

Talking about Books

Books for Summer Reading

CATHY BECK, SUSIE BARGIEL, DICK
KOBLOITZ, ANNE O'CONNOR, KATHRYN
MITCHELL PIERCE, AND SUSAN WOLF

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This month's Talking about Books column, the last before the school year, suggests some children's books that LA readers could add to their summer reading lists.

What do you like to read in the summer? How do you choose a book for summer reading?

We asked students in Susan Wolf's fifth-grade class to respond to these two questions. As a whole class, Susan's students brainstormed the types of books they would choose to read in the summer. Some of their contributions were by genre, Michael (age 11) told us, "I really like to read mysteries—good ones where you have to work to find out the answer." Other suggestions were by author: Sarah (age 11) explained,

Three years ago, no two, no three, my teacher read us a Roald Dahl book and I really liked it. So in summer, when I want a good book, I just look for something by Roald Dahl because I know it's gonna be good. Like, I've read *The Twits* (1980), *The BFG* (1982)—now that was really funny—and, uhm, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), and . . . I can't remember the titles but they were all good books.

Next, a group of students typed up the brainstormed list and distributed it to fourth- and fifth-grade students in their school. Students were asked to mark their top three choices for summer reading. Results were tabulated, yielding the following Top Ten list for summer books:

- First place: Scary books
- Second place: Mysteries
- Third place: Roald Dahl books
- Fourth place: Humorous books
- Fifth place: R. L. Stine books
- Sixth place: Science fiction books
- Seventh place: Sports Books
- Eighth place: Realistic fiction books and Boxcar Children books
- Ninth place: Nonfiction books
- Tenth place: Hardy Boys

It seems kids want to shake in their boots or roll on the floor laughing! These experienced readers were quite articulate in explaining their reasons for each decision. One reader who had voted for mysteries and good realistic fiction books explained,

"I like mysteries . . . but not really scary ones or gross ones. I don't like things like *Goosebumps* where they're scary and gory. . . ."

"They aren't scary," another reader disagreed, "They're really fun. I've got . . . thirty . . . two, no thirty-eight of them and I've read them all . . . and . . ."

"Well . . . not *Goosebumps* . . ." interjected a third reader, "but I do like to read mysteries, too. I like really good books with good plots and good description and good characters . . . and good action kinds of things."

We invited these students, along with other students in each of our classrooms, to join us in selecting and commenting upon books for summer reading.

With the time pressures of a regular school year behind us and the new year not quite a reality, we can dust off the books that have waited patiently to give us pleasure and without guilt, immerse ourselves in one of life's greatest pleasures—reading. Summer allows unfettered time for us to explore the journeys of others as they make their way through life, permitting us to witness their adventures, their fun, and their sometimes troubling experiences. Sometimes the leisurely pace of summer allows us to reflect on the troubling issues that affect many of our children. This month, we present books that will fill your summer with fun and whimsy, yet, give insight into children's lives.

SUMMER EXPERIENCES

Summer finds children traveling, attending camp, playing with friends, riding bicycles, and engaging in other activities that often occupy a good deal of their time. Short stories are one genre of literature that many children find appealing as they try to balance reading with other summer pursuits. Newbery Award winner Jerry Spinelli's *The Library Card* (1997) is a particularly appropriate collection of four short stories, each about a small blue library card that changes the lives of four children in very different, but uplifting ways. For example, in one story, Mongoose and his friend Weasel spend much of their free time shoplifting, spray painting graffiti on buildings and trees, and standing on top of an apartment rooftop looking down and dreaming about their futures when they will be free of school. But one day, Mongoose walks into a library with a blue card he has found and his life takes a decidedly different turn from that of his friend Weasel. A mysterious and mystical blue library card is the common thread that runs through all four stories. Spinelli's masterful storytelling demonstrates the wonders inhabiting library shelves and the power of books to change lives. It would make a great book for summer reading—for students, parents, teachers or librarians!

Poet Michael J. Rosen has written five very moving and heartwarming short stories in a collection entitled *The Heart*

Is Big Enough (1997). Each story is about a preadolescent who shows extraordinary determination, confidence, and perseverance. Matthew, an expert on dolphins, comes to appreciate his physical disability as he realizes his dream of swimming with a dolphin one summer in Florida. While visiting her grandmother in Ohio during summer vacation, Frayda begins to share her Nana Clara's love of gardening. By also loving the garden next door to her grandmother's house and the forgotten and cast-off people to whom it belongs, she learns that a green thumb can lead to a green and growing heart. The children who are the main characters in these short stories are all changed as they experience the power of love, caring, and selflessness.

This book would complement Sarah Stewart's *The Gardener* (1997). Young Lydia Grace Finch also learns that a garden can be a powerful means of changing a person's heart and spirit. Lydia must temporarily leave her mother, father, and grandmother and travel alone to the big city to live with her uncle during the Depression. Uncle Jim, who operates a bakery, never smiles. But Lydia's love and talent for gardening ultimately produces a rooftop secret that causes her Uncle Jim to smile in a way that surprises even Lydia. Written as a series of short letters to her family back home, Stewart's picture book shows the power of beauty in transforming the heart. Husband David Small's watercolor illustrations show the authenticity of the time period and the power of color and beauty to lift the spirit. Anna (age 8) wrote, "I liked the book because it's like a diary. The cover makes it look like a great book." Ted (age 9) agreed, saying, "I also like the way Sarah Stewart, the author, made each page of writing a letter to Uncle Jim or her grandma, father, and mother. It was a really unique way to tell the story. I thought the book was really great!"

Dick King-Smith has written a whimsical and light-hearted short chapter book entitled *A Mouse Called Wolf* (1997). The hero of the story is Wolfgang Amadeus Mouse. Nicknamed Wolf for short, he is the youngest and smallest of the thirteen children of Mary Mouse. Unlike the short, common names of his twelve brothers and sisters, Wolf was given a long name by his mother to make up for his small size. Wolf can sing, too! Through his gift for learning melodies, he makes friends with Mrs. Honeybee, the owner of the house where Wolf and his family live, and a former concert pianist. A lonely widow for many years, Mrs. Honeybee befriends Wolf and teaches him new songs. When Mrs. Honeybee has an accident, Wolf is finally able to repay her kindness by using his voice to seek help. Pencil sketches by Jon Goodell illustrate the easy to read, large print text. Michael (age 8) commented, "There are eleven chapters in this book and I read them all in one night!" This would be a wonderful book to read on a summer day while lying on the beach or under the shade of a tree.

Summer can be a magical time for children as they enjoy the freedom from homework and school routines. Extended

visits with grandparents that are not possible at any other time often provide adventures as well as new experiences, and they often build lifelong memories during the long summer vacation months. Jean Van Leeuwen's new picture book *Touch the Summer Sky* (1997) is a simple story of a family's week-long summer visit to Grandma and Grandpa's cabin by a lake. Luke and his brother Pete enjoy swimming, hiking, and fishing for a huge grandfather fish on warm, sunny days. Even on one rainy day, the joys of building a fire and popping popcorn, playing dominoes, drawing pictures, and listening to Grandpa tell stories evoke a nostalgia for a simpler time. On their last evening at the cabin, Luke and his mother are sitting outside looking up at the sky when they see a shooting star. Luke closes his eyes and makes a wish. Jean Van Leeuwen invites her readers to ponder the human interactions and genial experiences of the family's summer trip to their grandparents when Luke asks, "Can you guess what I wished for?" Full page oil paintings by illustrator Dan Andreasen show the uncomplicated and timeless joys and activities of a family's summer visit to Grandma and Grandpa's cabin.

Michael Foreman's *Seal Surfer* (1997) is a beautiful book of friendship and survival between a young boy and a seal. The simple text spans two and a half years in the life of Ben, who loves the ocean, seals, fishing, and surfing. Ben witnesses the birth of a baby seal and, as time passes, he and the seal pup develop a special relationship. After the seal rescues Ben from a deadly wave during a surfing adventure, Ben develops a greater appreciation for the ocean. Divided into short sections that follow the seasons, English author and illustrator Michael Foreman has created a picture book that invites readers to think about the interdependence of all life on Earth as well as the passage of time and renewal of life. "On every page I had to stop to look at the wonderful pictures," said Charles (age 9). "Every time I finished a page, I was excited to see another great picture! No matter what book Michael Foreman writes or illustrates, I know it will be good." This book would be a good companion to the dolphin story in Michael J. Rosen's *The Heart Is Big Enough*. The two stories have many similarities, both on and below the surface.

Freedom's Gifts—A Juneteenth Story (1997) by Valerie Wesley and *Read For Me, Mama* (1997) by Vashanti Rahaman are two new picture books that explore an historical and a contemporary perspective on African American life. In *Freedom's Gifts*, June loves Juneteenth, a holiday that commemorates the emancipation of African American slaves in Texas. Though officially set free by Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, African Americans in Texas did not realize their freedom until June 19, 1865, when General Gordon Granger landed on Galveston Island and proclaimed freedom for all those enslaved. June's cousin Lillie is visiting from New York City, but does not think much of an "old-timey" celebration like Juneteenth. Reluctantly, Lillie attends the big parade and picnic with June and her family. She realizes the importance and significance of the day as June's

Great-Great Aunt Marshall tells both girls what life was like as a young slave. Sharon Wilson's pastel illustrations beautifully capture the excitement and "old-timey" feeling of Valerie Wesley's story set in 1943. Charles (age 9) commented,

I read slowly to look for metaphors and her great way of describing. The beautiful metaphors and pictures made me read on. It was wonderfully written. The pictures and the writing are very eye-catching. Valerie Wesley and Sharon Wilson make a wonderful team! I hope you will enjoy this book as much as I did.

Read For Me, Mama (1997) is the story of a young boy, named Joseph, and his mother and how each learns an important lesson. Joseph loves books and gets to take two home from the school library each week—one book easy enough for him to read alone and one harder book for someone else to read aloud to him. Joseph would love his mama to read to him, but she always seems to be too busy. One Sunday evening while attending church, Joseph hears his mama praying for help so she can learn to read and share books with her son. With Joseph's help and a special reading class, Mama learns to read and begins to share the joy of stories with Joseph. Lori McElrath-Eslick's strong, warm oil paintings illustrate Rahaman's sensitively told story of the power of literacy as a bond between parent and child. "It was a breath-taking-away story," wrote Anna (age 9). "It is harder for adults to learn to read than a child. I think the message was perseverance." *Read For Me, Mama* would make a great companion book to Eve Bunting's *The Wednesday Surprise* (1989).

TRIPS AND JOURNEYS

Journey is a theme that cuts across and gives meaning to our lives. Journeys are a part of all human experience—journeys of discovery, adventure, imagination, and dreams. Literature can provide the documentation of these journeys. Children wonder with, respond to, and learn from people, real and imaginary, in books that share this common theme of "journey." Susie Bargiel shared these books with the students in her multiage intermediate classroom and recorded their responses.

Underground Train (1997), by award-winning author Mary Quattlebaum and illustrated by Cat Bowman Smith, takes readers on an amazing subway trip on the Washington D.C. Metro. The story unfolds through the narrative of a young girl on her way to visit her grandmother across town. We hear and feel the excitement of the high speed trip underground; Devin (age 9) said, "I like the sounds of the trains and the city. I like the onomatopoeia!" As the Metro races along below ground, we are allowed also to experience the parallel upper world, crowded with people working and playing among the "tangled streets and shops, cars, buildings, flags, clocks" (unpaged) of the busy city. The total effect of Quattlebaum's text and Smith's active illustrations is one of life filled with movement and joy.

Tighten your seat belts for a different sort of high speed adventure in Dan Yaccarino's *Zoom! Zoom! Zoom! I'm Off to the Moon!* (1997). Adults and young readers alike will be transported through space with the rhythmic and internally rhymed story of a young boy's voyage to the moon, from lift-off to homecoming. The circular construction of this story gives children a feeling of closure. Natalie (age 9) commented, "I liked the beginning and the end, because it is kind of like he completed his journey." The text layout and big bright illustrations (reminiscent of Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon*, 1947), effectively combine to make this book perfect for shared reading, particularly for younger readers.

Little Lucy takes a very different journey into the woods in Irene Haas' *A Summertime Song* (1997). A frog jumps through Lucy's window one fine summer evening and invites her to a birthday party. Along with the invitation comes a magic, paper party hat for Lucy to wear. A moonbeam touches the hat and Lucy becomes leaf-sized. The joy and discoveries made during the journey itself are a fine complement to the magical, happy ending. The lyrical text and lush full color paintings move readers, young and old alike, into the fantasy world of *A Summertime Song* where they make discoveries of their own, along with Lucy and her friends. Courtney (age 6) poured over this book all summer long—enjoying the detailed illustrations as she worked to read the rich text on her own.

The following historical fiction titles powerfully capture the challenges of travel in earlier times. Dreams sustain many weary travelers as in Elizabeth Van Steenwyk's *My Name Is York* (1997). The Lewis and Clark expedition is the backdrop for this thought-provoking story of the slave, York, who traveled with his owner Captain William Clark to explore the new lands of the Louisiana Purchase. Students in Susie Bargiel's classroom were moved by the paradox inherent in York's life: he was part of young America's quest for knowledge and instrumental in helping others realize their dreams, yet he never realized his own dream of equality and freedom. Bill Farnsworth's richly hued paintings lend historical authority to York's story of exploration and dreams. *My Name Is York* is an excellent alternative source for research on the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Patricia C. McKissack's novel, *Run Away Home* (1997), brings to life the difficult times of the 1880's as the Apaches are being relocated and White supremacist groups continue to threaten African Americans in the south. McKissack, a master storyteller, connects these two events in this finely woven book. Sarah Crossman, an 11 year old, who has both African American and Native



American ancestry, spots Sky, an Apache boy, escaping from a train bound for a reservation in Florida. Having heard the horror stories of slavery, Sarah is determined not to turn this boy in. When she finds him with a high fever, she has to betray her promise in order to save his life. The close-mindedness of the nation and the open-mindedness of Sarah's family is a powerful contrast in this exceptional book.

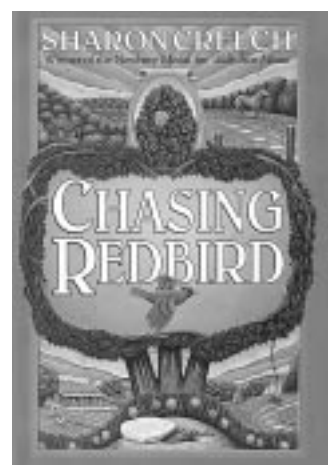
"Tomorrow our journey begins." So opens Patricia Witmann's *Buffalo Thunder* (1998), a panoramic story of a boy and his family traveling west in a Prairie Schooner. While the adults struggle with the hardships of life on the trail, young Karl Isaac is focused on one thing, seeing the fierce and wild buffaloes. In boldly poetic language, Witmann builds excitement and then fear as the sounds of thunder in the distance become the earth-shaking reality of a buffalo stampede. Translucent illustrations by Bert Dodson complement Witmann's informative and entertaining text, often highlighting the contrast between Karl's naive enthusiasm for adventure and his parents' worries about the very real dangers of westward travel.

The Divide (1997), by Michael Bedard and illustrated by award-winner Emily Arnold McCully, is the story of Willa Cather's move with her family to the wide open prairie land of Nebraska, in 1883. Adapting to a life so different than the life she had previously known, is a journey of self-discovery for the young Cather. Willa learns to love and celebrate the stark beauty of the American Prairie as she and her family settle into their new lives. This book, with its stunning art, would serve as a good companion piece to *Prairie Songs* (1985) by Pam Conrad, *Sarah, Plain and Tall* (1985) by Patricia MacLachlan, and *Lottie's Dream* (1992) by Bonnie Pryor. See also Bedard's stunning biography of Emily Dickinson, *Emily* (1992).

Chasing Redbird (1997), by Sharon Creech, provides a more complicated journey as Zinnia Taylor throws herself into clearing an overgrown settler's trail as she takes a journey through the many miles it covers. Her journey is both physical and spiritual as Zinnia learns that the mysteries of the trail are connected with mysteries in her family that have

haunted her for some time. In the process, she learns about the love of her parents, the love between her aunt, uncle, and cousin Rose, and the love between Jake and herself.

Having read and enjoyed two of Creech's earlier books, *Walk Two Moons* (1994) and *Absolutely Normal Chaos* (1995), one of Susan's fifth-grade students, Shannon, was drawn to select



Chasing Redbird on the reputation of author Sharon Creech. Shannon said she liked Creech's books because of the "mystery and romance." She also liked that some characters were found in all three books. Shannon remarked that neither the title nor the cover would have motivated her to select this book, but she says the cover offers many secrets to what the book contains, now that she has read the book. The map on the back cover and inside the book "would have really been helpful if I had noticed them." Shannon remarked that *Chasing Redbird* was her favorite of the three because she liked the mystery of finding Aunt Jessie's coat in the cabin and the scariness of stealing the horse to take Uncle Ned up the path.

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FAMILY EXPERIENCES

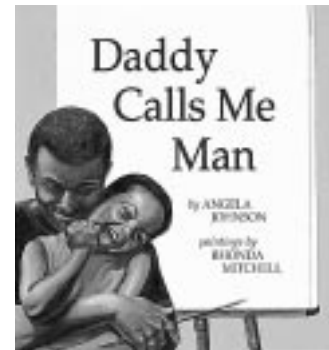
For many of us, summer is a time to connect with family members—those with whom we share our lives each day as well as those who travel from far away to share summer traditions. Summer can bring a more leisurely lifestyle including more time for families to spend with each other in their own backyards, on outings to local attractions, on visits with relatives and on vacations to faraway places. These experiences often provide children with memories that last a lifetime.

In *Miz Berlin Walks* (1997), Jane Yolen tells a story of her own grandmother, Fanny Berlin, to whom she dedicates the book. Mary Louise, a young girl of six or seven, watches from her porch each evening as old Miz Berlin walks past talking or singing to herself. When curiosity gets the better of her, Mary Louise leaves the safety of her porch and follows Miz Berlin who, without missing a beat, launches into a story of hunting crawdads in the creek and feathers raining from the sky. The story continues to the corner, as far as Mary Louise's mama lets her venture. As she joins Miz Berlin each evening, stories unfold and Mary Louise is drawn into the tales she's hearing—about ships on the bay, the hurricane of '48, and Miz Berlin's own birth. Mary Louise races home after each walk "stuffed full of tales which I told over and over to my dolly before falling asleep in order to keep ahold of them" (unpaginated). Then, one day, Miz Berlin doesn't come. Mary Louise must cope with her loss, but the reader is left with the notion that Mary Louise has taken up the wonderful legacy given to her by Miz Berlin. Warm and glowing oil-wash paintings by Floyd Cooper, winner of the 1995 Coretta Scott King Award, add to this story of intergenerational friendship and the power of storytelling.

Another book by Jane Yolen, *Nocturne* (1997), presents an inviting bedtime story that many children can relate to with ease—that of exploring the backyard on a summer's night. Anne Hunter's pen-and-ink, water-color, and colored pencil illustrations immerse us in the blue velvet of night as Yolen's words take us on this adventure with parent and child exploring the mysteries of the nocturnal world. With flashlight in hand, they view the star-filled night sky, the moths by the porch light, the lightning bugs blinking in the Queen Anne's

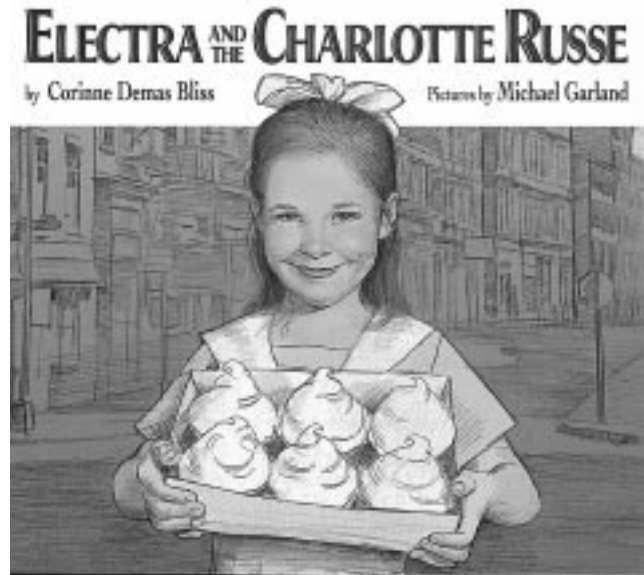
Lace, the owl swooping from his perch high in a tree before climbing into a cozy bed and drifting off to sweet dreams of nighttime creatures. A great way to end the day!

In *Daddy Calls Me Man* (1997), Angela Johnson, another Coretta Scott King Award Winner, uses four short verses to communicate a little boy's feelings about his daddy, mama, and sisters. In each verse, a painting by his parents inspires Noah to compare his shoes to Daddy's, spin with his older sister, wonder about the moon, or share with his baby sister. With just a few words Johnson conveys the strength and love in this family of artists. Rhonda Mitchell's big, bold oil paintings present interesting perspectives as Noah lines up his shoes beside Daddy's or looks down on his baby sister in her playpen and shares with her. He tells us that because he is a caring brother, "Mama calls me sweetheart and Daddy calls me man" (unpaginated).



Parents and siblings of multiples will certainly enjoy Eve Bunting's playful looks at twins and their impact on the family. In *Twinnies* (1997), big sister tells us that the worst thing about having twin sisters is that there are two of them. They need two of everything, they take up lots of space, and they're "twice as much work" for mom. When the family goes out for a walk or goes to the beach, the twinnies get all the attention. Big sister laments the fact that the twins are girls and that she's no longer Daddy's special girl. But she finds out that the twinnies also bring lots of joy and laughter to the family and that her special place in her parents' hearts is secure. Nancy Carpenter's oil paintings capture both the delights and challenges of raising twins. This book brought back many fond memories for Anne O'Connor, who is a mother of fourteen-year-old twin boys. "I vividly remember having that feeling of being 'overwhelmed' and wishing that I had a few more arms, just like the mother in this book." Pair this book with *Dragon Scales and Willow Leaves* (1994), by Terryl Givens, in which twins Rachel and Jonathon share a walk in the woods near their home, but have two very different experiences.

The following two picture books provide insights into the lives of their authors and affirm the value of parents and grandparents passing on the stories of their youth by sharing them with others. In *Electra and the Charlotte Russe* (1997), Corrine Bliss shares a story about her own mother as a young Greek girl in the Bronx during the 1920s. Mama is having guests for a special tea on Saturday morning. Electra is given six nickels and sent to the bakery to procure six *charlotte russes*, a special dessert of little round cakes topped with swirls of luscious whipped cream. With admonitions from



mama not to lose the money and to come straight home, Electra sets off for the bakery. She counts out her nickels for Mrs. Zimmerman who carefully takes each charlotte russe out of the case and gently places it in a box for Electra. As she walks home quickly so the cream won't spoil, she trips over a cat and three of the desserts are crushed. Electra invents a solution that will delight young readers! The party goes on and the guests enjoy their desserts, none the wiser. Michael Garland's beautiful digital paintings are the icing on *this* cake.

In *Marven of the Great North Woods* (1997), Kathryn Lasky tells the story of her own father's journey to a lumber camp when he was only ten. Marven's parents arrange to send him from Duluth, Minnesota, to a camp in the great forests around Bemidji to escape the influenza epidemic that is sweeping the country. As he steps off the train, alone and apprehensive, Marven heads off across the empty landscape on his five-mile ski trek to the camp where he will work for four months for his father's friend, Mr. Murray. Marven settles into the routine of living in the camp and doing his jobs. After a while he begins to explore the surrounding woods, develops a friendship with Jean Louis, a lumberjack, and becomes an accepted member of the camp. As the snow begins to melt in April, Mr. Murray tells Marven that it's time for him to return to his family. This time Marven is accompanied on the trip to the station by his new friend, Jean Louis. Kevin Hawkes does an excellent job of evoking the vastness and majesty of the great north woods.

THE LIVES OF CHILDREN IN TROUBLED TIMES

Summer is not all fun and games for many children. Sometimes summer represents a time when children, without the support of caring teachers in the safe environment of school, feel more lost and alone than at any other time of year. Every

day, some children face tough issues: abuse, alienation, peer pressure, family and social problems, and social expectations that place incredible demands on them. Because summer offers readers a respite and shelter from the daily reminders that children do not lead enchanted lives, perhaps it is the best time to read contemporary realistic fiction which can so graphically depict real life issues. Sometimes readers are comforted to know that children of the past also dealt with tough times, and survived.

In *Out of the Dust* (1997), author Karen Hesse proves again that she's willing to take risks in storytelling forms. Through a series of narrative poems, Hesse details one year in the life of 14 year-old Billie Jo Kelby as she comes of age in the Oklahoma Panhandle during the Great Depression. The poems steadily unwrap the harsh circumstances of Billie Jo's hard scrabble life: her father Bayner, so firm in his belief in wheat as a viable crop that he refuses to try more workable approaches to survival; her pregnant mother's fiery death; Billie Jo's hands, charred as she tries to extinguish the flames that engulf her mother; the constant smothering dust moving in relentless waves over parched Oklahoma soil. After her mother's tragic death, Billie Jo and her father drift apart, each blaming the other for Ma's death, and Billie Jo eventually hops a train and heads west to the promise of California. Billie Jo's experiences on the train convince her that there is no place better than home, and she turns around in Flagstaff and returns to the Panhandle. Hesse skillfully weaves historical data throughout the text of the poems: bank closings, extreme poverty, the scourge of grasshoppers, the Dionne Quintuplets, the Kilauea eruption, and the ever-present dust storms. This book provides a powerful partner text for *Cat Running* (1994) by Zilpha Keatley Snyder about Okies that have moved to Cat's community in California.

Although set in the summer, *Wringer* (1997) and *The Watcher* (1997) are anything but light, breezy books. Jerry Spinelli's *Wringer* deals with coming of age in relation to an annual community event. Each year, in the rural community of Wayner a week-long Family Fest is held to raise money for the city park. Families enjoy the picnics, rides, contests, and the climax, a pigeon shoot. In fact, 5000 live pigeons are shipped each year to be shot. When boys reach age ten, they become wringers, racing across the blood-stained field to wring the wounded pigeons' necks and put them out of their misery.

Palmer is now nine, ecstatic to be a member of the in-crowd, and willing to do anything they suggest—torment girls, lie in school—anything but be a wringer. Yet, he can't tell his friends that or he'll be out of the group. Palmer feels so alone; his friends expect him to want to be a wringer and his dad has a pigeon-shooting trophy on the mantle. To complicate matters even more, a pigeon pecks at his window after a snow storm and becomes his special pet, "Nipper." The more attached he becomes to the bird, the more he fears turning ten and the Family Festival.

Spinelli creates a tense ending that is exciting, satisfying, and a strong indictment against peer pressure, unquestioned tradition, the social expectations of a community, violence, and the belief that the end justifies the means.



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The Watcher (1997), brilliantly written by James Howe, is about thirteen-year-old Margaret who goes each day to the beach near her parent's rented cottage. Unlike other beach-goers, she sits at the top of the steps, watches the people, writes in her journal, and fantasizes a perfect family for herself. Most chapters in the book are prefaced with the fairy tale she creates at the beach as she tries to escape her life. We learn through four points of view that all our lives come up short when measured against our fantasies. Margaret, however, fantasizes Callie and Evan as the perfect family and symbolically makes herself a part of their familial group when she enters their unlocked cabin, steals a family photograph, and carefully cuts out a place to insert her own head into the portrait.

Margaret longs for an "Ozzie and Harriet" style family to replace the father who physically and emotionally abuses her while her ineffective mother retreats behind a closed bedroom door with sad opera music drowning Margaret's cries. This finely crafted book ends on a more positive note that leads readers to believe that Margaret's life may improve. Thirteen-year-old Meredith said, "I think that 'the watcher' is in desperate need of someone who loves and cares for her . . . I think it's fascinating how most people think other people have such wonderful lives when in fact they don't."

When She Was Good (1997), by Norma Fox Mazer, is an intriguing study in the continuing effects of physical and emotional abuse even after the abusive behavior stops. The story traces Em Thurkill's emotional trauma brought on by Pamela, her abusive and violent sister. Em wants desperately to have a happy home and believes in "magical possibilities" that "would change things—take away Mother's sadness and make Pamela nice and even turn Father cheerful. And then I would be happy" (p. 4). Although deep inside herself she knows the impossibility of having a happy home, Em steadfastly believes that happiness lurks just beyond her grasp but will one day be hers. The book is told in three parts over a six year time period: Pamela's death, a reflection of Em's life with Pamela, and Em's life haunted by the lingering effects of Pamela's abuse. Finally, Em's eternal hope that her life will change for the better becomes a reality. Like the elderberries in the final chapter, Em's life has come from extreme bitterness to some degree of sweetness. As readers, our spirits lift as Em's life brightens.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

We asked Cathy Beck's middle school readers to tell what they thought about this last set of books. The following excerpt from their discussion of *The Watcher* (1997) and *When She Was Good* (1997)—particularly when compared to our own, similar discussions—helped us appreciate the value of talking to others about believable yet uncomfortable books:

MARY: I like realistic fiction because it explains how real people would act in situations.

ALINA: A lot of problems kids confront are because they aren't educated about something. It happens with race. . . . You might be more hostile because you don't know about them. I think it's good that they have these kinds of books because then kids can know there are real situations out there and they'll know a little bit about them.

MEREDITH: In *The Watcher*, it's realistic how kids are abused but they don't want to tell anyone about it because they think they're supposed to be abused. They think their dad, or mom, or whoever is doing it, are just trying to teach them something. But really, if they write a book like this, or if they knew about it, they would know that it's wrong.

ALEX: I find it realistic that the abuse would happen in *When She Was Good*. But I don't think it was realistic that people didn't do anything about it.

ALINA: People don't want to get involved.

MARY: It's family problems. And it's none their business.

MEREDITH: Some people worry that, if they don't do anything, it will just go away and they'll forget about it. In *The Watcher*, it wasn't always abuse. There were a lot of problems. It was a son having problems with his family, and brother and sister having problems their parents always fighting and never looking happy and always slamming doors and them having to live with that. Margaret's mom just ignores her. Like when her dad beats her, [Margaret's mom] just shuts the door and turns on music and pretends she can't hear.

MARY: Maybe she does that because it's better than facing the truth. She knows it is happening, but if she doesn't see it happening and she doesn't hear it happening, then she just. . . .

MEREDITH: Yeah, well she does that but she doesn't try to stop it either so she just lets her husband beat Margaret.

- MARY: Maybe the mom's afraid of the father. She's afraid if she gets involved that. . . .
- ALINA: In those books where people are getting abused—I remember reading it—and I was like: why isn't this girl doing anything? Why isn't she telling anybody? Through the whole book I was like: just tell somebody you know, because it got to the point when it was really getting bad. But if you think about it, it's sounds like: oh they're stupid. Why didn't they say anything? But, if you were really in that situation, you have to think about what you would do and you would be afraid, you know? Even if they're not abusing you, if you're just afraid of someone, you just have to think about how you feel in that situation. And it does sound realistic but you can't really blame them for not saying anything because you didn't experience something that. You don't know what it's like.
- MEREDITH: You didn't experience the fear that they had that, if they told somebody, the person would find out and they would get punished even more.

The books we selected along with our students for this month's column are books that sent us running to one another to share a good story, talk about a troubled life, or debate a thought-provoking conclusion. We invite you to find a summer reading buddy, create your own Top Ten list of summer books, and immerse yourself in a summer of reflection, discovery, and renewal through literature.

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Cathy Beck teaches at Wydown Middle School; Susie Bargiel and Dick Koblitz teach at Captain Elementary School; Anne O'Connor, Kathryn Mitchell Pierce, and Susan Wolf teach at Glenridge Elementary School.

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The Conference on English Education is seeking a new editor for *English Education*. In July 2000, the term of the present editors will end. Persons interested in applying for the editorship should send a letter of application to be received **no later than November 2, 1998**. Letters should be accompanied by the applicant's vita, one sample of published writing, a one-page statement of the applicant's vision for the future of the journal, and two letters of general support from appropriate administrators at the applicant's institution. Please do not send books, monographs, or other materials which cannot be easily copied for the Search Committee.

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