Children’s Literature Reviews

2019 Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction for Children

Erika Thulin Dawes, Maria V. Acevedo-Aquino, Patrick Andrus, Bettie Parsons Barger, Donna Bulatowicz, Desiree W. Cueto, and Mary Lee Hahn

This children’s literature review column showcases the winners of the 2019 NCTE Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction for Children.

The Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction recognizes literature for children ages five to twelve that has the “potential to transform children’s lives by inviting compassion, imagination, and wonder.” Charlotte S. Huck, a former elementary school teacher who joined the faculty of education at The Ohio State University in 1955, believed that good literature should be at the heart and center of the elementary school curriculum. She established the first course in children’s literature at the university and went on to develop master’s and doctoral programs in children’s literature with a wide range of special topics.

In 1961, Huck published the first edition of Children’s Literature in the Elementary School with her colleague, Doris Kuhn. Now titled Charlotte Huck’s Children’s Literature, the book is in its 10th edition. Over the course of her career, Huck received numerous awards and honors, including membership in the Reading Hall of Fame. She served as President of NCTE and developed an annual children’s literature conference at The Ohio State University.

Charlotte Huck was convinced that if children found joy in books, they would want to learn to read and then read avidly. The Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction was established in 2014 to honor her contribution to children and teachers and to further the belief that distinctive literature has the potential to positively affect the lives of young people.

Winner

Sweep: The Story of a Girl and Her Monster
Written by Jonathan Auxier

“Sometimes, on nights when there was no food to eat, the girl and her Sweep used to make story soup” (p. 58). Eleven-year-old Nan Sparrow is a chimney sweep in Victorian London and now that she is orphaned and indentured to cruel Master Crudd, memories of her absent guardian’s stories sustain her, as does a small, strangely warm lump of coal (her char) that he has left her.

Life is gritty, exhausting, hunger-filled, and often short for the children who sweep the city’s chimneys. When working at a school, Nan becomes stuck in a flue. Her rival, Roger, does the unthinkable, lighting the fire beneath to force her with the “Devil’s Nudge” (p. 53). Magically, Nan is saved by her char, which has come to life. Taking full advantage of her supposed death, Nan moves into an empty mansion and begins to educate her char, now called Charlie, whom she now knows to
be a Golem. Befriended by Tobey, a mudlark (or riverbank scavenger) slightly older than she, and Miss Bloom, a teacher and activist against child labor, Nan inspires a May Day protest to expose the mistreatment of child chimney sweeps.

Rich with lyricism, metaphor, and literary references (including to Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Jewish folklore), Auxier’s storytelling is breathtaking. In a detailed Historical Note, Auxier describes *Sweep* as a “tangled knot of fantasy and fact” (n.p.). Readers will be appalled to learn that the conditions experienced by the “climbing boys” (and girls) were in fact even worse than Auxier portrays and will be intrigued to learn more about the time period using the suggested resources.

A grand adventure, a reflection on the human condition and our obligations to one another, and a “story soup” (p. 58) made of history, literature, activism, friendship, and love, *Sweep* will break your heart, then restore it to you more fully realized. (ETD)

**Honor Books**

*C*an I *T*ouch Your *H*air? Poems of Race, Mistakes, and Friendship

Written by Irene Latham and Charles Waters
Illustrated by Sean Qualls and Selina Alko

This thought- and conversation-provoking book represents the collaborative effort of two authors, Irene Latham and Charles Waters, and two illustrators, Sean Qualls and Selina Alko. Told through a series of paired poems, with each character’s perspective reflected on opposite pages, the book takes readers through the often uncomfortable space that precedes intercultural understanding and change. Charles is Black and Irene is White, and neither can imagine having anything in common. Yet when their teacher, Mrs. Vandenberg, assigns them to be writing partners, they are forced to consider all that makes them unique and similar. Vibrant, saturated acrylic and newsprint collage illustrations draw readers into the story world. Mirroring the text, the images reflect a gradual shift in each character’s
Half of the world’s 22.5 million refugees are children. Moved by news stories about displaced children and their struggles to find acceptance and new homes, author Nicola Davies penned a poem in the voice of a young girl refugee. First printed in *The Guardian*, the poem is now published as a picturebook, with sales benefiting the humanitarian organization Help Refugees. The text is spare and raw, opening with the arrival of war for the narrator: “I can’t say the words that tell you about the blackened hole that had been my home. All I can say is this: War took everything. War took everyone.” Rebecca Cobb’s illustrations in mixed media create appropriate intensity. Shading and color changes represent the fear, depression, and isolation experienced by the young narrator as she crosses mountains and ocean to reach a refugee camp. There, she is turned away from the local school by a teacher who tells her there are not enough chairs. A double-page spread depicts her huddled under a blanket, thoroughly overwhelmed by trauma. Hope is not completely lost, though—a local child arrives bearing a chair and a welcome. This clear call for compassion and action will not go unheard. (ETD)

Everything Else in the Universe
Written by Tracy Holczer

Can Lucy be her father’s missing arm? Tracy Holczer takes the reader back to the Vietnam era in this novel that explores recovery, resilience, and the ripple effects of PTSD. Lucy’s father has spent time overseas as a doctor in the Army. He is returning home early. Lucy is beyond excited about his return, but quickly realizes he has come home a different man, both physically and emotionally. As Lucy spends the summer of her father’s return with her quirky Italian relatives, she learns how to navigate a new world that includes a boy named Milo, a changed father, and a group of Vietnam veterans. This historical fiction novel grabs the reader’s attention, mind, and heart. The themes of family, friendship, war, and survival are explored with fine precision. Middle-grade readers...
will connect with Lucy and her determination to make life for her and her family right again. Lucy’s journey will leave a heart-print upon readers young and old. (PA)

Ghost Boys
Written by Jewell Parker Rhodes

Six decades after the brutal murder of Emmett Till, Rhodes introduces 12-year-old Jerome Rogers, who has been shot and killed by a White police officer. In this riveting novel, she brings the two boys together in the afterlife, allowing readers to see that the racial attitudes that led to Till’s death still exist today. Surrounded by scores of other ghost boys—including Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin—Emmett Till explains, “Somebody decided they didn’t like us. . . . We were a threat, a danger. A menace” (p. 160). Indeed, the officer responsible for Jerome’s death admits that he mistook the small boy for a 25-year old man, and his toy gun for a real weapon. Rhodes drives home the point that fear of and stereotypes about Black boys don’t make the world a better place. At the same time, she offers hope, as Sarah, the police officer’s daughter, becomes Jerome’s afterlife friend. Unlike her father, Sarah really sees and hears Jerome, and because she is alive and he is not, she has the power to create change in the world. (DWC)

Merci Suárez Changes Gears
Written by Meg Medina

Once again, Meg Medina delivers a strong female character who navigates and thrives in tough circumstances, while embracing the power of family and culture. Born into a Cuban American household and living with her extended family in a low-income housing compound that Mom named Las Casitas, sixth grader Merci navigates different cultural and socioeconomic worlds. Meanwhile, Merci and her high school brother attend a private school in an affluent neighborhood with scholarships. This kind of access pressures both children “to show everyone [at school] every day that they did the right thing accepting you” (p. 174). At home, life becomes complicated as grandfather Lolo, who has been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s after a violent incident, begins to forget names, faces, locations, and routines. The family must stay together to “respect how things change and adjust” (p. 202). Merci Suárez Changes
Gears is a story about compassion and hope that splendidly integrates Spanish dialogue into the English-language prose. Above all, it portrays a hard-working, intergenerational Latino family raising bicultural children ready to “take a deep breath and ride” through life (p. 355). (MA)

**Recommended Books**

**Alma and How She Got Her Name**

*Written and illustrated by Juana Martinez-Neal*


![Alma and How She Got Her Name](image)

Every name represents a story, a thought, a moment in life. Through her dad’s storytelling, Alma Sofia Esperanza José Pura Candela learns that her name stands for her family’s knowledge, abilities, passions, dreams, courage, and hopes for new beginnings. Her name means belonging to a family history that she is expected to contribute to. Juana Martinez-Neal created a most needed story about the importance of honoring, sharing, and celebrating a child’s name through compelling text and evocative illustrations. For example, Alma’s red-and-white striped pants could represent layers of meaning behind each name. Words in Spanish, embedded in the illustrations, provide windows into Alma’s Peruvian household. Books at home include titles like *Culturas Peruanas* and *Aves de Las Américas*. Alma draws a *perro* and a *chancho* (*cerdo*), and her maternal grandmother, Candela, marches with signs that read, “ESCUCHA,” “PIENSA,” and “¡DENUNCIA!” (Listen, think, speak up!). (MA).

**The Cardboard Kingdom**

*Written by Chad Sell*


![The Cardboard Kingdom](image)

Imagination and creation empower and unite sixteen neighborhood children. Using cardboard boxes, they transform their neighborhood into a magic kingdom. The children are delightfully and realistically diverse and are dealing with very relatable “demons,” such as parental assumptions and expectations, divorce, bullies, friendship, and entrepreneurial competition. After a summer filled with adventures, the book ends with the characters’ return to school. As they ride the bus towards school, each character from the summer of imaginative play runs beside or rides on top of the school bus, letting the reader know that the children’s imaginations will stay intact even as

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they begin a new school year. The book, a series of short stories in brightly colored graphic novel format, was created, organized, and drawn by Chad Sell with writing by ten other authors. (MLH)

**The Day You Begin**

*Written by Jacqueline Woodson*

*Illustrated by Rafael López*


Jacqueline Woodson encourages us to embrace our uniqueness and be brave enough to share our stories. When we take pride in who we are, what we eat, and where we’re from, we’re bound to find kindred spirits who appreciate us. Rafael López’s brightly colored multimedia illustrations (acrylic on wood, graphite pencil on vellum, watercolor splatters, and digital layering) capture not only the emotions of doubting oneself, feeling lonely, being misunderstood, and feeling left out, but also of the moments of self-confidence, discovery, connection, and camaraderie. The day you begin to embrace everything that makes you feel one-of-a-kind is the day you begin to find others who are eager to share their similarities with you. (MLH)

**Drawn Together**

*Written by Minh Lê*

*Illustrated by Dan Santat*


Language can build a wall, but art can tear it down. In this gorgeous picturebook, an English-speaking young boy spends the day with his Thai-speaking grandpa. At first, the language, cultural, and generational barriers seem insurmountable. Although they are saying nearly the same thing to each other, neither the boy nor the old man can understand the other. Then the boy takes out some paper and starts drawing his hero with markers. The grandpa brings out his sketchbook and starts drawing his hero with brushes and ink, “[a]nd in a FLASH—we see each other for the first time.” Santat’s mixed-media illustrations perfectly capture the emotions of the characters and their growing connection in this heartwarming story. Although this book is designed for early elementary children, all ages can appreciate the stunning pictures and beautiful messages. Art speaks every language. (DB)
**I Walk with Vanessa: A Story about a Simple Act of Kindness**  
Written and illustrated by Kerascoët  

At the end of her first day at a new school, Vanessa walks home alone. In fact, it has been a lonesome day. Instead of finding a friend, she finds unkind and hurtful words. A classmate sees the rude boy screaming at Vanessa and tells her friends. All of them are saddened by the way Vanessa was treated and walk home with their heads hung down. Fortunately, the next day, that classmate comes up with a plan—a small act of kindness. She gets her friends involved to walk with Vanessa to school. Thankfully, Vanessa finds that she is no longer alone. Kerascoët’s delightful ink and watercolor illustrations play with color and emotion in this wordless picturebook. They inspire readers to stand up for what’s right. They teach us that we walk toward friendship and community with every act of kindness. (BPB)

**Ivy Aberdeen’s Letter to the World**  
Written by Ashley Herring Blake  

Even before the tornado tears her world apart and she loses her home, Ivy feels out of place. Since the birth of twin brothers, her parents have little time for her. She withdraws from her family and best friend, pouring everything into her sketchbook. Ivy’s most important—and most secret—drawings are of herself holding hands with another girl. Ivy is frantic when her sketchbook goes missing at the shelter. Someone finds it and slides the drawings one at a time into Ivy’s locker along with encouraging messages. Who is leaving the messages? Is it her crush? Ivy’s journey through the trauma of losing home, the joy and confusion of a first crush, and the courage to speak her truth are sensitively and warmly portrayed in this beautiful novel. (DB)

**Lifeboat 12**  
Written by Susan Hood  

Imagine being twelve years old, having a stepmother who doesn’t want you, and living amidst a war raging throughout Europe. The next thing you know, you are one of 90 children...
who are being shipped to Canada on the SS City of Benares. Life on the ship is actually an improvement because the food is better than anything rations can buy, there is freedom to roam the ship, and your friends are with you. Just as you are adjusting to the idea of spending the war in Canada, torpedoes hit. You scramble aboard Lifeboat 12 and find yourself adrift at sea with four friends, one woman, and 40 strangers. Based on the true story of World War II survivor Ken Sparks, Hood’s extensive research and eloquent verse tell of fear, hunger, and the power of story. (BPB)

Sometimes friends just need us to sit beside them and listen. This seems like it should be an easy lesson to learn, but many humans, and animals, don’t seem to grasp the concept. Taylor is a young child experiencing great frustration and looking for a friend to help him deal with it. All his animal friends have suggestions to solve the problem, but none of them seem quite right for Taylor. It isn’t until Rabbit appears that the solution becomes crystal-clear. The Rabbit listens. What may seem like a simple story at first glance is a deeply moving and tender story about what friends can do for others during their time of need, frustration, or loss. With simple, colorful, child-friendly digital-ink illustrations that complement a profound message, this is a story for all ages that will lead the reader to moving discussions and comfort. (PA)

**The Rabbit Listened**
Written and illustrated by Cori Doerrfeld

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**Erika Thulin Dawes** (ETD), Committee Chair and NCTE member since 1999, is professor of language and literacy at Lesley University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. **Maria V. Acevedo-Aquino** (MA), NCTE member since 2012, is an assistant professor of early childhood education and care at University of Massachusetts, Boston. **Patrick Andrus** (PA), NCTE member since 2015, is a fourth-grade teacher in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. **Bettie Parsons Barger** (BPB), NCTE member since 2005, is an assistant professor of elementary and literacy education at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina. **Donna Bulatowicz** (DB), NCTE member since 2013, is an assistant professor at Montana State University Billings in Billings, Montana. **Desiree W. Cueto** (DWC), NCTE member since 2010, is an assistant professor of literacy at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington. **Mary Lee Hahn** (MLH), NCTE member since 1990, is a fifth-grade teacher at Daniel Wright Elementary in Dublin, Ohio.