For almost thirty years, Alleen Pace Nilsen, in collaboration with an illustrious cast of scholars, including Kenneth Donelson, James Blasingame Jr., and Don Nilsen, have authored the yearly Honor List for prize-winning YA books. Their contributions have helped thousands of teachers and librarians select appropriate quality literature for their classrooms and libraries. In November of 2017, they invited me to take over the responsibilities of selecting the Honor List, which I was thrilled to do.

The process for choosing books for the Honor List begins in February, when award season for the previous year’s publications begins. Editors and committees of esteemed judges convene to select winners and finalists for the Printz Award, the Newbery Award, the National Book Award, the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, the New York Times and the School Library Journal Best Books, to name just a few. The titles from these prestigious lists are then read and considered in terms of their relevance to and impact on the lives of adolescents. Ultimately, the lists are winnowed to six to eight books that represent the “best of the best.”

True to the defining characteristic of YA literature, each of this year’s six winners features teen protagonists struggling to learn what it means to become an adult. Relationships play important roles in each character’s identity development. The novels’ themes reflect contemporary societal and political issues that are as varied and diverse as the characters portrayed: emigration and cultural assimilation, new schools and new families, urban violence, police brutality, adoption, romance, religion, bullying, abuse, grief, death, and revenge.

**American Street**

Sixteen-year-old Fabiola Toussaint and her mother, Valerie, leave their homeland of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to start a new life in America. Their final destination is Detroit, Michigan, where Fabiola’s aunt and cousins live. Her aunt has been sending money to Haiti for years so that Fabiola can attend a private school, and her family finally decides that America will be the best place for her. Fabiola is an American citizen because her mother came to America during her pregnancy and then returned to Haiti shortly after Fabiola was...
born. Unfortunately, Valerie is detained by immigration officials shortly after they arrive in New York and sent to a holding tank in New Jersey. Fabiola is forced to travel to Detroit alone.

Upon arriving at the airport in Detroit, Fabiola meets Chantal, nineteen, Primadonna (Pri) and Donna, sixteen-year-old twins, and Aunt Jo. Her cousins, known around town as the 3 B’s, and an aunt who spends most of her day in bed bear little resemblance to the warm family Fabiola dreamed of when she was in Haiti. She immediately tells her aunt about her mother being detained, and Aunt Jo reassures her that it will be taken care of. The next day, Fabiola is enrolled in the private school that Donna and Pri attend. On the corner of American Street and Joy Road, Fabiola Toussaint thought she would finally find une belle vie—a good life. Instead, she begins the daunting process of navigating the disconnectedness and violence of her new home—without her mother—while trying to hold on to her own identity, her heritage, and her family’s spiritual traditions.

Fabiola—everyone calls her Fabulous—soon discovers that her new neighborhood is as dangerous as the one she left behind in Port-au-Prince, but thanks to her cousins’ tough reputations and a budding romance with a boy named Kasim, she finds a middle ground between worlds in which to machinate her mother’s release. Her relationship with Kasim is complicated, though, because his best friend Dray is her cousin Donna’s abusive, drug-dealing boyfriend. When her new life becomes challenging, Fabiola provides offerings to her Haitian spirits (lwa) and prays. When her cousins refer to it as voodoo, Fabiola explains that vodou is not sticking pins in dolls. It is the Haitian religion.

As Dray becomes more of a problem, flirting with her friend, beating her cousin Donna, and continually asking her boyfriend Kasim to do “favors” that she is convinced involve selling drugs, Fabiola succumbs to a detective’s request to inform on Dray in exchange for information about her mother. Fabiola hatches a plan that she hopes will take down Dray and get her mother freed, but at what price?

American Street is beautifully written. Contemporary issues—immigration, assimilation, violence, and drug culture—are filtered through Fabiola’s perceptive and sensitive narration, giving readers an often-frightening look at how elusive the American dream can be for anyone, but especially for immigrants. Zoboi, who emigrated to the United States from Haiti, brings humanity, tragedy, magic, and hope to this unforgettable story.

Far from the Tree

It is prom night, and sixteen-year-old Grace—an only child, adopted at birth—has long since broken up with her ex, Max, who is attending the prom with a new girlfriend. Grace is in the hospital, having a baby, whom she affectionately refers to as Peach. Max’s parents forced him to sign away his rights to the baby, and Grace has chosen to give her up for adoption. Following the birth and adoption of Peach (her new parents name her Milly), Grace decides that she wants to find her birth mother. Her open-minded adoptive parents support a reunion and immediately begin to help her with her quest. While her parents don’t know where Grace’s mother is, they do know she has a biological younger sister and possibly an older brother.

Grace and her parents meet her fifteen-year-old sister Maya at her home, which Grace refers to as a stone mansion. Maya is a snarky brunette in a household full of redheads. She was adopted by her parents a year before their biological daughter, Lauren, was born. On the surface, Maya appears confident, and she is open about her relationship with her girlfriend, Claire, but when she gets nervous, which is often, she can’t stop talking. She doesn’t, however, tell Grace everything. She doesn’t tell her that she often feels
Tree is an expertly told story that demonstrates that families can be messy, complicated, and yet fiercely devoted.

**The Hate U Give**

Starr Carter is a sixteen-year-old African American girl who lives in two conflicting worlds. Starr’s parents pay for her to attend Williamson Prep, a suburban, predominately White high school, so that she can receive a good education. She lives in Garden Heights, a poor, predominately Black neighborhood. Her father, Big Mav, is the neighborhood grocer and a former gang member trying to make a better life for his family. Her mother, Lisa, is a nurse whose greatest wish is to get her family out of Garden Heights. Rival gang battles and the loss of two childhood friends, one by a gang drive-by, the other by a cop, make Garden Heights an unsafe environment for Starr and her two brothers. Starr tells readers that at Williamson, “I don’t have to ‘play it cool’—I’m cool by default because I’m one of the only Black kids there. I have to earn coolness in Garden Heights” (11). As Starr attempts to navigate friendships at Williamson, she also must be careful to keep her school life separate from home, specifically the fact that her boyfriend is White.

As the story begins, Starr’s friend has asked her to attend a party in Garden Heights. Starr reluctantly agrees but worries that she will no longer fit in. She thinks, “I shouldn’t have come to this party. I’m not even sure I belong at this party. . . . There are just some places where it’s just not enough to be me” (3). Once there, Starr reunites with Khalil, one of her

less of a family member compared to Lauren, that her adoptive mother is an alcoholic, or that she is certain that it will only be a matter of time before her parents separate. Grace chooses to conceal her recent pregnancy, but despite their unshared secrets, the sisters’ initial meeting goes well, and they decide to search for their biological half-brother.

Joaquin is almost eighteen. He has endured seventeen failed foster-care placements and one failed adoption, and as a result, he finds himself unable to accept his current foster parents’ wish to adopt him. Joaquin’s deep-rooted fears surrounding commitment also cause him to break up with his longtime girlfriend. After seventeen years in the foster care system, Joaquin has learned not to trust himself or others and that his fears are best kept secret.

Once the three siblings reunite, Grace proposes her plan to find their birth mother, but both Maya and Joaquin resist the idea. During subsequent visits, Grace persists in her attempts to convince them to search. Maya and Joaquin both refuse because they believe that they were abandoned. Conversely, Grace hopes that discovering the reason her mother put her up for adoption will help validate her own actions with Peach. Each time they meet, the siblings find that they have much in common, and eventually they begin to share their own secrets. Joaquin opens up about his breakup with his girlfriend, and Maya shares details of her mother’s alcoholism and her breakup with Claire. Grace shares experiences with her new boy “friend” but remains reticent to tell her siblings that she did exactly what their birth mother did to each of them.

Family issues are handled realistically and with great sensitivity. Grace, Maya, and Joaquin are complex characters who are shaped by their DNA, their past, and their current family situations. The alternating third-person narrative is both empathetic and nonjudgmental. Benway exposes the souls of her characters as they wrestle to overcome feelings of inadequacy, abandonment, and betrayal. As they are connecting with each other, Grace, Maya, and Joaquin begin to form stronger relationships with their own families. Far from the
best childhood friends. Minutes later, shots ring out at the party. Khalil grabs Starr’s hand and leads her to his car. As the two old friends catch up on each other’s lives, police lights flash in Khalil’s rearview mirror. Moments later, Khalil is murdered, shot by a man Starr refers to as “Officer One-Fifteen.” Khalil was unarmed.

Khalil’s death becomes national news. He is referred to as a thug, a drug dealer, and a gangbanger. His murder is viewed as justified by many, including one of Starr’s friends at school. What actually happened in the moments leading to Khalil’s death? As the sole witness to the shooting, Starr is overwhelmed by the pressure to testify before a grand jury and the responsibility to speak out in Khalil’s memory. She worries about sharing her role in an investigation at school because she is not convinced that her Williamson friends will be sympathetic to her situation. In addition, after learning that Khalil was dealing drugs for a local gang leader to help support his family, Starr fears that she will place her family and community in harm’s way.

Angel Thomas’s debut novel is an astute and engrossing first-person perspective into the life of a teenager whose worlds collide over questions of police brutality, justice, and activism. Thomas brings humanity to every character—the victims of police brutality and the families and friends left behind. Starr’s voice commands attention and serves as a perceptive lens through which the author examines Khalil’s death, racism at Williamson, and Starr’s conflicted relationship with her White boyfriend.

_The Hate U Give_ is heartbreakingly topical. The situations and contexts are a grim reflection of the current environment in America and echo recent news stories about police brutality and racial injustice. Finally, the book’s title is a recurring theme throughout the story. As Khalil explains to Starr minutes before he is shot, THUG LIFE, according to Tupac Shakur—an acronym that was tattooed across Tupac’s stomach—stands for _The Hate U Give Little Infants F**ks Everybody_. Khalil explains it this way: “What society gives us as youth, it bites them in the ass when we wild out” (17).
Long Way Down

Long Way Down, told in free-verse narrative, is a raw and emotional depiction of urban violence. Two days ago, Shawn left his neighborhood and traveled into enemy territory to get his mother a bar of soap for her eczema. Shortly after he left, Shawn’s younger brother Will and his friend heard shots. They did what they had been trained to do: “Pressed our lips to the / pavement and prayed / the boom, followed by / the buzz of a bullet, / ain’t meet us. AFTER THE SHOTS / me and Tony / wait like we always do, / for the rumble to stop, / before picking our heads up / and poking our heads out / to count the bodies. / This time / there was only one / Shawn” (10–12).

Two days later, Will decides that he is obligated to follow the rules. Rules, he explains, that didn’t come from “my / brother, / his friends, / my dad / my uncle, / the guys outside, / the hustlers and shooters, / and definitely not from / me” (34). The rules are simply a part of the neighborhood: no crying, no snitching, revenge.

Will is certain that Riggs, a member of the Dark Suns gang, killed his brother. He finds the gun that is jammed into Shawn’s dresser, shoves it into the waistband of his shirt, and heads to the elevator in his building. He gets in the elevator at 9:08:02. Before he reaches the lobby, six ghosts, all figures from his past, enter the elevator. They are victims, perpetrators, or both, entangled in a chain of murder, misidentification, and revenge that eventually
led to Shawn's death. Together they challenge Will’s perspective on vigilante justice.

Floor by floor, the ghosts enter and share their stories. As they relate their tales, readers learn about the cycle of violence that has engulfed Will. The ride down spans a mere one minute and seven seconds, and as the seconds tick by and the floors count down, each new occupant challenges Will to face questions about his plan. Each stop of the elevator adds a new character and a new perspective on The Rules. The ghosts know each other. They are connected by a common thread—death. The history that once made them enemies is now overshadowed by their detachment from mortal issues. The ghosts, particularly Will’s uncle, father, and brother, care deeply about Will, and although they don’t give him specific advice on his current situation, they do tell stories and ask pointed questions that move Will to separate his anger and pride from the reality of the consequences associated with taking a human life.

The free-verse structure used in *Long Way Down* heightens the tension of the story. Readers will get a vivid picture of the people in Will’s life, all trying to cope with their environment while expressing the love, uncertainty, and hope that all humans share. Reynolds adeptly reveals the individual stories that led to this moment in the elevator. The ambiguous conclusion goes beyond the simple question of whether the protagonist will seek revenge. Ultimately, readers will root for Will to make the right choice, to slow down and take the time to grieve and reconsider his plan.

**We Are Okay**


Marin has made the decision to physically isolate herself in her rural New York first-year college dorm over Christmas break. Everyone has gone home to be with family for the holidays, and the only other human being on campus is Tommy, the groundskeeper. Marin has emotionally isolated herself as well. She spent her first semester of college trying to distance herself from her old life in California. Gramps, the man who raised her since she was three, has died, and instead of accepting support from her friends and the close-knit community where she lived, she fled across the country. She hasn’t spoken to anyone from San Francisco since the day she left through the backdoor of the local police station. Only Marin knows the truth about the weeks leading up to her abrupt departure.

Despite the physical and emotional distance she has created between herself and her recent past, Marin discovers that she is unable to escape her previous life. Her best friend, Mabel, has sent her texts—thousands of them—since she left, and though she feels guilty, Marin has ignored them all. Marin and Mabel had been acquaintances for three-and-a-half years as the summer following their senior year of high school approached, but during that summer, their friendship evolved into something deeper. Now, Mabel is coming to visit for three days, and Marin will be forced to face everything that’s been left unsaid and finally confront the loneliness that has engulfed her over the past three months.

Marin’s past unfolds through flashbacks that alternate with present-day events. Marin and her grandfather lived at the beach. Her mother died in a surfboard accident when Marin was a baby. Gramps, her mother’s father, becomes her legal guardian. He is kind to her, but in a detached way that Marin doesn’t really question, because it has become the norm. Their house is divided in half, Marin’s space and Gramps’s space. The kitchen, living room, and dining room are their common areas. They respect each other’s privacy. Busy with summer fun and her burgeoning relationship with Mabel, Marin is oblivious to the changes in Gramps’s health. One day, he simply disappears—some say they saw him walking into the ocean—and Marin finally enters his bedroom, where she discovers a secret room, the contents of which cause her to believe that her grandfather had been untruthful her entire life.
As the story develops, readers learn that immediately following Gramps’s disappearance, Marin called the police and was taken to the police station. When Mabel’s parents—who treat Marin as one of the family—arrive at the station to take her to their home, Marin slips out the backdoor and boards a bus to upstate New York with nothing but the shirt on her back, her cell phone, and her debit card.

Each chapter provides additional clues as to why Marin’s loneliness runs so deep. It is not just Gramps’s death that haunts her; it is what she discovers about his life that makes her question what was real. LaCour keeps these facts from readers for much of the novel, and though it may feel frustrating at times to be given so little, ultimately, the slow peeling of layers is rewarding. In the end, readers learn much more about Marin’s life, before and after, and understand that her loneliness is quite different from simply being alone.

We Are Okay is a heartfelt story of grief, secrets, and the power of friendship. Although Marin and Mabel are first-year college students, their storylines will be familiar to many high schoolers—single-parent family, finding one’s way in a new place, a failed romance, helping a friend. LaCour’s expertly paced, sensitive depiction of Marin’s turbulent inner life makes for a rich narrative. She juxtaposes the frigid and desolate settings of upstate New York with the vibrant sights and sounds of San Francisco to compare Marin’s alienation with the moments of joy she experienced in her former life. If you are wondering how it all turns out, look to the title. We Are Okay suggests a happy ending, but the journey is intense and often dark.

The authors of these award-winning novels adeptly create verisimilitude. This semblance of reality provides readers with opportunities to contemplate the complexities of lived experiences that differ from their own, from a safe distance. Classroom discussions on the contemporary issues raised in these stories can be designed to encourage critical text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections, which enhance reading motivation and comprehension.

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