

Winners in *My Book*

I have a recurring dream: I am at the podium announcing the names of the winners and handing out the prizes. No, not at the Academy Awards. I have been named Queen of the Awards for Young Adult Literature, and I am front and center as I announce the winners.

In reality, most of the awards are decided by committees comprised of folks who know a great deal about the field of YA literature and who spend many hours each day reading books. Imagine the book discussions these committees have! I would love to be a fly on the wall as they present their case for the books that should be honored. Instead, I will have to console myself with the list that follows. Here are some of my favorite books from the past year; other favorites appeared in the September issue of *VM*. These outstanding books break new ground, discuss hitherto taboo topics, and present fresh, exciting new voices for readers. Will they win awards? Time will tell. However, they are already winners with readers.

Pushing the Envelope: Books with Unusual Styles and Formats

Breathing Underwater. Alex Flinn. HarperCollins, 2001. 263 pp. Sixteen-year-old Nick, convicted of hitting his former girlfriend, is instructed by the judge to write a journal. In this diary of sorts, he talks frankly about his inability to control his temper.

Fat Camp Commandos. Daniel Pinkwater. Scholastic, 2001. 96 pp. This is another graphic novel (texts in comic-book format). The zany humor is

perfect for middle school readers looking for some light, fun reading. Don't dismiss it too easily, though, as there are plenty of tongue-in-cheek jokes for grown-up readers, too. Join two overweight campers as they attempt to dethrone the leader of their fat camp, Dick Tator.

For Better, for Worse: A Guide to Surviving Divorce for Preteens and Their Families. Janet Bode and Stan Mack. Simon and Schuster, 2001. 160 pp. The title pretty much says it all. Bode presents the true stories of children and teens whose lives have been touched by divorce. This is a must-have in the school library collection. Be certain to recommend this book to the school counselor as well.

On the Bright Side, I Am Now the Girlfriend of a Sex God. Louise Rennison. HarperCollins, 2001. 243 pp. This is the sequel to the 2001 Printz Honor Medalist, *Angus, Thongs and Full Frontal Snogging*. Georgia Nicholson is back for another round of complaining about her awful parents interspersed with loving observations about her new boyfriend, aka The Sex God.

Witness. Karen Hesse. Scholastic, 2001. 161 pp. A brilliantly conceived and written novel told in verse, Hesse uses nine points of view to tell about the Klan's arrival in a New England town in the 1900s. The characters are young and old, black and white, central and peripheral. The use of antique photographs to present the characters will help students enter more fully into the story.

Breaking Topic Taboos

Black Angels. Rita Murphy. Delacorte, 2001. 163 pp. In the summer of 1961, Celli notices angels

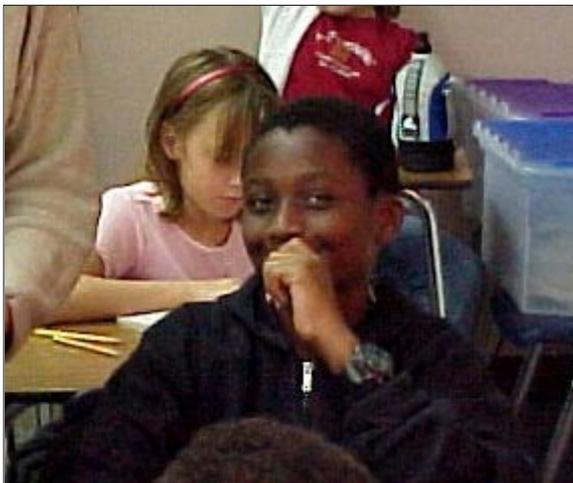
no one else can see. Perhaps the angels are in Celli's life for a reason? Tie this book to Christopher Paul Curtis's *The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963*, for an interesting text set.

Of Sound Mind. Jean Ferris. Farrar Straus Giroux, 2001. 224 pp. Theo is the only hearing person in his family. As a result of this, he has been the chief means of communication for his deaf parents and brother. When he meets Ivy, he discovers a friend in a similar situation. What makes this book stand out are two aspects of the story: There are no stereotypical hearing-impaired characters here; additionally, the signing conversations are set in different type, allowing the reader to follow the conversation.

The Rag and Bone Shop. Robert Cormier. Delacorte, 2001. 128 pp. This is Cormier's final novel and is vintage Cormier. Jason is a young man facing a clever police interrogator who will not stop until he secures a confession about a brutal murder. How far is Trent, the interrogator, willing to go for a conviction? The ending is haunting and unexpected.

Distinctive Voices

Anna Casey's Place in the World. Adrian Fogelin. Peachtree, 2001. 224 pp. Anna has been shuttled from home to home since the death of her parents. She hopes this next home may become per-



manent, even if it means sharing it with scrawny little Eb. Anna works hard coaching Eb in how to survive the foster care system. All Eb cares about is being reunited with his mother.

Caleb's Story. Patricia MacLachlan. HarperCollins, 2001. 116 pp. Another of the stories from *Sarah Plain and Tall*, this novel opens with Anna headed off to town to assist the town doctor. She gives a journal to Caleb and instructs him to keep an accounting of the experiences on the farm in her absence. One of the first entries in Caleb's journal tells of a mysterious visitor to the farm. This older man will have a profound effect on Jacob and Sarah and their family.

Cirque du Freak. Darren Shan. Little Brown, 2001. 266 pp. Darren is lured to an abandoned house one evening to see what is billed as a one-of-a-kind freak show. What he sees that night alters the course of his life and of those he loves most. When Darren steals one of the performing animals, he incurs the wrath of Crepsley, a vampire. *The Vampire's Assistant* (Little Brown, 2001) tells what happens next in Darren's changed life. For those students who yearn to read Stephen King and other adult horror novelists, this novel will satisfy the blood thirst without concerns about more mature content.

Crazy Loco. David Rice. Dial, 2001. 135 pp. This collection of stories, set in Texas's Rio Grande Valley, covers the gamut from pets to relatives to school, all with a fresh new outlook. There are so few books with Hispanic settings and characters. This story collection is a must-have for those striving for a more multicultural collection.

Dancing in the Cadillac Light. Kimberly Willis Holt. Putnam, 2001. 167 pp. Whenever life closes in on Jaynell, she simply climbs inside one of the cars in the local parts junkyard. There she can pretend to flee from the chaos and struggle that is a daily part of her existence. Holt, whose *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town* was the 2000 National Book Award winner, once again demonstrates her pow-

erful talent with character development. The prose sings in this quiet coming-of-age novel.

Don't You Know There's a War On? Avi. Harper-Collins, 2001. 200 pp. As World War II rages overseas, those at home make the necessary adjustments to their lives as well. Howie and his best friend Denny are on the lookout for spies. What they discover instead is a secret about their favorite teacher. The boys must face their fears in order to save her job. Avi has a deft hand when developing characters such as Howie and Denny. They are real boys, friends who fight from time to time but remain loyal to one another when the going gets tough. The dialogue sounds more like eavesdropping in a typical classroom despite the historical setting.

A Group of One. Rachna Gilmore. Holt, 2001. 192 pp. Tara gains new pride in her Indian heritage when she learns of her grandmother's involvement in the "Quit India Movement." This first novel, set in Canada, explores issues as wide ranging as family conflict and racism. Indian characters are often underrepresented in literature. Here is a nice addition for the multicultural collection in your classroom. World History teachers might find this book valuable as well.

No More Dead Dogs. Gordon Korman. Hyperion, 2000. 124 pp. Wallace Wallace has vowed that he

will read no more books in which a dog dies. When his teacher requires a book report on *Old Shep, My Pal*, Wallace responds with his honest appraisal. The results are utterly unpredictable and utterly hilarious. If you are looking for a humorous read-aloud, look no further.

Shipwreck. Gordon Korman. Scholastic, 2001. 129 pp. Six kids board a sailing vessel. They have been sent along on this journey in order to learn more about themselves. A sudden storm and a shipwreck cause a handful of teens to face incredible odds. This first book in a projected series ends with the six landing on a deserted island. More adventures are sure to follow. This slender novel is a good one for reluctant readers looking for some adventure.

Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants. Ann Brashares. Delacorte, 2001. 304 pp. One pair of pants and four friends make for a memorable summer in this quirky coming-of-age story. How is it possible that the same pair of pants so perfectly suits four very different young women? They must possess some magical power. As the pants travel from friend to friend over the summer, the pants witness events that are comic, tragic, bittersweet, and evocative. This marvelous concept of the traveling pants allows Brashares to tell the story from multiple points of view.

Teri S. Lesesne is associate professor at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas. She can be reached at LIS_TSL@shsu.edu.