The new emphasis on nonfiction and on such terms as information literacy, cultural literacy, metacognitive, common core, and standards-based literacy made us feel almost guilty to be recommending eight new pieces of fiction—and no nonfiction—for our 2013 Honor List. To find a place on our Honor List, books have to have been chosen for “Best Book” recommendations by at least three respected editors or committees, as cited in the headings of the following reviews.

Partly because of the wide variety of subject matter in nonfiction, critics find it harder to agree on the best nonfiction. However, we will at least mention the top five nonfiction books honored in 2013 by the ALA’s YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association). The winner was The Nazi Hunters: How a Team of Spies and Survivors Captured the World’s Most Notorious Nazi by Neal Bascomb (Scholastic) while the finalists included Go: A Kidd’s Guide to Graphic Design by Chip Kidd (Workman Publishing Company), Imprisoned: The Betrayal of Japanese Americans During World War II by Martin W. Sandler (Walker/Bloomsbury), Courage Has No Color: The True Story of the Triple Nickles, America’s First Black Paratroopers by Tanya Lee Stone (Candlewick), and The President Has Been Shot! The Assassination of John F. Kennedy by James L. Swanson (Scholastic).

As we got into reading the 20 or so YA books that during the past year received the most accolades from journal editors and awards committees, we realized that high-quality fiction also contains lots of “real information,” and that we English teachers need to help students develop the skills that are needed to distinguish between fact and fiction in the same discourse, as when authors move into magical realism as does Gene Luen in his Boxers & Saints, Tom McNeal in Far Far Away, and Marcus Sedgwick in Midwinter Blood. We also need to teach students to look for where and how authors of historical fiction have gotten their information (see Elizabeth Wein’s Rose Under Fire) and why readers need to pay attention to the acknowledgments that authors of contemporary realistic fiction include in their books (see Cynthia Kadohata’s The Thing about Luck). And perhaps most importantly, readers need the experience of “falling into” a story, as opposed to just skimming the pages for key words and the general outline. Honor List books that encourage this kind of reading and the gaining of empathy for their contemporaries include Tim Federle’s Better Nate Than Ever and Rainbow Rowell’s Eleanor & Park.

A challenge in today’s world is that we are all faced with more information than we can possibly read—much less understand—and so we end up skimming for “quickie” facts. Perhaps the biggest help we can give our students is to entice them into reading such good stories that they will be inspired to metaphorically “stop and smell the roses.”

We hope the prize-winning books described below, in alphabetical order, will help you do exactly that. Happy reading to both you and your students.
**Better Nate Than Ever**


*Better Nate Than Ever* is an autobiographical, coming-of-age novel, told as a comedy of manners by twelve-year-old Nate, who leaves Jankburg, Pennsylvania, on a Greyhound bus to answer an open-casting call for the part of Elliott in the Broadway musical of *E.T.* He has some clean underwear, along with a mysterious manila envelope, a dead Nokia cell phone, and two dozen Entenmann’s donuts stuffed into his book bag. He plans to return the next day to grand accolades because of having gotten the part, but alas, things get complicated.

He manages to get himself to the Ripley-Grier Building in New York City, where he is asked to fill out a sheet and have his mom, his dad, or a guardian sign it if he is under 18. When he puts his age as 21 because he has borrowed his brother’s ID, and his brother is 21, he recognizes this as a pretty big lie, and so does the casting assistant who asks if he might have gotten the numbers reversed, “Didn’t you mean to put *twelve* for your age?” (68). She later adds that unless Nate has an adult to vouch for him, the audition is over.

This is when the “deus ex machina” part of the story comes into play. Nate hears a voice saying, “I’ll vouch for him.” To his surprise, the voice is coming from his Aunt Heidi, his mother’s sister, who strongly identifies with Nate because years ago she had also left Jankburg to pursue her dream on Broadway. And like many Broadway dreamers, she has ended up alienated from her family and working in a no-future job in New York. Nevertheless, she proves to be a lifesaver for Nate.

But even with help, is Nate going to make it big on Broadway? There are a zillion actors who came to Broadway and never made it, and like his aunt, they ended up living in Queens. However, Nate makes it big and Aunt Heidi is proud of her nephew for getting the role of Elliott in *E.T. The Musical!* Nate meets John Williams who wrote the musical score, and he watches as Williams conducts the amazing flying sequence of E.T. going across the moon on a bike.

But wait a minute. Is that the reality, or is that just Nate’s dream? (DLFN)

**Boxers & Saints**


In two companion graphic novels, Gene Luen Yang depicts the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 from the opposing points of view of two Chinese teens. The Boxer Rebellion was a series of conflicts in northern China, so-called because the physical training practiced by the “rebels,” who organized a secret society called the Righteous and Harmonious Fists, appeared to American missionaries as an army of boxers preparing for war. The Boxers perceived the colonial incursion into China of the Eight-Nation Alliance (Britain, Russia, Japan, France, United States, Germany, Italy, and Austria-Hungary) as a harbinger of the total extinction of the Chinese people and their culture. Russia and Japan had previously taken Chinese territory by force, and European and American missionaries had already converted thousands of Chinese to various forms of Christianity. The Boxers were unwavering in their resolve to force foreigners and Chinese Christian converts from their nation.

The Boxers advanced on Beijing, executing tens of thousands of Christian converts along with foreign officials and merchants. The Chinese Empress Dowager Cixi announced her support and declared war on the foreign Alliance. The Boxers and Imperial armies joined forces, but their efforts were sabotaged by various Chinese political and military leaders who were not aligned with the Empress.
In the end, the Boxers and Imperial forces were defeated through treachery and superior foreign numbers and weaponry. After the Boxer’s defeat, the foreign military and missionaries committed ghastly atrocities against the Chinese people. However, the Empress signed the Boxer Protocol, agreeing to war reparations and the execution of various rebel leaders if she were allowed to remain on the throne.

In *Boxers* and *Saints* Yang speculates on how two Chinese teens from similar backgrounds could find themselves on opposite sides of the conflict. The focus is always on the Chinese experience, keeping the foreign intruders on the periphery.

The protagonist of *Boxers*, Lee Bao, is a peasant boy who sees his way of life threatened by “foreign devils” and Chinese governmental collaborators who defile his village’s religious icons and even murder his friends and family members. Eventually, he forms the Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fist. As Yang tells the story, he weaves in the legendary and mythical Chinese warrior gods with whom Bao has become familiar from the local festivals and operas. Bao and his brothers fantasize that they are the famous Chinese warrior gods fighting against the enemy. As they travel from village to village on their way to Beijing, they confront the foreign devils, mete out justice, and pick up recruits. They soon have a large army trained in the martial arts and convinced of their invincibility.

In the heat of battle, Bao always transforms into Ch’in Shih-huang, and as such, he seems impervious to the invaders’ bullets. And just as Bao leads an army of ultimate male soldiers, so his female counterpart and romantic interest, Mei-wen, leads an army of women, the Red Lanterns. She transforms into the female warrior goddess Mu Gui-ying.

*Boxers* speculates on how a religious society attempting to mete out justice and return the country to spiritual harmony could repeatedly engage in atrocities such as murdering defenseless women and children, and burning whole congregations locked inside their churches. Yang’s interweaving of realistic story-telling with supernatural experience may very well come close to capturing the actual experience of the people of the time.

Yang presents Bao as a leader who is conflicted and torn between his moral and spiritual obligations and his mission to fight for the weak, while killing defenseless Christians. Bao questions the morality of these actions in conversations with the gods, who ridicule his naiveté and lecture him on the consequences of ill-conceived mercies shown to past enemies in Chinese history. Bao becomes the ruthless scourge of the foreign devils that history suggests the Boxers may have been.

In Yang’s companion book, *Saints*, he tells the story of Four-girl, a child whose family perceives her social station as being so low that they will not even give her a real name. Abused by her family but treated kindly by a Chinese Christian acupuncturist, Yang’s protagonist converts to Christianity and accepts the Christian name Vibiana. She cares for boys in a church-run orphanage. Her experience of the “foreign devils,” sometimes the very same characters cast as evil demons in *Boxers*, is different from the experience of Bao. She believes that the Christians are not devils at all, but rather are concerned with taking care of all people, no matter how low their social station.

Like Bao, Vibiana has a supernatural connection to a specter, in her case, Joan of Arc. Like Joan, Vibiana comes from the lowest of social stations and aspires to fight for the weakest members of society. Like Joan, she learns to fight with a sword so that she might defeat, not the invading foreigners but those among her fellow Chinese who are intent on killing anyone and everyone they perceive as threats to the Chinese way of life.

Characters from Bao’s story also play a part in Vibiana’s version, including Bao himself, who first sees Vibiana when they are both small children. He recognizes her when the Boxers invade her newfound home to kill the Christians. Parallel to Joan of Arc, Vibiana is given the opportunity to renounce her heartfelt beliefs, and like Joan of Arc, she refuses and dies at the hands of Bao, who insists that all she has to do is verbally renounce the foreign god and run away. It seems like such a small thing to him, and he is baffled at her refusal but murders her just the same.

Bao’s and Viviana’s opposite experiences of the same events are subtly revealed by the graphic images and dialogue, which explain why some characters in history fight on one side even though it means taking up arms against a brother or sister, while characters on the other side choose to do the exact opposite.
We are told that history is written by the victors, but sometimes, it is written twice by someone trying to do justice to the truth. (JB Jr.)

Eleanor & Park

Of the eight books chosen for this year’s Honor List, Eleanor & Park was the first one to make it to the New York Times “Best Seller” list, and as far as we know, it was also the first one to be involved in a major censorship case. Parents of a reader at Anoka High School in Minnesota led a citizens’ group in challenging the book’s place in school libraries after counting 227 instances of coarse language or sexuality. An invitation to author Rainbow Rowell to speak at the school was rescinded, but after the school principal convened a committee of parents, staff, and a student to review the book, Eleanor & Park was returned to the library because the committee judged it to be “powerful, realistic, and appropriate for high schoolers.”

The book is a love story between two outsiders. Park is half-Korean because when his father was a soldier in Korea, he fell in love with Min-Dae and brought her back to live in his hometown. While Park may be a little “different” from the other kids in his high school, he isn’t nearly the outsider that Eleanor is. One reason is that his parents truly love each other, and as a young man, Park’s father had been a local “hero” and so the family is treated with respect in their small Nebraska neighborhood.

Eleanor’s birth father abandoned his family of five, and Eleanor’s beautiful mother ends up marrying Richie and lives in the inadequate family home in which Richie had grown up. Because of his meanness and the vulgar and creepy way he lusts after Eleanor, I put Richie in my “top-ten list” of horrible fathers in YA books.

Being a basically non-romantic person, I’ve always been a little irritated at authors who, when they write about a girl with terrible problems, invent a boyfriend for her, and the boyfriend immediately makes all the troubles disappear. It is true that in this book Park literally saves Eleanor’s life, but that’s not the end of the story because there’s still plenty of work for Eleanor to do. Another pet peeve of mine is how often in teen romances, girls must undergo the agony of choosing between two boys as Katniss does in the Hunger Games books with Peeta and Gale and Bella does in the Twilight books with Edward and Jacob. Having such a choice forced on the protagonist is more wish-fulfilling than problematic, but this is certainly not the plot in Eleanor & Park. Poor overweight Eleanor, who has the troubles of the world piled on her shoulders, is as surprised as are readers—along with Park—that somewhere in the world there is a boy who truly loves her.

Next spring, Don and I (Alleen) are planning on teaching an Honors College class on “Symbols, Archetypes, and Visual Literacy,” and we hope we can get a small group of both boys and girls to read Rowell’s book because we want to hear what young readers say when Eleanor calls Park her “Asian Prince” and he argues that there is no such thing—at least not in this country—as “a super-hot Asian guy.” As part of his argument he explains, “Look at M*A*S*H. The whole show takes place in Korea, and the doctors are always flirting with Korean girls, right? But the nurses don’t use their R and R to go to Seoul to pick up hot Korean guys. Everything that makes Asian girls seem exotic makes Asian guys seem like girls” (272).

We would also love to see if male and female readers react differently to Eleanor’s appearance and to the strange clothes that she wears, and also to Park’s decision to start wearing eyeliner. And will they agree with Eleanor when she worries that all the things that Park thinks are “mysterious and intriguing about her” are actually “just . . . bleak?” (204). (APN)

Far, Far Away
The main characters include a boy named Jeremy Johnson Johnson, so-named because before his mother married Harold Johnson, her name had been Zyla Johnson. The girl protagonist is a fun-loving red-haired girl named Ginger Boultinghouse, perhaps named so to inspire readers to think of a story about a wicked witch who would entice children to her gingerbread house so that she could bake and eat them. This contemporary American story takes place “far, far away” in a town called Never Better. However, after Sten Blix, a skilled baker from Sweden, migrated to the town several years ago, the town’s name is no longer appropriate.

Every once in a while, green smoke rises from Mr. Blix’s Green Oven Bakery so that the townspeople know that Mr. Blix has been making his magical “Princess Cakes.” They are so delicious that people watch for the green smoke and rush to the bakery in hopes of getting one before they are all gone. A complication is that customers must eat them with their eyes closed, because if they happen to see someone while they are eating one of the cakes, they will lose their heart to the person. In a backdrop story, Jeremy’s mother was at the Green Oven Bakery eating a Princess Cake when a traveler from Canada walked through the door. She glanced at him and was so overcome that she followed him out the door and has not been seen since.

Poor Jeremy! Even as an infant he had recognized the evil in the Green Oven Bakery. When his mother would stop by the bakery with Jeremy in his stroller, he would shrink down and hide his head under his baby blankets almost as if he sensed the future. Before Zyla ran off with the man from Canada, Jeremy’s father had worked as a steam-fitter, dynamiter, water-witcher, card-shark, and coffin maker. He thought his life was so interesting that he wrote a book titled My Life and Times by Myself: Volume I. Then he wrote Volume II and turned his coffin shop into what he called the Two Book Bookstore. Since his mother left, Jeremy and his father had lived pretty much alone in the space above the book store. Harold’s only interest in life was to watch every episode of a television show named Uncommon Knowledge, a “quiz show that celebrates the uncommon knowledge of the common man” (40).

The most unusual thing about the story is that it is narrated by the ghost of Jacob Grimm, who since his death in 1863 has been wandering in the “Zwischenraum,” a kind of purgatory or waiting place between Heaven and Earth. Jacob can see but not touch, smell but not taste, suffer but not weep, rest but not sleep, and speak but not be heard. He is roaming the earth hoping to find his younger brother Wilhelm and make peace with him. In his travels he happens to come upon the village of Never Better where he finds Jeremy Johnson Johnson and discovers that Jeremy has the peculiar ability to hear what Jacob says. They eventually figure out that touching his right temple gives Jeremy the ability to communicate telepathically with Jacob. Jacob feels he has an obligation to protect this unfortunate boy and to help him with his “studies, studies, studies” because earning a scholarship is the only hope for Jeremy to escape from living above the Two Book Bookstore in the increasingly dangerous village of Never Better.

Because Jacob Grimm’s real occupation was as a scholar and a linguist (he and Wilhelm collected their famous stories as a way of studying the relationship between different versions of the same stories told in various dialects and languages), Jacob is especially good at teaching Jeremy the Greek and Latin roots of many English words. And Jacob has shared with Jeremy (and with readers) much information about himself and his brother. This leads Jeremy to go on the televised quiz show offering the Brothers Grimm as his area of specialization. All goes well while Jacob is feeding Jeremy the answers. But for a final question, Jeremy gambles all his winnings on one last question, which happens to have been taken from a Walt Disney version of one of the stories, which Jacob knows nothing about. Jeremy’s dream of becoming rich is shattered. He has to return to Never Better, where he faces a mystery and a fate more somber and suspenseful than anything in one of Jacob and Wilhelm’s old stories.
Besides enjoying a modern story that has many motifs taken from the Grimm brothers fairy tales, McNeal’s book is likely to inspire readers to search out more information about Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in hopes of figuring out why Jacob Grimm is still hanging around looking for his younger brother. (DLFN)

Midwinter Blood

For people who think the best books are ones that leave readers with more questions than answers, Midwinter Blood is a treasure because it inspires deep thinking about personal and group identities, pre-existence, reincarnation, and the effects of the past on present and future cultures. The book is made up of seven loosely related stories. Part One, “Midsummer Sun: June 2073—The Flower Moon,” begins with Eric Seven, a journalist, getting on a plane to fly to Skarpness and then taking a ferry to the far north Blessed Island where during the summers the sun never sets. Also, one side of the island is covered with a unique plant, which is brewed into a mysterious tea that is thought to help people live forever, but also to make them infertile. Eric’s editor has sent him to explore “the facts” and come back with a feature story that will answer the questions that “the net” hints at, but fails to document.

Each story is named for a particular kind of moon. After the first chapter comes “Part Two: The Archaeologist: July 2011—The Hay Moon” and on through a story set in August of 1944, one in September of 1902, one in October of 1848, one in the 10th century, and then the final story, “Midwinter-blood: Time Unknown—The Blood Moon.”

The stories are separated by a double-page spread on black paper with a picture of white vines encircling something symbolic of the chapter, such as a hare, a paintbrush, or a sword. Because of our interest in how authors use names for purposes way beyond that of simple identification, we Nilsens loved the way that Sedgwick works with names. When as he debarks on the island, Eric introduces himself as Eric Seven, Tor, an older man who appears to be the leader, responds with “Seven? . . . One of the True Modern Church?” (8). Erik explains that his parents were “first generation converts, back in the twenty-twenties,” but that they are probably disappointed with him because the name means nothing to him, except that he had liked the idea behind the re-naming. He explains: “They believed that names were shackles, and badges, and that they were full of meaning, and history, and were therefore weapons of prejudice and of snobbery. Anyone who joins the Church is invited to select a new name, one without meaning, without history, without prejudice. Numbers are common in the Church; they seemed neutral. Devoid of meaning” (9).

In a prophetic statement that readers will come to appreciate as the stories unfold, Tor says, “But Mr. Seven, all words have meaning. Especially names. Even new ones. And as for numbers . . .” (9).

Even though Erik has never believed in love at first sight, when he meets a girl named Merle, his journalist’s brain rubs out a long-held belief and writes “a new one in its place” (7). The two names (Eric and Merle) appear in alternate forms throughout the book. In the final story (time unknown) the names appear as King Eirikr and Queen Melle, while the 1902 story features a famous painter named Eric Carlsson, whose huge and mysterious painting titled Midvinterblot, that is, “midwinter sacrifice,” still hangs in the National Museum in Stockholm.

The name of the painting relates to a discussion on page 164 of the name of the island, which people think means “blessed,” but as the painter explained, “In the old tongue it was bletician and before that blotsian, and before that, just blod. It means sacrifice . . . and in blood.” (APN)

Rose Under Fire
Elizabeth Wein, the author of *Rose Under Fire*, is an avid flyer of small planes and also the author of last year’s prize-winning *Code Name Verity*. This companion book takes place in 1944 when Maddie Boddart is mourning the death of her best friend, Julie. Maddie becomes friends with a young American pilot named Rose Justice, and it is mainly her story that is told. Toward the end of World War II, Rose left college in Pennsylvania to join England’s Air Transport Auxiliary.

Ironically, while women were not allowed to be fighter pilots, or to fly combat missions, their jobs were often more dangerous and life-threatening than were the actual combat missions. Rose flew military aircraft (sometimes damaged planes) from one airport to another so they could be repaired or assigned to particular combat missions. The planes did not carry bombs, or ammunition, or even a radio, and Rose was once in danger of freezing to death because her plane had a hole in the windshield. Another irony is that much of the story takes place after D-Day when atrocities continued to occur for more than a year.

When Rose’s plane was shot down over France she was captured by the German Luftwaffe and taken to Ravensbrück, a notorious women’s concentration camp in Germany. In the camp she meets various members of the French resistance, along with Polish women, many of whom had been the subjects of Nazi medical experiments, and hence were referred to as “the rabbits.” *Rose Under Fire* is a feminist novel written in a diary or epistolary form, which brings readers directly into the horrors of the Holocaust and the war. One of the most interesting friendships is that between the protagonist Rose and a feisty Polish girl, who was also named Rose, really Różyczka, but called “Little Rose.” She was tiny and her legs had been terribly damaged in the Nazi’s experiments. The relatively healthy prisoners tried to hide and protect the medically damaged prisoners because they wanted them to survive and bear witness to the world about the atrocities inflicted on them.

Little Rose was so young and healthy that she had been used in many medical experiments, and as a result had developed a strong sense of sarcasm and a giggling maniacal howl of laughter. She would address Rose as “English-speaking French Political Prisoner 51498.” All the women thought it funny that because Rose, an American, had been shot down over France, she was considered a French Political Prisoner, even though she spoke no French. Many of the prisoners in Ravensbrück had been in the French Resistance, but in the camp, they had to change from active to passive resistance working with such techniques as silence, indecisiveness, feigned misunderstandings, extreme self-control, whispering, hoarding and sharing pieces of bread, and subverting orders. Each prisoner had her own strategies for survival. Some were belligerent fighters, others were passively resistant, and still others had no fight at all in them. These different techniques were later explored in the Nuremberg trials.

The novel makes no judgments as to which strategy is better. And Rose, whose main function in the novel is that of a witness, makes no judgments either. And this is one of the differences between *Code Name Verity*, in which Julie is a heroine, and *Rose Under Fire*, in which Rose is a poet, a witness, and a survivor.

Interested readers may want to also read Neal Bascomb’s *The Nazi Hunters: How a Team of Spies and Survivors Capture the World’s Most Notorious Nazi*, which, as mentioned above, was chosen by YALSA as the “Best Nonfiction” book of 2013. (DLFN)
The heart of the story revolves around these huge, expensive machines and how each family that has developed a harvesting company has to coordinate their equipment and their hired workers so as to do the harvesting for several large-scale farmers, probably located long distances from each other. The biggest challenge is that the wheat must be harvested, in the relatively short time between its ripening and the arrival of fall winds and rain. Kadohata grew up in a Japanese American family as reflected in her earlier books *Kira Kira* and *Weedflower*, but still she thanked two Japanese women for checking the Japanese expressions that she included, and she also thanked two Irish combine drivers, a child psychologist, an entomologist specializing in mosquitoes, and a woman who had suffered through a case of malaria. Twelve-year-old Summer is the narrator and begins her story with an explanation: “*Kouun* is ‘good luck’ in Japanese, and one year my family had none of it. We were cursed with bad luck. Bad luck chased us around, pointing her bony finger. We got seven flat tires in six weeks. I got malaria, one of fifteen-hundred cases in the United States that year. And my grandmother’s spine started causing her excruciating pain” (1).

In a continuation of the family’s bad luck, Summer’s parents had recently received a phone call from Japan where three elderly family members were getting ready to die and needed Summer’s parents to “come home” and help them settle their family and business affairs. So on April 27, Summer’s mother and father flew off to Japan leaving Summer and her younger brother, Jaz, who has more than his share of psychological problems, with Summer’s 67-year-old grandparents, Obaachan and Jiichan.

This is fine except that the mortgage on their own house and land still has to be paid and so Jiichan decides to come out of retirement and work as a harvester for the Parkers—just as the whole family had done in previous summers. Grandma Obaachan will be cook for the crew, assisted by Summer, and Jaz will go along and help where he can.

The spring and summer are full of adventures—some of which are amusing, while others are heart-breaking, dangerous, or just plain fascinating. I wouldn’t have believed what Summer did to save her family’s livelihood if I had not heard my own father, who was born in rural Arizona in 1907, tell about some of the responsibilities on his family’s farm that he was given when he was the same age as Summer is in the book. One of the values of Kadohata’s writing is how skilled she is in researching, and then presenting, details that make her stories come alive. And best of all, in *The Thing about Luck*, she found subjects close to her heart, but unknown and ignored by most of us. Readers will come away with a whole new image of immigrant families and contemporary farm workers in America. (APN)