

BAYA BOOK REVIEWS

VOL. 3, NO. 5

NOVEMBER 2008

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR: D. CARTON

Recommendations:

- * Titles suitable for YA
- M Mature, ages 16-20
- Y For younger teens, 11-14
- H/L High interest/low vocabulary books
- B/A Borrow from Adult
- R Rejected (no review- or sometimes a scathing one)

EDITOR'S NOTE: After nearly 20 years as a teen librarian, I bid BAYA and Teen Services a fond farewell. It's been exciting to watch BAYA transform itself into its current lively and valuable networking organization, and I wish you all continued enjoyment of and success in teen services. I've moved to a halftime position in the Art & Music Department of Berkeley Public Library, where I still see lots of teens (because they love art, music, dance and sport, in short everything we've got up here). Please feel free to pick my brain about teen literature/teen services questions, as I'll continue to review teen books for *Booklist*. You can reach me at work at 510-981-6236, and my email remains: dycarton@yahoo.com. - Debbie Carton

Childs, Tera Lynn. *Oh. My. Gods.* Dutton, 2008. 224 p. 978-0525479420. \$16.99.

* Phoebe should be having the best year of her life. She's going into her senior year of high school poised to get a full track and field scholarship to USC, which she'll attend along with best friends Cesca and Natalie. Instead, her Mom announces that she's getting remarried and dragging them both to a small Greek Island where her new husband lives. It turns out this island is home to the prestigious Academy, where the students are all descendants of Gods. To say that it will be hard for Phoebe, a nothos (normal) to fit in among literal Greek Gods, is an understatement. Phoebe shows much pluck as she navigates her intimidating school, battles with her new step sister, and wins a spot on a track team filled with descendants of Nike herself. Though

utterly predictable, the interesting premise, snappy writing and great cover will make this romantic comedy/drama a hit with teen readers.

-Kelly Keefer, San Leandro Public Library

**Kadohata, Cynthia. *Outside beauty*. Atheneum, 2008. 265p.
9780689865756 \$16.99**

Y 13 year old Shelby is the second eldest of four sisters, all of whom have different fathers. Their gorgeous Japanese mother is completely self-absorbed, and uses her beauty to charm and manipulate an ever-changing parade of boyfriends. The sisters have, as a result, become incredibly close. When the mother is in a disfiguring car accident, the sisters are separated, each going to live with their own father. Fortunately for Shelby, her father Jiro is a good egg who supports and nurtures Shelby and realizes that more than anything, she needs her sisters, who are her real family. On the way to this truth, however, we get a mini Thelma and Louise joyride. Set in the 1980's and starting in Chicago, the story takes a while to settle down. As always, Kadohata excels and wins our hearts when she explores thorny but necessary family ties. The messages about beauty- how we use it, and are used by it- and mother-daughter relationships make this a good pick for a mother-daughter book club.

- Debbie Carton, Berkeley Public Library

**Kidd, Ronald. *On Beale Street*. Simon & Schuster, 2008. 244p.
9781416933878. \$16.99.**

* Johnny lives in Memphis in 1954 and works at Sun Records, where he meets Elvis Presley. He also befriends the son of the chauffer (Johnny's mom is the bookkeeper for the same man the chauffer works for), even though Johnny is white and Lamont is black. Both Johnny and Elvis are "outcasts" because they have black friends, go to blues clubs, and wear clothing from an African-American store known for cutting edge style. The author successfully mixes the fictional characters with real people, including the owner of Sun Records Sam Phillips, disc jockeys Dewey Phillips and Nat D. Williams, and others who are listed in a note in the back. The plot element of a biracial romance is not entirely believable in its quiet resolution - people would have been more outraged and violence probably would have occurred. But overall, this is a thoughtful, compelling book on how the

creation of rock and roll and the civil rights movement overlapped. It also is a great choice to go along with 2009's teen summer reading program "Express Yourself."

Penny Peck, San Leandro PL

Mackel, Kathy. *Boost*. Dial Books, 2008. 978-0-8037-3240-7. \$16.99.

* Savvy, 8th grade basketball player extraordinaire, has been uprooted from Arizona to Rhode Island, courtesy of her parents. On impulse, she tries out for her new town's elite senior basketball team, rather than the 15 and under team, and makes it. *Boost* follows Savvy as she struggles to prove herself among older, stronger players, navigates her new life on a sheep farm, and deals with her older sister's strange behavior. Though spare on development for the supporting characters, *Boost* offers realistic sports scenes interspersed with family drama. The cover and jacket copy make this book seem like it focuses on steroid use, yet that plot point does not dominate the story. While not as strong as Catherine Murdock's *Dairy Queen* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006), the combination of sports and family make *Boost* a fine choice for girls looking for books with female athletes.

- Kelly Keefer, San Leandro Public Library

Myers, Walter Dean. *Sunrise Over Fallujah*. Scholastic Press, 2008. 290 pages. \$17.99.

* Much to his father's dismay, Harlem teen Robin "Birdy" Perry enlists in the army following high school, and is shipped off to an allegedly brief mission in Iraq, code named Operation Iraqi Freedom. Through letters written to his father and Uncle Richie, himself a Vietnam War veteran, Birdie shares the ins and outs of daily life in a burgeoning war zone. As *Fallen Angels* did before it, *Sunrise Over Fallujah* offers an unflinching account of the life of a deployed soldier, this time in Iraq. The interactions between the soldiers and civilians are expertly drawn, with Myer's capturing the terror both sides must feel when approaching each other. Though the book is short on descriptions of the landscape to better give the reader a sense of place in Iraq, Myers delivers a sobering look at the changing, confusing and conflicting circumstances our enlisted soldiers endure.

-Kelly Keefer, San Leandro Public Library

Overstreet, Jeffrey. *Cyndere's Midnight*. WaterBrook Press, 2008. 370 p. 9781400072538. \$13.99

* The grieving widow, Cyndere, shares the belief of her dead husband, Deunoroi, that the beastmen and noblemen can coexist in peace. Mysterious characters seem to be pulling strings behind the scenes, pitting the primitive beastmen against the "civilized" noblemen. Cyndere is able to bond with Jordam, a beastman who has experienced Auralia's colors. Jordam decides to help Cyndere to work towards peaceful coexistence.

Fans of Overstreet's first book, *Auralia's Colors*, will not be disappointed in this second book of the Auralia Thread series. The world Overstreet paints will captivate fans of Tolkien's Lord of the Ring series, although the solution is not as simple as destroying a ring of power. The characters are carefully drawn so that the reader can view this intriguing scenario from many different perspectives. Unlike Tolkien's tale, where there is no hope for the orcs or goblins, everyone, including the beastmen have a chance at survival. The story moves along at a good pace with lots of action. Familiar characters reappear and several new characters emerge. An intriguing tale that will leave readers eagerly waiting for Book 3. Recommended for teens of all ages looking for another good heroic tale.

- Elsie Tep, Contra Costa County Library

Scieszka, Jon, ed. *Guys write for guys read: favorite authors write about being boys*. Viking, 2005. 272p. 0670060275 \$10.99

Y Younger teen boys (and many girls as well) will be attracted by this delightfully diverse compilation of extremely short works from beloved authors such as Dav Pilkey, Jerry Pinkney, Daniel Pinkwater, Jerry Spinelli, Darren Shan, M. T. Anderson and Stephen King. Stories, cartoons, hilarious anecdotes of a "manly" nature- there's something for practically everyone. The name recognition factor will be a strong pull- even if your teens are no longer reading Captain Underpants, they might want to check out something else Pilkey wrote for older readers. Though some of the contributions are "gee, the rosy days of my youth- times aren't like this anymore!", mostly it's just great storytellers spinning mostly true yarns. The book strongly promotes a very guy-friendly website with additional recommendations. The website is intended to be useful to guys of all ages, with categories such as young guys, middle guys and older guys. While it's intended for younger

readers (gr. 5-9) be sure to display this title among holiday or light reading recommendations for older teens.

- Debbie Carton, Berkeley Public Library

Scott, Kieran. *Geek Magnet*. Putnam, 2008. 308p. 9780399247606. \$16.99

* KJ is the stage manager for her high school's production of "Grease," and she is annoyed by the geeks who regularly hit on her. She has her eyes on Cameron, the cute and nice guy at school, and popular girl Tama is willing to help KJ attract Cameron. Many of the characters are stock teen archetypes (geek, athlete, nice girl, mean girl, etc.), and the narrative can get tedious and predictable. The pop culture references are likely to be dated soon, but the references to the musical "Grease" are fun and the best part of the story. Also memorable is the subplot concerning KJ's alcoholic father, so this adds something substantial to the fluff. From the author of the "Non-blonde Cheerleader" series, this works as a summer timewaster but won't be memorable.

Penny Peck, San Leandro PL

Taylor, Kate. Ed. *Going hungry: writers on desire, self-denial and overcoming anorexia*. Anchor, 2008. 352p. 9780307278340 \$14.95

M / B/A The thoughtful older teen will appreciate finding this title in your YA collection- though they may not read it in its entirety. The anthology presents nearly 20 writers' struggles with anorexia. What makes it different than the typical anorexia book is that these are stories from the other, "recovered" side. Another welcome difference is the inclusion of people of color, average or "plus size" women, and men. Contributors include authors Jennifer Egan and Joyce Maynard, and poet Louise Gluck. Part of the book's appeal- and part of its structural problem- is that for many contributors, this was clearly a therapeutic exercise. After a while, you feel like you're locked in a room with angry, bitter, terrified people struggling with self-image and control issues. It's too much material to take in one reading- but a valuable and important book for anyone who is intrigued by, suffering from and/or trying to understand what it's like inside an anorexic's body and mind. Encourage readers to skip around- the essays and experiences are very different and most illuminating.

- Debbie Carton, Berkeley Public Library

Tinti, Hannah. *The Good Thief*. Dial Press, 2008. 336p. 978-0-385-33745-8. \$25.

* 12-year old Ren lives at St. Anthony's Orphanage for Boys, with little hope of being adopted - he's past the age of cute and missing his left hand. When Benjamin Nab springs Ren from the orphanage with a tear-jerker tale of their parent's death, Ren hopes his life will improve. Instead, he finds himself riding shotgun with two con men as they work various scams from small town to small town. Set in 19th century New England, *The Good Thief* is packed with unforgettable characters, from one-armed Ren to a shrieking landlady and a back-from-the-dead giant, yet it never feels unbelievable. Author Tinti draws you in with her gothic setting, concern for Ren, who remains just likeable enough to keep you rooting for a happy ending, and an exciting plot inclusive of murder, fights, kidnapping and other untoward acts. Highly recommended for audiences of all ages who can stomach a little grave digging.

- Kelly Keefer, San Leandro Public Library

Waters, Daniel. *Generation Dead*. Hyperion, 2008. 392 p. 9781423109211 \$16.99

REJECT. I tried very hard not to reject this one, as the concept is an interesting one, and its heart is in the right place. First-time novelist Waters imagines a not-distant future wherein some teens come back to life after dying, and these "living dead" or "differently biotic" young people are shunned by society and persecuted when they attempt to rejoin the living. It's clearly an effort to get young people to see that prejudice is alive and well (racism, homophobia, lookism, etc.) using Goth culture as a hook. The problem is that it is not well-written- for example, Waters repeats himself all the time (secondary character Margi is never mentioned without throwing in her pink-spiked hair), and at nearly 400 pages, this kind of repeated detail isn't necessary to pad the story. Thinking I was being too harsh, I put it out on the table and had teens look at it. I didn't have to urge them to pick it up- the title and cover are appealing- but no one finished it. They'd read a bit, then skim, then skip to the end, then throw it down in disgust. Where's a good editor when you need one?

- Debbie Carton, Berkeley Public Library

Wittlinger, Ellen. *Love & Lies: Marisol's story*. Simon & Schuster, 2008. 248p. 1416916237. \$16.99.

***M** Wittlinger's previous YA novel *Hard Love* continues, this time from Marisol's point of view as she embarks on a bold journey: postpone freshman year at Stanford to write a novel and fall in love, both for the first time. Both goals become entwined when Marisol falls for charming Olivia, a 20-something instructor in the adult-ed class ("Write your first novel") in which Marisol has enrolled. Roommate and friend Birdie provide snappy humor while testing Marisol's patience. Gio reappears from *Hard Love* and Marisol manages to maneuver their friendship through the residual weirdness. She also takes on a fix-it project in the form of a new-to-Cambridge lesbian, who may not need much fixing after all.

Compulsively readable, *Love & Lies* conveys witty and humorous dialogue through solid characters. Though Wittlinger hammers lessons of truth, these are appreciated nonetheless by die-hard truth-sayer Marisol. She discovers how complicated it can be to tell the truth in friendship, romance, and everything in between. The surprising ending leaves room for a third book. Sexuality is artfully and realistically presented, but only alluded to. Recommended for mature teens.

- Marla Bergman. San Francisco Public Library.