-1. \$16.99. 407 pages.



Calen is a timid and lonely mage's apprentice who is befriended by the fearless Princess Meglynne. Meglynne has a secret that she shares with Calen, revealing that she is caring for an orphaned baby dragon. As the dragon grows, Meg often feels that she can hear it calling to her in her mind, even when it is far away.

To end a war between kingdoms, Meg's sister is being married to a foreign prince. But Calen and Meg overhear a murderous plot being hatched against this marriage, and decide to try to stop the evil plan. Through a combination of bravery, adventure, and magic, Meglynne, the dragon, and the often reluctant Calen are able to thwart the would-be evildoers and avert tragedy.

Read-aloud hooks:

- Meeting the dragon, pages 82-84: "Ready? Calen nodded, though at the moment he wasn't sure he *was* ready...."
- Sleuthing, pages 330-332: "And suddenly they heard something in the hall. Meg's face went sick with dread...."

Discussion questions:

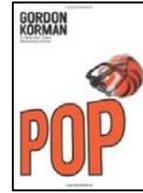
- Why is the friendship between Calen and Meglynne so surprising? How are their situations and personalities different?
- Describe Calen's life before and after he met Meg. What was it like to be an apprentice to the mage Serek?
- How did Meg feel when she learned about Wilem's part in the evil plot? Why was her discovery about him so painful?
- Of Meglynne, Calen, and the dragon, Calen is the most "unlikely hero" of the story. Why?
- Discuss the role of magic in the lives of these people.

<http://www.michelleknudsen.com/index.htm>

Gordon Korman

POP

Balzer & Bray, 2009. ISBN 978-0-0617-4228-6. \$16.99. 260 pages.



High school junior Marcus and his mother move to a new town in the summer, which means that Marcus doesn't know anyone and has no one with whom to practice football. After several days of playing by himself at a local park, a long pass he throws is intercepted by someone who races back to him. Astonished that it is a middle aged man and not another teen, Marcus quickly finds out that this guy really knows what he is doing (he is a former NFL player), and together they practice almost every day, with Charlie teaching him about tackling and hitting and getting the "pop." But something is off: Charlie behaves more like a teenager than a fifty something, can't be counted on, likes to play practical jokes and never gets Marcus's name right. Plus, it turns out that he is the father of the star quarterback on the high school team, the position that Marcus wants for himself.

Soon Marcus is in an odd position: he's enemies with Troy Popovich, the star high school quarterback and friends with his father. The Popovich family guards information about Charlie very carefully, but eventually Marcus discovers that he has early onset Alzheimer's, brought on by all the hits and concussions he got as a pro football player. Marcus really likes Charlie, and wants to help him, but the family wants him to back off. When he and the family disagree about what is best for Charlie, Marcus takes a risk that may make everyone unhappy.

Read-aloud hooks:

- Marcus meets Charlie: from page 3, "Sucking in a lungful of moist, heavy air..." through page 5, "He punted the ball..."
- Playing a practical joke: from page 49, "Marcus couldn't shake the feeling..." through p. 51, "By morning this place is going to be a bug sanctuary!"

Discussion questions:

- Do you think that Marcus did the right thing taking Charlie to the ceremony where he was inducted into the Hall of Fame?
- What did you think about the pranks that Charlie played before you knew he was sick?
- Do you understand the appeal of the "pop"?
- What do you think about Alyssa, the head cheerleader?
- Would you have told who really did the pranks?
- If you were a football player who learned about the dangers of repeated concussions, would you keep on playing?

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

Grace Lin

WHERE THE MOUNTAIN MEETS THE MOON

Little, Brown, 2009. ISBN 978-0-3161-1427-1. \$16.99. 282 pages.



Minli's village was the shade of faded brown. At the end of a grueling day in the rice fields, even after her wash water had turned brown, Minli still felt like she was covered in mud. "Every day, Ma and Ba work and we still have nothing. I wish I could change our fortune." Just as those thoughts form in her mind, Minli notices a stranger on the doorstep. He's selling goldfish, goldfish he claims will "Bring fortune into your home."

Ba's stories tell that only the Old Man of the Moon knows the secrets of fortune. When our heroine discovers that her goldfish can talk, it reveals the way to Never-Ending Mountain and that very Old Man. Thus begins an enchanting tale of interconnected events that lead Minli far from home and through extraordinary adventures and danger. At every turn she encounters another friend or foe, from a trapped dragon to an evil tiger, from a humble buffalo boy to a king. Each character illuminates her quest with a story revealing some key to the past or future. She must use all this knowledge to find her way to Never-Ending Mountain and finally home again.

The interspersed stories are carefully reworked tales from Chinese folklore, seamlessly woven into a whole which is both timeless and completely original, profound and beautifully simple. Adding to this small book's perfection are its extraordinary illustrations. Grace Lin, an illustrator before she became an author, has created a visual package that complements the style of her story. Jewel-like color paintings punctuate the book and small, single-colored prints begin each chapter.

Read-aloud hooks:

- "The goldfish man's eyes ... flashed as he looked at Ma and Ba...." through "Yes," Ba said, "it's impossible." pages 60 -61
- "Salt water!" Minli exclaimed. "This water is salty!" - end of page 41 - 42

Discussion questions:

- A traditional Chinese folktale probably wouldn't have words like "okay," "um" or "uh-huh." Why do you think Grace Lin uses them?
- Minli's name means "quick thinking" and fortunately she lives up to it. Describe a time when Minli has to trick her way out of a situation.
- This story feels a lot like *The Wizard of Oz*. Did you notice similarities? What other books does it remind you of?
- Compare the mother Minli leaves at the beginning of the book with the pleasant-faced woman she comes home to. How do you explain her changes?
- Minli forgets to ask The Old Man of the Moon her questions, yet she finds they have been answered anyway. What has she discovered?

<http://www.gracelin.com>

<http://www.wherethemountainmeetsthemoon.com> (Ideas about how to throw a *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* party!)

Nan Marino

**NEIL ARMSTRONG IS MY UNCLE & OTHER LIES
MUSCLE MAN MCGINTY TOLD ME**

Roaring Brook, 2009. ISBN: 978-1-5964-3499-8. \$16.95. 151 pages.



Summer for Tamara is all about playing kickball, meeting the ice cream truck, talking about the upcoming *Apollo 11* mission, and either ignoring or criticizing Douglas, the new kid on the block (a.k.a. Muscle Man McGinty). Muscle Man moves into the neighborhood shortly after Tamara's best friend's sudden departure. Both Muscle Man and Tamara's best friend are foster children. Tamara can't stand the outrageous lies Muscle Man tells and she really can't stand that everyone else ignores the lies; Muscle Man claims to be an Olympic contender and Neil Armstrong's nephew. Muscle Man even claims he can beat everyone in a kickball game: Muscle Man versus everyone else.

Tragic details are interspersed among the dramatic scenes from the kickball field. One day the game ends abruptly when an Army representative enters Mr. Pizza's home. We come to understand that Tamara's anger at Muscle Man just might be the displaced sadness resulting from losing her best friend and that Muscle Man is in foster care because both his parents died in a car accident. This novel blends humor and sadness as naturally as real life. Tamara is a real bully who comes around in the way only a ten-year-old can.

Read-aloud hooks

- *The kids in the neighborhood are meeting to discuss various "gripes" among the kids. Page 38, "I've never been clear on how John got the job of running the gripe votes...I run away, taking the chunk of sod with me, leaving the others to gape at the big brown spot in the middle of Mr. Grabowsky's lawn."*
- *Muscle Man McGinty has challenged all of the neighborhood kids to a game of kickball...him against everyone else. Tamara is out to win. Page 86, "It's time to strike this kid out...We are ready to go the distance."*

Discussion Questions

- What was your opinion of Tamara at the beginning of the book? At the end of the book? Did your opinion of her change? If yes, how so?
- Why do you think Tamara is so hard on Muscle Man?
- Douglas seems to always be so nice to Tamara, despite the way she treats him. Is this believable to you? Why do you think he is always so good-natured?
- Why do you think Muscle Man tells so many fibs?
- This story is set in 1969. Did you learn anything about the time period from the book? What are some of the historical references?

<http://www.nanmarino.com/index.html>

This website includes many links relating to the historical context of the novel.

Ann M. Martin
EVERYTHING FOR A DOG

Feiwel & Friends, 2009. ISBN 978-0-3123-8651-1. \$16.99. 224 pages.



Everything For a Dog is really three interwoven stories. One story is about a dog that needs a permanent, loving home. Another is about a boy who loses a beloved dog just when he needs it most. The third story is about a boy who desperately wants a dog of his own.

Bone is the brother of Squirrel, the main character in Martin's *A Dog's Life*. Bone spends much of his life alternating between a variety of temporary homes and being a stray. Charlie is a boy who has suffered a terrible loss for which he feels some responsibility, and as his dog helps him heal another tragedy occurs. Henry has wanted a dog—and everything for it—forever, but his dad won't allow him to have one.

These stories connect in unexpected ways, and give the reader a glimpse into the world of abandoned and stray animals, the compassionate ways that human beings can help, and the ways animals can help humans in return.

Read-aloud hooks:

- Bone, page 1: “My tale begins with a tail...”
- Charlie, pages 17-19: “The day RJ died was not remarkable in any way....”
- Henry, page 22: “What I Would Like For Christmas....”

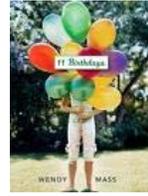
Discussion questions:

- Charlie's feelings about his brother RJ's death are complicated and overwhelming to him. What factors contribute to his feelings?
- What do you think Bone learned about human beings during his many adventures?
- Why won't Henry's dad let him have a dog? What changes his mind?
- Henry creates a Christmas list with a dog and “everything for a dog” on it. Make your own list of reasons to have a dog.

<http://us.macmillan.com/everythingforadog>

Wendy Mass
11 BIRTHDAYS

Scholastic, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-5450-5239-4. \$16.99. 267 pages.



Amanda and Leo were born in the same hospital on the same day. Each family went their separate way and did not meet again until one year later when their children’s birthday parties were double booked at the same venue. Amanda and Leo became fast friends and celebrated every birthday together. Their friendship and this tradition quickly ends on their 10th birthday when Amanda hears Leo making some hurtful comments about her to other classmates. One year later, on their 11th birthday, Amanda and Leo plan separate parties. Nothing goes well for Amanda on her 11th birthday: she freezes at gymnastics tryouts, her party is a flop, and her mom loses her job. She can’t wait for the day to be over.

The next day she slowly goes through her morning routine only to come to the understanding that she is experiencing her birthday all over again. No one else seems to know that they are repeating the same day. On the fourth repeated birthday, Amanda and Leo realize they are in this together. After some apprehension and a short conversation, Amanda and Leo reconcile and they soon understand that their actions have no consequences beyond the end of the day. After some fun exploits, they begin collaborating to figure out how to get through the days and eventually get out of the cycle of repeating their birthday. They discover keys to breaking the cycle of repeating the day: Angela, a fairy godmother-type character, and an old family feud.

This book is perfect for anyone who has ever wished they could “do-over” one day of their life. Wendy Mass skillfully blends reality with a twist of fantasy and fairy tale to create a unique story filled with authentic characters and humorous adventures.

Read-aloud hook: Amanda wakes up on her birthday for the third time. Chapter Eight (page 71), “Hoorah! I’m awake and my alarm didn’t go off....” read to “My head *does* hurt from thinking so hard” (page 72).

Discussion Questions

- In what ways do Amanda and Leo change the outcomes of each birthday they repeat? How do these changes affect the people around them?
- What types of risks do Amanda and Leo take, knowing that no one else will remember what they did the next day? What would you do if you were in the same situation?
- What are the various roles that Angela plays in the story? Who or what do you think she is? How does she alter the characters’ actions?
- The author blends fantasy and reality in this story. Does this work for you as a reader? Why or why not?

<http://www.wendymass.com/mass-birthdays.htm>

Hannah Roberts McKinnon

FRANNY PARKER

FSG, 2009. ISBN 978-0-3743-2469-8. \$16.00. 160 pages.



Thirteen-year-old Franny Parker’s simple, small-town life in rural Oklahoma changes forever when Lindy Dunn and her teenage son Lucas move into the cabin next door. It is summer and a severe drought has taken its toll on local farms and wildlife. Franny has set up a make-shift clinic in her barn to care for drought-stricken creatures – a turtle with a cracked shell, baby swallows who have lost their mother, several mice, and opossums. She befriends the older Lucas who prefers spending time with Franny and her creatures despite the objections of Franny’s flirtatious older sister, Sidida.

The Dunns are charming and worldly. They have lived in Georgia and New Mexico. Lindy is a potter and she transforms a shed into her potting studio. But the Dunns are also harboring a secret, one that is uncovered when a surly man shows up claiming to be Lucas’ father.

As the story unfolds, Franny is confronted with keeping a secret from her close-knit family and friends. When a theft, a disappearance, and a fire test Franny’s bond of friendship, she must decide whether or not her secret is worth keeping.

Read-aloud hooks:

- Franny’s world, pages 6-7: “Only a bike ride away from Grandma’s is our farmhouse....”
- The animal hospital, page 21: “We carried her to the barn”
- When things changed/the black car, page 61: “I was startled by the roar of the engine....”
- The fire, page 121: “I don’t remember screaming fire....”

Discussion questions:

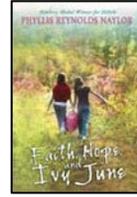
- Is it ever okay to tell a lie? Franny lies to her friend Pearl about how many books she’s read in order to make Pearl feel better. Lucas lies when he tells Franny that his father is dead. When Franny fails to give Lucas his party invitation, is she lying to Sidida who thinks she has given it to him?
- Many secrets are kept and then revealed in this story. The Busy Bees share their secret of skinny-dipping. Franny’s mother reveals her secret of a long ago job offer. Franny keeps her secret about Lucas and the stolen money. What are the consequences of keeping secrets? When do secrets become a burden? Have you ever kept a secret?
- Franny cares for the wild creatures who have been injured by the drought. She becomes attached to them but then must let them go. What else does Franny have to let go of?
- Are you superstitious? Do you believe the Busy Bees’ rain dance could really have brought the rain? What are some common superstitions?
- Before Lucas’ father arrives, there are clues or foreshadowing that something is not right. What are those clues? When does Franny know that something is wrong? Should the Parkers have interfered?

www.hannahrobertsmckinnon.com

Her new book *The Properties of Water* will be released in the fall of 2010.

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor
FAITH, HOPE, AND IVY JUNE

Delacorte, 2009. ISBN 978-0-3857-3615-2. \$16.99. 280 pages.



This is the story of two seventh graders, Ivy June and Catherine. Both from Kentucky, they come from very different backgrounds. Ivy June lives in the mountains with her grandparents without indoor plumbing, telephone service, or store-bought clothes. Catherine, on the other hand, lives in Lexington in a large modern house and attends a private school.

Ivy June and Catherine are the two students chosen to participate in an exchange program, each spending two weeks living in the other's home and attending school there. The girls ultimately each share a painful secret with the other, as well as events that will threaten members of both of their families. Through these experiences, and the act of recording their feelings in journals, Ivy June and Catherine learn to appreciate each other in ways they never anticipated.

Read-aloud hooks:

- Stereotypes, page 6: "In seventh-grade social studies the topic was stereotypes...."
- Confrontation, pages 210-212: "For a long time neither girl spoke, just sat tuned to the wind's whisperings...."

Discussion questions:

- Ivy June is one of only six students who competed from her school for the exchange program. Why do so few mountain kids want to participate?
- How does Ivy June almost jeopardize any chance of a real friendship with Catherine during the visit to Lexington? What does Catherine demand of Ivy June in return?
- Catherine's and Ivy June's mother and father have very different ways of parenting. Why do you think this is so? Describe the differences.
- Could you spend two weeks in a house like Ivy June's? What would be the biggest challenges?

<http://www.randomhouse.com/teachers>

Barbara O'Connor

THE SMALL ADVENTURE OF POPEYE AND ELVIS

FSG, 2009. ISBN 978-0-3743-7055-8. \$16.99. 160 pages.



Popeye lives in Fayette, SC with his grandmother and deadbeat Uncle Dooley. He has been called Popeye ever since an unfortunate accident during which Dooley fired a BB gun and hit Popeye squarely in the eye. Popeye's life is boring, so dull that the biggest event in his week is learning a new vocabulary word from his grandmother.

All of this changes when Popeye meets Elvis, the oldest of six children with unconventional parents and a nomadic lifestyle. Elvis' family's motor home gets stuck in the mud near Popeye's house for several days, giving Elvis an opportunity to introduce Popeye to a new world of indifference to the rules imposed by grownups. When a series of boats constructed from Yoo-hoo drink boxes and containing secret messages comes floating down the creek, Popeye and Elvis embark on a small adventure to locate their mysterious source.

Read-aloud hooks:

- Popeye's boring life, pages 3-10: "Drip. Drip. Drip. Popeye opened his eyes...."
- A small adventure, pages 28-29: "After a while, they turned around and went back to Popeye's house...."

Discussion questions:

- Compare the personalities and home lives of Popeye and Elvis.
- Why does Velma, Popeye's grandmother, try so hard to keep Popeye on the "straight and narrow"? Is Velma's son Dooley partly the reason?
- Popeye takes a number of risks in the story in order to experience a small adventure. Do you think that the risks are worth it? Why or why not?
- When the motor home is finally freed from the mud and drives away, is this the end of Popeye's adventure?

<http://us.macmillan.com/thesmalladventureofpopeyeandelvis>

Rodman Philbrick

THE MOSTLY TRUE ADVENTURES OF HOMER P. FIGG

Blue Sky, 2009. ISBN 978-0-4396-6818-7. \$16.99. 224 pages.



“My name is Homer P. Figg, and these are my true adventures.”

Part *Huckleberry Finn* and part *Odyssey*, Rodman Philbrick’s latest novel is a rollicking adventure that introduces a young man with a heart of gold and a taste for prevarication...er...um... lying. Homer P. Figg, our twelve-year-old hero, is living in unfortunate circumstances: his evil uncle, Squinton Leach, has forced Homer and his older brother Harold into a life of servitude after the death of their parents. When Squint and his drinking buddy sell the underage Harold into the Union Army to get around the newly passed Conscription Law, the two brothers are separated.

Homer decides to run away and find his brother, a journey that will take him from the backwoods of Maine to one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War. Homer is not but a few miles from home when he is set upon by two nasty villains named Stink and Smelt, whose kidnapping of a conductor on the Underground Railroad eventually introduces Homer to a Quaker abolitionist, a naïve lovelorn minister, a pair of blackmailing siblings, a medicine show barker named Fleabottom, and a balloon ride into battle. Phew, that’s a lot of action to pack into one novel, but Philbrick does it well. As Homer falls in and out of every misadventure, he grows as a character and as a human being; he is forced to use his wits and rather impressive exaggeration skills. Humor, irony, and wordplay abound in this story about a boy who tries to do the right thing but allows his mouth to get in the way. The Battle of Gettysburg changes the tone of the story as Philbrick portrays the leaders of both the Confederate and the Union Armies as real men called upon to lead. Like Colonel Chamberlain and General Robert E. Lee, Homer is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for his brother.

Read-aloud hook: Shows Squint’s motives and provides the catalyst that forcing Homer to leave home: “Worried sick about what will happen to Harold, I lie in the corner feeling sorry for myself and my big brother and for everything that’s ever made me sad...before it’s too late”(pages 20-22).

Discussion questions:

- Although Homer is an orphan, he seems to attract quite a few father figures. Besides Mr. Brewster, who else has a positive influence of his life?
- Which character has the best name to suit his/her personality and why?
- Who is the best villain and why?
- Homer tells a lot of lies which usually come back to harm him. Is a lie ever a good thing?
- Why does Harold allow himself to be sold into the army? How does Homer react to Harold’s reasoning and would you react the same way?

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

<http://www.nps.gov/archive/gett/getttour/sidebar/chambln.htm> (Colonel Joshua Chamberlain)

http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/bhistory/underground_railroad (Underground Railroad)

Ellen Potter
SLOB

Philomel, 2009. ISBN 978-0-3992-4705-7. \$16.99. 199 pages.



You thought you had problems? Owen Birnbaum, the twelve-year-old hero of *Slob*, he has problems. He's an overweight genius attending a progressive NYC school where his physical education teacher takes pleasure in humiliating him, his younger sister has begun dressing like a boy, and his one guilty pleasure, his daily ritual of three Oreo cookies, is being stolen. What's a boy to do? Should he ask his six-foot five-inch best friend Izzy Shank for help? Is the culprit Mason Ragg, a transfer student and bona fide psychopath? The only adult in his life that he can confide in is his Tibetan neighbor, Nima, whose relaxed demeanor and excellent cooking skills have a calming influence on Owen.

All is not as it seems in this novel, from each character's motivation to the reliability of our narrator. At home, Owen is an inventor who is attempting to build a machine that can capture digital information from a specific date and time from two years ago. That information will hopefully allow Owen to reconcile his life and move on. Owen and his sister salvage parts from metal demolition sites to outfit this machine, not the most traditional of childhood playgrounds, but a lot more fun. Subtle clues help the reader to infer what may have happened to cause such a change in Owen. This middle school mystery will make you howl with laughter one moment and have you in tears by the end when the true meaning of the title and its cover is revealed.

Read-aloud hooks:

- Humiliation at the hands of Mr. Wooly, pages 7-12: "I don't think I was the only one who was nervous about this gymnastic stuff, though...."
- Introduces Owen's big invention and alludes to a secret, page 29: "Her name is Nemesis....other secrets you can't see."

Discussion questions:

- Are there mysteries that you would do anything to solve?
- Owen is an unreliable narrator, but he does give clues for the reader to follow. Look for tell-tale comments that hint at what has really happened to Owen and his sister.
- Why does the author have Owen narrate the story? Pick another character and retell a chapter from his/her point of view.
- Why does Owen name his machine Nemesis?
- Who is the cookie thief and what is the motive for the theft?
- Why does Jeremy dress and act like a boy? Why does she stop?
- What does Nima offer Owen besides food and conversation? Do you have a Nima in your life?
- How does Owen maintain his dignity in this novel? Give specific examples.

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

James Preller
BYSTANDER

Feiwel & Friends, 2009. ISBN 978-0-3123-7906-3. \$16.99. 223 pages.



While testing out the basketball court at his new middle school in Long Island, Ohio transplant Eric Hayes witnesses the first of many incidents involving Griffin Connolly, the school bully. Charismatic and confident, Griffin has the innate ability to sense people’s weaknesses which he then uses to control them. Eric is unsure of himself, uncomfortable in his new surroundings, and eager to make friends. Eric lives with his mother and younger brother; his father was diagnosed with a mental illness that his son is embarrassed about and there is little contact between them.

When the school year begins, Griffin “allows” Eric to hang out with him and his popular friends. Bullying and harassment are common-place in this middle school and Eric quickly learns to keep his mouth shut. He recognizes the social pecking order and chooses to stay closer to the top than the bottom. *Bystander* contains the necessary ingredients for bullying to occur: the bully, the bystander, and the target or victim. Instead of concentrating on the bully, the plot focuses on what makes a bystander become an ally instead. Eric is not alone in his confusion; other students at his school are grappling with the same issues. In a twist, some of Eric’s enemies provide more help than his “friends.” His new friend Mary is dealing with cyber-bullying and Eric tries to help her as he learns to help himself. This frank look at a nation-wide problem provides no easy solutions but will foster meaningful discussions that are very much needed.

Read-aloud hooks:

- “The first time Eric Hayes saw him, David Hallenbeck was running, if you could call it that.” (pages 1-5)
- “Even if he wanted to, how could Eric tell Griffin about what really happened back in Ohio?” (pages 63-64.)

Discussion questions:

- Does this book portray bullying in a realistic way?
- Why does Eric ultimately take a stand?
- The bystanders in this novel change for the better but Griffin does not. Why does the author make the choice to not have Griffin grow as a human being?
- Each of the characters have played the roles of ally, bully, bystander, and victim. Show how Eric, David, Mary, and Griffin all contribute to the school’s culture.
- If Eric had a stable father figure in his life, would the story be as compelling?
- How do the adults in this novel deal with Griffin?
- “Terrorism in jeans. It comes with a laugh and a loose-leaf binder.” (page 85) What does Eric recognize for the first time?

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

<http://www.bullying.org/> (Bullying prevention)

Arthur Slade

THE HUNCHBACK ASSIGNMENTS

Wendy Lamb, 2009. ISBN 978-0-3857-3784-5. \$15.99. 278 pages.



This latest entry to the “steampunk” genre is a dark tale of mystery and power set in Victorian London. Borrowing heavily from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* with allusions to *Sherlock Holmes*, *Frankenstein*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, this is the story of a young man with physical deformities trying to find his way in an often unforgiving world. Saved from a traveling freak show as an infant, Modo has been raised as a young gentleman by Mr. Socrates, a cold yet powerful patron whose motives are not entirely pure. Modo can shape shift and this “adaptive transformation” will help him to become a secret agent for the Permanent Association, a group whose mission is to preserve the values of the British government. A group of arch-villains known as the Clockwork Guild have convinced a mad scientist named Dr. Hyde to help them in their plot against the government; his skills are needed to create an army of altered children to further the evil goals of the Guild. A steam powered menace named Fuhr and the red-haired hook-armed Hakkandottir are also members of the Guild and figure prominently in the story.

Mr. Socrates tests Modo by leaving him to fend for himself in London where he uses his deformities, his shape-shifting abilities, and his wits to survive. A chance encounter with another agent leads to a potential friendship with the smart and sassy Octavia Milkweed. Together the two young people travel the sewers and back streets of London in order to stop the nefarious Guild. Modo is forced to confront his feelings about his distant employer whom he looks upon as a father figure. Does Mr. Socrates act in the best interests of his agents? Will Modo save the day? Find out what happens in this thrilling tale that forces you to question natural selection, power, identity, and self-worth.

Read-aloud hooks:

- Mr. Socrates finds Modo, pages 12-15: “At the far end of the carriage was a cage draped in black cloth.”
- Modo sees his face for the first time, pages 23-26: “It has been four years since I rescued you.”

Discussion questions:

- How would life be different for Modo if he were not a hunchback?
- What does Octavia do to change her appearance? Would she have to change if she were a boy?
- Why do orphans make such good heroes in literature?
- Why does The Clockwork Guild pick on the street children in London?
- Would Modo be as good an agent were he not ugly and deformed?
- How does Modo’s condition help him identify and connect with the children of Dr. Hyde’s experiments?

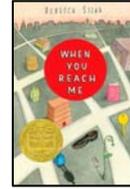
http://www.hunchbackassignments.com/index_steamtrunk.php

<http://www.victorianweb.org> (The Victorian Era)

<http://www.victorianlondon.org/maps/railwaymap.htm> (Railway map of Central London)

Rebecca Stead
WHEN YOU REACH ME

Wendy Lamb, 2009. ISBN 978-0-3857-3742-5. \$15.99. 208 pages.



Miranda, a sixth grader, lives in New York City with her single mother. Her problems are of the normal adolescent variety: friends who come and go, the possible beginning of a romance, concerns about money and school situations—nothing she can't handle. But, then the mysterious notes start to arrive, notes that make no sense unless you believe that they foretell the future. Who is sending these notes, and how are they getting to her?

A Wrinkle in Time is Miranda's favorite book, and she takes it with her wherever she goes. But, she knows that time travel is not possible—is it? And, why are there all these other weird things happening: the homeless man on the corner who sleeps with his head under the mailbox; the new boy who punched her friend Sal for no apparent reason; the hidden apartment key that disappeared without anything being stolen?

The solutions to all these questions are tied together in a fabulous story that is part realistic novel, part mystery and part science fiction.

Read-aloud hook: Read the entire first chapter, “Things You Keep in a Box” which is only one and a half pages long. This sets the stage for the book, and gets the reader thinking about the past, present and future, and how they will be intertwined.

Discussion questions:

- This book takes place in the 1970s. Do you think the time period was important to this book? Why or why not?
- Stead writes a lot about the neighborhood in which Miranda lives. Why is the setting so important? Can you describe it?
- Why do you think *A Wrinkle in Time* was so important to Miranda? In what ways are these two books alike?
- Why do you think Colin, Annemarie and Miranda worked at the sandwich shop during their lunch break? How did your opinion of Jimmy change from the beginning of the book to the end?
- What do you think of Julia? Did your opinion of her change over the course of the book?
- Did you notice the chapter titles? How do they fit into the plot?
- As Miranda gets note after note, what did you think they were about? Who did you think was writing them?
- Do you think time travel is possible? If so, where and when would you go to visit?
- What do you think Miranda and her mother mean when they talk about the “veil” that's over them?
- At the end, do you think all the pieces of the puzzle come together? Is there anything that still confuses you?

<http://www.rebeccasteadbooks.com>

James Sturm, Andrew Arnold & Alexis Frederick-Frost
ADVENTURES IN CARTOONING: HOW TO TURN
YOUR DOODLES INTO COMICS

First Second, 2009. ISBN 978-1-5964-3369-4. \$12.99. 109 pages.



Once upon a time, a creative comic book artist, dedicated to teaching in his field, started up North America's only 2-year accredited school for aspiring comic artists. (In Vermont!) A few years later, two graduates of the program joined their teacher to make this really cool book together. (Inspired by an assignment based on a book by the incomparable Ed Emberley.)

Adventures in Cartooning is a fantastic example of how-to explication and inspiration combined into one easy-to-read, fun-to-look-at book. Its premise is clear and well presented: anyone who can doodle can make a comic book. The book's informative aspects teach cartooning basics: what's a panel? How do word balloons work? Even, how can the average not-so-great doodler make Good Pictures?

The authors know their audience. Neither the most enthusiastic comic book fans, nor the average kid, want to read through a bunch of words explaining how comics work. They need a story to hold their interest, and it's even better with a joke here and there. Starting on the cover and revving up for a couple pages before you even hit the title page, Sturm and company introduce characters, plot and quest. In their story, an enthusiastic knight, his cautious horse and a helpful elf pursue a dragon. Their adventures bring them to the top of a wall ten miles high, inside the belly of a whale and, of course, into the dragon's lair, where they rescue helpless knights from their awful fates as root vegetables.

It's all pretty silly and not even finished, which is where you, the reader, come in: you might find yourself thinking, "Hey, I could do as well as these guys!" In fact, you could finish this story in all kinds of wild and crazy ways. You'll want to get started right away.

Read-aloud hook: Page 5: "Once upon a time...a princess tried to make a comic..." read through to the bottom of page 6 "Let's start a real-life comic book adventure..."

Discussion questions:

- The title page doesn't show up till page 9! How does the design of this book's beginning relate to the book as a whole?
- Describe some of the visual shorthand used by comic illustrators that are featured in this book.
- This book includes both an actual cartoon adventure story and a "how to" aspect. Do you feel the combination works? Why or why not?
- After you read *Adventures in Cartooning* were you *really* inspired to try working on your own cartoon? If so, what encouraged you? If not, what could the authors have done better?

<http://www.firstsecondbooks.com/adventures/adventuresGift005.html>

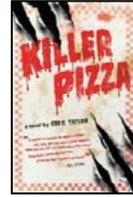
James Sturm: <http://www.drawnandquarterly.com/artStudio.php?artist=a3dff7dd55f39b>

Andrew Arnold: <http://www.cartoonstudies.org/arnold/>

Alexis Frederick-Frost: <http://www.cartoonstudies.org/FrederickFrost/>

Greg Taylor **KILLER PIZZA**

Feiwel & Friends, 2009. ISBN 978-0-3123-7379-5. \$16.99. 346 pages.



Toby McGill may not be the coolest kid in school, but he knows a cool job when he sees one. When he is hired by Killer Pizza, a new pizza joint in town, he is thrilled to have the chance to put his secret passion for cooking into practice. Working at Killer Pizza, along with co-workers Annabel and Strobe, however, proves to be more than Toby bargained for when he finds out that pizza specials are not KP's main fare. The business is actually a front for a monster hunting organization, and not only has Toby been told about the project, but "management" actually wants him, Annabel and Strobe to become MCOs – Monster Combat Officers.

In Toby's town, danger lurks in the form of guttata, monster cousins to gargoyles, which can disguise themselves as people during normal hours. At night, however, they become sophisticated predators, directed by a powerful alpha. To combat these monsters, Toby, Annabel and Strobe undergo a regimen of physical training, weapons use, and guttata behavior knowledge. Toby's confidence grows, but after facing the terrifying reality of guttata, he must face up to his potential in order to ultimately save the lives of his friends. Toby must confront his true nature when seeing if he has what it takes to be a good friend, a tough monster hunter, and a killer pizza maker.

Read-aloud hooks:

- Prologue: Chelsea runs from the monster, pages 1-4
- Chapter 4: Toby grows uneasy after his first day at work, pages 29-30.
- Toby sees the Guttata in the basement, pages 47-49. *Read from* "It was a large, grotesque figure that looked like"...*to...* "One could be your neighbor for all you know."
- Strobe, Toby and Annabel run from the Alpha, pages 295-298. *Read from* "Toby slid away from the side window to see"...*to...* "Once again, the Alpha guttata was blocking the trio's passage."

Discussion questions:

- Our society has always been fascinated with monsters. What are monsters from the past like compared to monsters now? Do they say something about the things we are afraid of? Why do we like to be scared by monsters?
- *Killer Pizza* was written by a screenwriter. Find several action-packed paragraphs in the book and compare them to a movie scene. How are they similar to the action and imagery you would see in a movie? Different?
- Are there such things as guttata in folklore, or did Greg Taylor make them up?
- Create a monster of your own. How would you make it look? What would make it scary to humans? Write a short scene in which a human encounters your monster. What would they see, feel and do? Add as many horrifying details as possible!

<http://killerpizzabook.com/>

<http://us.macmillan.com/killerpizza> (Music video/trailer)

<http://us.macmillan.com/author/gregtaylor> (Author biography)

http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=79235181503 (Greg Taylor talks about writing screenplays vs. writing books)

Karl Wolf-Morgenländer

RAGTAG

Clarion, 2009. ISBN 978-0-5470-7424-5. \$16.00. 240 pages.



Ragtag is a young swallow who belongs to the Feathered Alliance, an organization of birds that is dedicated to living in harmony in the city of Boston. When vicious raptors from the Talon Empire are forced out of their woodland habitat by humans, they threaten to invade the city and destroy the Feathered Alliance.

Surrender is not an option for the swallows, sparrows, pigeons, chickadees and other small birds who make up the Alliance. Under the leadership of Hoogol, the great horned owl, the clan leaders are ready to defend their territory and to fight to the end.

Ragtag is not a clan leader but he is a determined, feisty little bird. When he stumbles upon a caged eagle and frees him, he thinks he has found the one weapon that will help the Alliance defeat the raptors. Unfortunately, the tide turns for the worse. Baldur the eagle disappears, Ragtag is banished; Loki the crow defects to the other side, and Hoogol is killed. What will Ragtag do now to save his home from certain defeat?

Read-aloud hooks:

- Setting the stage/the plot, page 3: “Blue Feather looked out over the city....”
- Ragtag meets the eagle, page 11: “He glanced at the broken windows....”
- Page 14: “As lightning flashed again, Ragtag could see the blood....”

Discussion questions:

- What kind of relationship does Ragtag have with his brother Bobtail? Are their personalities alike or different? Is Bobtail jealous of Ragtag? If you have a brother or sister, are your personalities different? Do you understand each other?
- There are many different species of birds portrayed in this book. What personalities did the author give to each species? Do you think the personalities fit the true characteristics of each bird? Have you ever observed birds in nature?
- What is the author’s environmental message? What can people do to better protect the natural habitat of birds?
- There are many courageous acts in this book. How do you define courage? Ragtag says on page 50, “I am such a loser. I don’t even have the courage to run away.” Does it take courage to run away? What about Hoogol the owl? He ran away once in his past and then formed the Feathered Alliance.
- Loki the crow joins the Talon Empire in order to save his own clan. When captured, Bragi the pigeon informs the raptors of the final Alliance attack. Was Bragi being a traitor? What would you do in this situation if you thought you were going to be killed? What are the consequences of their actions? Do you forgive Loki in the end?
- The author says that he was inspired to write this story after witnessing an attack by a peregrine falcon on a flock of pigeons in Copley Square in Boston. Have you ever witnessed something unusual that piqued your imagination? Could you write a story about it?

No author website.

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)

2010-2011 DCF Nominees: Themes Matrix

TITLE	ACTION/ ADVENTURE	ANIMALS	DEATH	FAMILY	FRIENDSHIP	HUMOR	PEER RELATIONSHIPS	PREJUDICE/ ACCEPTING DIFFERENCES	GENRE	PUSHING THE LIMITS	SCIENCE/ ENVIRONMENT	SUMMERTIME	SURVIVAL	TIME TRAVEL	WAR
Adventures in Cartooning						√			NonFiction						
All the Broken Pieces				√			√	√	Narrative Verse				√		√
Anything but Typical					√		√	√	Realistic Fiction	√					
Bystander					√		√		Realistic Fiction	√					
Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice								√	NonFiction	√					
Closed for the Season	√								Mystery						
Double Eagle	√								Mystery		√	√			
The Dragon of Trelian	√				√				Fantasy	√			√		
The Dunderheads	√					√			Fiction						
11 Birthdays					√	√	√		Fiction					√	
Everything for a Dog		√	√	√	√				Realistic Fiction						
The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate				√		√			Historical Fiction		√				
Faith, Hope, and Ivy June				√	√		√	√	Realistic Fiction						
Franny Parker		√		√	√		√		Realistic Fiction						
The Great and Only Barnum						√			NonFiction	√					
The Hunchback Assignments	√								Fantasy	√			√		
Killer Pizza	√					√	√		Fantasy	√		√	√		
The Mostly True Adventures of Homer...	√			√	√				Historical Fiction	√			√		√
Neil Armstrong is My Uncle ...			√				√		Historical Fiction	√			√		
Newsgirl	√			√					Historical Fiction	√					
Pop				√	√		√		Realistic Fiction						
Project Sweet Life					√	√			Realistic Fiction			√			
Ragtag	√	√		√					Fantasy				√		√
Scat	√	√							Realistic Fiction		√				
Slob			√	√	√	√	√		Realistic Fiction					√	
The Small Adventure of Popeye and Elvis	√				√		√		Historical Fiction			√			
War Games	√							√	Historical Fiction	√					√
We Can't All Be Rattlesnakes		√							Fiction						
When You Reach Me					√				Mystery					√	
Where the Mountain Meets the Moon				√	√				Folktale	√			√		

-Lauren Chabot [laurenc@mpsvt.org] 4/10