

**Hummingbird, Kimberly Greene Angle**

Interest Level: 3-6 Reading Level: 5.8

Twelve-year-old March Anne expects this summer to be like all others—spending time with her girlfriends, helping on the family's Georgia watermelon farm, and learning from her grandma, who has been raising March Anne and her brother since their mother died nine years ago. But in July, the girl's world is turned upside down when Grenna suffers a heart attack and is bedridden. March Anne valiantly tries to cook the dinners, but her misadventures only serve to highlight the void that her grandmother's absence will leave. Things gradually settle down, and March Anne regales Grenna with stories about school, especially the antics of three previously irritating boys. When Grenna insists that a hummingbird has stayed for the winter, March Anne assumes her grandmother is "wonky," but the creature soon makes itself known, remaining nearby until the February day when Grenna passes on. Afterward, March Anne must come to terms with her grief not only for her grandmother, but also for her mother. Her friends are there to help, and her family draws closer as her father opens up about his repressed heartache over his wife. While the vocabulary is poetic, the Southern idioms and clichés are exaggerated, and March Anne's first-person narration never entirely engages readers. The tone is somewhat saccharine and preachy, and the themes are presented with a heavy hand - An additional novel about friendship and loss.

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**The Golly-Whopper Games, Jody Feldman**

Interest Level: 5-8 Reading Level: 3.9

Gil Goodson's future happiness depends on winning the Golly Toy & Game Company's ultimate competition. If Gil wins, his dad has promised that the family can move away from all the gossip, false friends, and bad press that have plagued them ever since The Incident. Inside the toy company's fantastic headquarters, Gil will have to master trivia, solve puzzles, and complete physical stunts—and he'll have to do it better than all of the other kids competing. Oh, and did we mention that Gil's every step—and every mistake—will be broadcast on national television? Hold on tight, because the ride of his life is about to begin!

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**The Year the Swallows Came Early, Kathryn Fitzmaurice**

Interest Level: 3-6 Reading Level: 4.8

Watching helplessly as her father is taken off to jail, Groovy Robinson, 11, is convinced that there has been a terrible mistake. When her mom admits that she turned him in because he gambled away the \$25,000 savings account that Groovy's great-grandmother left her, the child shrinks into herself—disappointed, hurt, not caring about anything. Not until Groovy—now wanting to be known as Eleanor—heeds the advice of the homeless old sailor Mr. Tom does she grasp that people we love can hurt us, but that only through forgiveness can we become whole again. This first novel is peopled with three-dimensional characters whose imperfections make them believable and interesting. Groovy's big-talking, ne'er-do-well dad donates a trailer to Mr. Tom. Her beautician mom is guided by astrology, but her boundless love for Eleanor is totally grounded. And Groovy's perceptive friend Frankie is unable to grasp the real reasons that his immigrant mother left him in his stepbrother's care. The well-structured plot is underscored by clear writing and authentic dialogue, and short chapters keep the story moving. The book draws a parallel with the birds of Capistrano, and a novel that encourages understanding, tolerance, and forgiveness is as welcome as the returning swallows.

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**Diamond Willow**, *Helen Frost*

Interest Level: 5-8 Reading Level: 4.3

When a diamond willow's bark is removed, sanded, and polished, it reveals reddish brown diamonds, the dark center of which are the scars of missing branches. Frost has used this image to craft an intricate family story in diamond-shaped verse. In her small Alaskan town, 12-year-old Diamond Willow, named for the tree, prefers to be just "Willow" but muses that if her parents had called her "Diamond," "...would I have been one of those sparkly kinds of girls?" Instead she describes herself as an average, part-Athabaskan girl with one good friend, who finds herself more comfortable around her family's sled dogs than with people. Her story takes a heartrending turn on a solo dogsled trip to visit her grandparents, and Willow is soon caught up in an intense adventure that leads to the discovery of a family secret. As she unravels the truth, Willow comes to understand the diamonds and scars that bind her family together. She also gains awareness of her own strength and place in her community. Willow relates her story in one-page poems, each of which contains a hidden message printed in darker type. At key intervals, the narrative is continued in the voices of her ancestors, who take the form of animal spirits—Red Fox, Spruce Hen, Mouse, Chickadee, Lynx—and her sled dogs. Frost casts a subtle spell through innovative storytelling. Her poems offer pensive imagery and glimpses of character, and strong emotion. This complex and elegant novel will resonate with readers who savor powerful drama and multifaceted characters.

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**A Tugging String**, *David Greenberg*

Interest Level: 5-8 Reading Level: 6.1

A fascinating look at the Civil Rights Movement, specifically the campaign to gain the vote for blacks in Selma, AL. The author, son of Jack Greenberg, a civil rights lawyer and director of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund during the 1960s, provides a unique perspective on this time, wrapping actual events within a fictional story line. It centers around David's boyhood in Great Neck, NY, as he grows in understanding of the often-dangerous work his father does. Alternating chapters focus on Jack Greenberg's efforts in the South, the courageous individuals with whom he comes into contact (ranging from regular people to leaders such as Thurgood Marshall and Martin Luther King, Jr.), and the threats they all face daily. This book is at once homage of a son to his father and an exploration of a crucial moment in American history. Dad is lovingly portrayed, as is the rest of the Greenberg family. The narrative beautifully melds historical fact with imagined situations and characters (footnotes and a postscript clearly delineate between real and fictionalized events). Although didactic at times, it is clearly written and sincere, and it should prove appealing to those readers who absorb historical fact better through historical fiction.

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**Chase**, *Jessie Haas*

Interest Level: 5-8 Reading Level: 4.5

Pennsylvania coal country is the setting for this post-Civil War adventure in which an orphan witnesses a murder and runs for his life. For stable boy Phin Chase, being in the wrong place at the wrong time makes him a suspect, and his dilemma is compounded when he comes into possession of the killer's wallet. Now he knows Ned Plume is one of the "Sleepers," a secret society of Irishmen causing trouble over mining jobs, and townspeople are not certain who can be trusted. As Phin flees into the countryside, first by foot and then by train, someone is tracking him on a stallion, and the stranger seems to have a sixth sense about his whereabouts. The story moves at the same fast pace as the horse and unknown rider who chase Phin through farmland and forest. The boy's survival skills work to his advantage and he cleverly turns the tables on his pursuer, who is injured when he is felled. Dialogue and characterization are tops here, and the back story about rural life following the war and about Irish miners, better known as Molly Maguires, is accurately woven into the novel with some explanation for their violent ways. The book may be tagged as a historical adventure but it has plenty of appeal for horse lovers as well.

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**All the Lovely Bad Ones**, *Mary Downing Hahn*

Interest Level: 5-8    Reading Level: 4.5

Travis, 12, and his younger sister, Corey, are high-spirited youngsters who love to play tricks on unsuspecting targets. When they discover that their grandmother's Vermont inn, Fox Hill, is reportedly haunted, they can't wait to cook up some ghostly manifestations to scare the guests and liven up their summer vacation. But their pranks turn terrifyingly real when they awaken Ada Jaggs, an evil and vengeful spirit. The shadows of children she tormented and mistreated in the past when the county poor farm was located at Fox Hill are also roused. Events soon spiral out of control, frightening the staff and guests of the inn, and Travis and Corey must discover a way to get rid of Ada and release the children to their final rest. Part of this plan includes opening her grave—a task that, of course, must be done at midnight. Hahn has written another fast-paced ghost story that readers will relish, shivering all the while. An interesting thread is the comparison of the lively children whom Ada hated and targeted with Travis and Corey—all are boisterous, energetic kids with a mischievous gleam in their eye.

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**Bird Lake Moon**, *Kevin Henkes*

Interest Level: 5-8    Reading Level: 4.9

Mitch Sinclair, 12, is at Bird Moon Lake because his parents are divorcing. But there are tense moments with his grandparents, so Mitch fantasizes about moving into the empty house next door. Then Spencer Stone and his family, who own the cottage, arrive. Spencer and younger sister love the lake, but it's also the place where their barely remembered brother, Matty, drowned at age four. Told in overlapping chapters, the story is spare. Mitch tricks Spencer into thinking Matty is haunting them; then he does something worse. After the boys become friends, the truth becomes both barrier and bridge. As in his Newbery Honor Book *Olive's Ocean* (2003), every word counts, moving the story forward moment by moment. Yet the writing is as evocative as it is precise: fireflies are "pinpricks of topaz." Emotions are just as carefully carved, turning characterization into portraiture; the children stand out in relief, against the deceptive tranquility of the lake. Some children may find the story too quiet or the ending too abrupt. But Henkes knows children and their secrets, and readers will lean close to hear the whispers.

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**Go Home or Go Big**, *Will Hobbs*

Interest Level: 5-8    Reading Level: 4.7

When a meteorite crashes through the roof of Brady's home in the Black Hills of South Dakota, the young astrophile is excited beyond belief. He names it Fred (for "Far Roaming Earth Diver") and calls his cousin Quinn over to check it out. The two are enamored of anything extreme or insane and deem this space rock "extremely insane" before setting out for a headlong series of bicycling, fishing, and caving adventures. When Brady starts to surpass his normal physical limitations, it becomes apparent that the meteorite might have brought along some hidden visitors with it from outer space. Hobbs captures young teen dialogue well, and the characters are all easy to like in this solid adventure. Reluctant readers who'd rather be airborne than chair bound will appreciate the two young boys' penchant for pushing the envelope, and the postulations involving extremophile organisms is a neat twist with just a hint of science behind it, even if it leads to a few mildly preposterous situations by the end.

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**The Quest Begins, *Erin Hunter***

Interest Level: 5-8    Reading Level: 5.4

In this new series, *Seekers*, readers meet three bear cubs: Kallik, a polar bear; Lusa, a black bear; and Toklo, a brown bear. The story follows their adventures, narrated in alternating chapters. Kallik loses her mother in a killer-whale attack and is separated from her brother. She has never lived on her own before, and never been anywhere but on the ice. Lusa hears stories about life in the wild that eventually cause her to leave the safety of the zoo. Toklo is abandoned by his mother, who flees into the woods in grief when his brother dies. All three cubs are now learning to survive in the woods with minimal knowledge and ability and with no adult allies. From the first page, this story is exciting and refreshing. The bears' declining habitat is evident, and often throughout their journey the animals have to dodge cars and humans with guns. The plot is fast paced, and the author is apt at creating and sustaining the adrenaline-charged mood of these youngsters on their own.

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**We Can't All be Rattlesnakes, *Patrick Jennings***

Interest Level: 3-6    Reading Level: 3.9

After being captured by "an oily, filthy, fleshy human child" named Gunnar, a female gopher snake gets an up-close view of the human world. Christened Crusher by her captor, the snake communicates telepathically with the other reptiles in his room and learns that the boy has a bad track record with his pets, soon losing interest in them and becoming absorbed in his video games. Crusher at first refuses to eat any food Gunnar provides and even befriends the live mouse he brings her—Breakfast. At first standoffish, Crusher attempts to act tame in order to get an opportunity to escape; at the same time, she begins to develop compassion for both her human and animal companions. Crusher is a compelling narrator, her voice dripping with sarcasm. Although some of the minor characters, such as Gunnar's friends, are not fully developed, kids are not likely to notice. They'll be too busy enjoying Crusher's commentary on human habits and absorbing the facts about snakes that are seamlessly integrated into the narrative. They will also come away with the message that wild animals don't make good pets.

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**House of Dance, *Beth Kephart***

Interest Level: YA    Reading Level: 5.0

Kephart offers another quiet, sensitive story about a girl who pulls together her fragmented family. Fifteen-year-old Rosie faces a lonely summer. Her best friend is out of town, her single mother is consumed by an affair with a married man, and Rosie has been charged with daily visits to her grandfather, who is dying of cancer. While sorting through her grandfather's possessions, Rosie concocts a secret plan that she hopes will "give him back the life he loved." As part of the scheme, Rosie begins dance instruction at a neighborhood ballroom, and her growing confidence on the dance floor strengthens her sense of self. Kephart's dialogue sometimes reads with the mannered feel of a stage play; Rosie's poetic, meditative, first-person voice doesn't always feel authentic; and her romance with a neighbor is underdeveloped. Still, the piercing emotions and family situations, described with lyrical beauty, will hit home with readers who enjoy gentle, emotional journeys.

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**The Last Girls of Pompeii, Kathryn Lasky**

Interest Level: 5-8 Reading Level: 5.1

In an author's note, Lasky says that her visit to the Pompeii site was an "almost intoxicating experience." Unfortunately, all her meticulously researched detail gets in the way of this story. It is the looming volcanic disaster that will hold readers, as well as the stirring fictional story of two young women. Born with a withered arm, Julia, 12, is a disgrace to her powerful family, not marriageable, and sick to death of her sister's elaborate wedding preparations. Sura is Julia's slave and her best friend. Both are destined for prison: Julia will be locked up in a temple; Sura sold as a concubine. But they help each other escape Vesuvius. The mounting suspense blends the personal rebellion with what they leave behind as the sky reels with burning rocks and cinder.

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**Savvy, Ingrid Law**

Interest Level: 5-8 Reading Level: 6.0

For generations, the Beaumont family has harbored a magical secret. They each possess a "savvy" -a special supernatural power that strikes when they turn thirteen. Grandpa Bomba moves mountains, her older brothers create hurricanes and spark electricity . . . and now it's the eve of Mibs's big day. As if waiting weren't hard enough, the family gets scary news two days before Mibs's birthday: Poppa has been in a terrible accident. Mibs develops the singular mission to get to the hospital and prove that her new power can save her dad. So she sneaks onto a salesman's bus . . . only to find the bus heading in the opposite direction. Suddenly Mibs finds herself on an unforgettable odyssey that will force her to make sense of growing up -and of other people, who might also have a few secrets hidden just beneath the skin.

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**Storyteller, Edward Myers**

Interest Level: 5-8 Reading Level: 5.3

An old man tells the opening of one story after another, only to be interrupted by his grandchild, who finds fault with each—until he begins a tale about a young storyteller. At intervals within the novel, the child poses questions his grandfather answers. This narrative framework soon fades into the background as readers are swept away by the eventful tale of 16-year-old storyteller Jack, who leaves his village to seek his fortune, as lads in stories do. Along the way, he befriends a talkative crow, provokes a notorious outlaw, finds employment as the king's storyteller, and falls in love. Dealing with bad luck and good, Jack makes his share of mistakes but tries to learn from them and from the people he meets along the way. A bit reminiscent of the later novels of Lloyd Alexander, this old-fashioned story has the timeless appeal of adventure, humor, and light romance, all woven together by an able teller of tales.

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**Dragon's Egg, Sarah Thomson**

Interest Level: 3-6 Reading Level: 4.9

It is a rare talent, and only she can care for the Inn's herd. She feeds them, gathers their eggs, and tends to their injuries. But Mella dreams about the dragons of legend, even though hardly anyone believes they still exist. Dragons are small farm animals, not huge fire-breathing monsters. Everyone knows that - Until one day changes everything. A Knight of the Order of Defenders arrives at the Inn. Signs of the mythical dragons have led him there, he says. Then a simple errand takes Mella through the forest, where she stumbles across a dragon's egg—and faces the true, terrifying dragon guarding it. On the spot, Mella vows to get the egg safely to the fabled Hatching Grounds. She must leave her home for the first time, and she finds an unlikely companion in the Defender's squire, Roger. For Mella and Roger, this one day is the beginning of an adventure. Where will it take them?

**Child of Dandelions, Shenaaz Nanji**

Interest Level: YA Reading Level: 4.8

Sabine is 15 years old in the summer of 1972, when Ugandan president Idi Amin issues his proclamation that all “foreign Indians” must leave the country within 90 days. Unlike many of the Indians in their Kampala community, Sabine was born in Uganda, and although she is of Indian ancestry, she feels as much a Ugandan as her best friend, Zena, an “ethnic African.” As the countdown continues, though, the terrifying street violence reaches into Sabine’s home, and she realizes that despite her family’s Ugandan citizenship, they aren’t immune from the president’s decree. Nanji, who grew up in East Africa, exposes a period of shocking, rarely viewed political history in this vivid story that makes the horrors feel both personal and universal. Sabine’s close, realistic friendship with Zena, who admires “Dada Amin,” mirrors societal warfare over issues of class, race, and nationhood. The story’s authentic emotions and relationships balance the detailed cultural and historical explanations and combine in a gripping story of a remarkable teen who helps her family face impossible loss.

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**Bringing the Boy Home, N. A. Nelson**

Interest Level: 3-6 Reading Level: 4.4

A boy with a malformed foot is cast off by his remote Amazonian tribe, the Takunami. Sara, an American anthropologist, rescues 6-year-old Tirio, adopts him, and brings him home to Miami. As Tirio approaches his thirteenth birthday, he begins to hear inner voices; a phenomenon that he knows is common among Takunami boys as they prepare for the soche sente tente, a grueling coming-of-age test in which young men are guided through a dangerous jungle by spiritual communication with their fathers. When Sara and Tirio return to the Amazon, Tirio plans his own secret soche sente tente, hoping to meet the father he never knew. Alternating with Tirio’s story is a plot about another young Takunami boy who is also training for his soche sente tente, and the end connects the stories with a moving surprise. The vivid setting, imagined cultural particulars (Nelson invented the Takunami), and magical realism will captivate readers, as will Tirio’s complicated, shifting emotions of rage, abandonment, belonging, and love.

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**Darkwing, Kenneth Oppel**

Interest Level: 5-8 Reading Level: 5.0

In his Silverwing series Oppel spun a contemporary fantasy about the world of bats. In this ambitious new stand-alone fantasy, he turns the clock back 65 million years to imagine the world of the bats’ earliest ancestors, which he calls “chiropters.” These tree-dwelling creatures are flightless, using their wings (which they call “sails”) to glide through the air, from tree to tree. Only Dusk, youngest son of the colony’s leader has made an evolutionary leap; not only can he fly, he can also see at night, using echo vision. Predictably, the others regard him as a mutant to be shunned—all but his father, who wisely considers his son’s differences as gifts. Dusk’s real nemesis, however, is a beast (a “felid”) called Carnassial, who is the first of his kind to be carnivorous and, like Dusk, is shunned by his own. Clearly the world is poised on the brink of remarkable change, and the future belongs to these two. Oppel writes with keen insight and empathy about the condition of being “other” in the context of a richly plotted, fast-paced story that—though sometimes too heavily anthropomorphized—is captivating reading from beginning to end.

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**The Magic Thief**, *Sarah Prineas*

Interest Level: 3-6    Reading Level: 4.5

Young Conn opens the first volume of this new trilogy, noting “A thief is a lot like a wizard.” Conn is a thief but, through desire and inevitability, becomes a wizard by book’s end. This evolution begins when Conn picks the pocket of the wizard Nevery, who is startled that the nicked magical stone didn’t kill the boy. Nevery takes on Conn as a servant, but the boy’s inquisitiveness and talents move him to apprentice status. Nevery has recently returned to Willmet to save the city-state, which is faltering as its magic seeps away. As Conn becomes more enmeshed in his new life, he navigates through the intricate dealings of both the wizarding world and the political machinations of the Underlord. The events are not as lively as in some middle-grade fantasies—though Conn’s turn as a cat is delightful, and his search for his own stone is very well played. What works wonderfully well here is the boy’s irresistible voice, which is supplemented by the writings of Nevery in his journal; it’s creased and stained pages appearing as a part of the design. Readers will particularly enjoy the way Conn often knows just a little more than his master, and they’ll look forward to seeing how much more he learns as the series progresses.

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