

BOOK BANTER



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2007 NYSRA Children's Literature Committee

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Kristen Gramlich, Alice Sample (Chairperson)

Young Adult

Firegirl (Little, Brown, 2006) by Tony Abbott is a beautiful but sad story that will be hard to forget. Tom, a quiet, somewhat introverted seventh grader describes how the lives of his classmates change with the arrival of a new student who is recovering from being seriously burned. She is extremely disfigured and has to keep returning to the local hospital's burn unit for plastic surgery. Most of the children are afraid to be near Jessica because her burns make them uncomfortable; and Jessica has moved so many times and been through so much that she doesn't really try to be friendly.

This is not a happily-ever-after book. It shows that the reactions of people to disabilities are often a reflection of their own negative experiences and fears. But people can learn (and that's an important lesson in this novel). After only three weeks in Tom's class Jessica changed his outlook and in fact his perception of himself, and his life will never again be the same. Though a Young

Adult novel this book would be appropriate with children from Third Grade up. It would also make a great read-aloud. This is a powerful book that shows that sometimes even the smallest gestures can have a profound effect on someone's life.

Fans of Coleen Paratore's blithe and heart-warming earlier novel, *Wedding Planner's*



Daughter, get ready to be blown away by her new book, *Cupid Chronicles* (Simon & Schuster, 2006)—especially those enjoying a little love

in their fiction because *Chronicles* joins two types: a high school romance, and passion for a social cause (keeping the local public library open). Will main character Willa, with help from her friends and community, be able to sort out her love problems and keep Bramble's Library afloat? Will she end having more fun than in the earlier novel, where happiness turned out to be a bridal

gown full of cherry pits? Both Paratore books will be flying off the shelf—right into the hands of young ladies in quest of their own identity through the power of good literature.

Rumor has it that Paratore's next book (*Mack McGinn's Big Win*) will be all boy. She's a talented author who deserves attention. Watch for the new entry soon!
www.coleenparatore.com

Imagine life as an Eighth Grade Middle School adolescent enjoying country life in rural Georgia with Grandma, when all of a sudden Mom, who lives in Chicago, decides it's best for you to move to the city with her. This is Patrice's situation, as *Standing Against the Wind* (Farrar, Straus,

Patrice isn't alone, standing against the wind.

Giroux, 2006) opens. And things get worse from there. Just a few months after Patrice's move to Chicago her mother is arrested for welfare fraud, and the girl has to move in with an aunt who already

has a large family of her own and seems to have little time or money left for Patrice. Besides this uncomfortable domestic situation Patrice also has to cope with bullies and drug dealers on her way to school who harass her about the way she looks—until Monty, a boy in her housing development, befriends her for the sake of his little brother who needs help with his studies. Patrice's only wish and hope is to win a scholarship to a prestigious African American boarding school in Mississippi, so she can get away from all this. But there's a catch: Patrice's Mom needs to sign the application form. How can Patrice get her mother to sign? Older sister Cherise promises to help, but is busy with her own life and fails to follow through. Who will come to Patrice's rescue? *Standing Against the Wind* is Traci L. Jones's first novel, and it's a strong, impressive beginning to her career. The characters are well drawn, and the issues

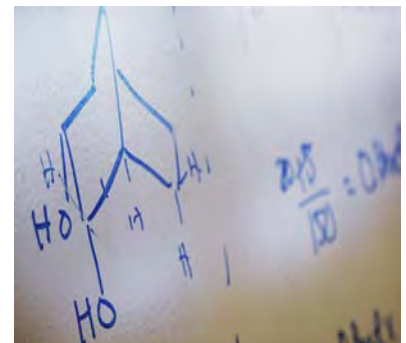
and predicaments are credible and involving. This one was hard to put down.
www.fsgkidsbooks.com

Nate arrives home from Middle School one day to find a police car in his driveway. His mind whirls through all kinds of scenarios—all bad. Then, a scene he surely does not want to see: two officers walking his wounded and handcuffed father to their vehicle.

This is the startling opening of Joyce Maynard's *The Cloud Chamber* (Atheneum, 2005). Nate is by turns incredulous and devastated. His father meant everything to him. He was his hero. Over the years they had made time capsules and learned about nature and the stars together. And now there he is—wounded, apparently by his own gun; and arrested. Why? What happened? No one will give Nate any answers nor even discuss the situation with him. He doesn't understand; he doesn't know how to cope. Eventually he learns his Dad is in a mental institution. He knows too that the family is in financial trouble. But he also knows he should remain in school. And perhaps he can use his Science Fair project to get to the state finals, which will take place near his Dad's hospital. But Dad was always the one who helped Nate create his projects, and Nate's not sure he can do this one on his own.

Joyce Maynard spins a realistic story of the kinds of hardships families have to confront when struck by a bad turn of fortune.

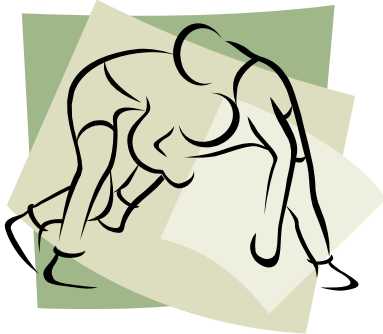
Will Nate, with the help of friendships and family, be able to come to grips with his father's illness? Will he be able to finish his "cloud chamber" science project, then win a chance to compete in the state finals? Will he



ever get to see his Dad again? *The Cloud Chamber* is an absorbing read and Nate, a convincing and likable character. Young adults of both genders will feel emotionally drawn into his quandaries, hoping for him to succeed. This is a powerful novel which could be used as the stimulus for many kinds of rewarding discussions.

www.joycemaynard.com

Pinned (Harcourt, 2005) by Alfred C Martino is an involving story of two High School seniors, from vastly different backgrounds, living in two different New



Jersey towns—each of whom loves to wrestle and hopes to win the state championship. Each of the boys is also

competitive—though in different ways; and prepared to make sacrifices to train, practice and unremittingly pursue the championship goal. Author Martino weaves a complex net connecting the pressures of school, growing-up, setbacks and disillusionment, and endless hours of workouts in the gym. We sweat through some of the boys' matches and see the constant effort athletes from any sport must make. The culmination of course is.....guess who the two finalists in the State Championship turn out to be! And unfortunately only one of them can win the title. With any luck, readers of this novel will come away with the feeling that all who participate in sports with such dedication are in effect winners.

Envisioning a novel about three teenage friends who are seniors in High School, why not call it *Boy Girl Boy* (Harcourt, 2005)? That's exactly what Ron

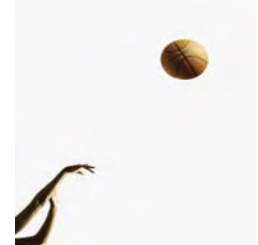
Koertge did with his latest Young Adult selection, which takes place in a small town where everyone seems to know everyone else. Larry, Teresa and Elliot plan to escape the constraints of small town life and run off to California to create a new life. And once there (needless to say) they will find jobs and success in the movies.

Larry is struggling to accept his sexuality. Elliot is trying to stand out and believe in himself. Teresa loves each of them as friends (not boy friends) and is the cement that binds the friendship together. This is a very appealing, tender coming-of-age book. Teenagers will respond well to these amiable characters who, like many in that age-bracket, are simply trying to sort things out and make sense of what's happening in their world.

Middle School

Basketball—Competition—Sportsmanship—Interpersonal relations—Self-realization—Family life—*Basketball (or Something Like It)*, (Harper Collins, 2005), has it all! Nora

Raleigh Baskin captures readers from her first page when Hank hears his parents arguing about the basketball



tryouts. (He really loves the game, is good at it and wants to play; he wants to try to make the team.) Nathan speaks next. He is the only black kid in Sixth Grade and is tired of people expecting him to be good at basketball because he happens to be black and tall. He is black and tall; but he's also uncoordinated! Nevertheless, don't all black kids play basketball? Next we meet Jeremy who has just moved from a big city to live with his Grandmother in a small town. Will he be on the team? After all, don't all kids who come from the city play basketball? And let's not

leave out Anabel. When she was younger she had to go to the gym all the time because her brother played basketball. She shot baskets for hours on end and eventually got good at it; still, despite her prowess she grew to hate the game.

This is an engrossing series of stories dealing constructively with stereotypes; and themes like friendship, honor and family. The text is easy to read, and since each character has an individual chapter to speak there's also a sense of newness and variety, and the overarching storyline moves along quickly. Children from Third grade up will enjoy the diverse perspectives this book presents.

Everyone should read

Basketball (or Something Like It), perhaps especially parents and coaches!

www.norabaskin.com

Those from the Adirondack Mountain area will feel right at home reading the latest in the Adirondack Kids series *Islands in the Sky* (Adirondack Kids Press, 2005); and those not from that area will almost surely get the yen to visit! The well-received father-son writing team (Gary Van Riper and son Justin) joins with their illustrator-wife/mom (Carol

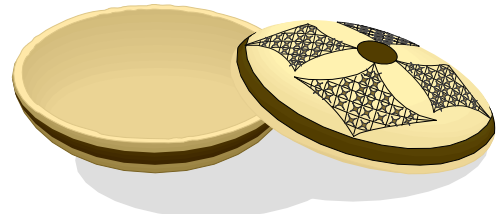


Van Riper) to compose various adventures set in the Adirondacks. This latest has three kids around age ten climbing their first High Peak (over four thousand feet) in the Range.

They're undertaking the outing with Justin's Grandfather, who enjoys camping and climbing and already knows many of the Adirondack peaks. Mix camping out overnight in tents, cooking over an open fire, reports of Black Bears stealing food, star-studded night skies, with three fun loving kids

on their first climbing venture and we've got all the right elements for a great story... which this one is. At the end of each of the Van Riper books there are always some non-fictional facts about the Adirondacks included—"Dax facts." In this one readers learn more about Black Bears, the Alpine zone and the White-throated Sparrow.

I Lost My Tooth in Africa by Penda Diakite (Scholastic Press, 2006) is a wonderful way to connect young audiences with another culture through an experience all can relate to. When Amina travels to Africa with her family she is very excited about losing a tooth. She places the tooth under a



calabash gourd so the African Tooth Fairy will bring her a chicken. The vibrant pictures and detailed border-illustrations serve to transport the reader into African culture. The story is also inter-woven with African phrases, traditions and details about daily life, which heightens the sense of authenticity. Many aspects of this book were enlightening; all of it was entertaining.

My Almost Epic Summer (G. P. Putnam, 2006) by Adele Griffin is an excellent selection for Middle School students often called upon to baby-sit. It's a fast-paced novel about Irene, a young girl spending the summer vacation babysitting while her friends enjoy the freedom a summer vacation usually brings. Irene has had babysitting jobs before but this is a daily enterprise, and seems very different from her once-a-week experiences of the past. This is a delightful novel, loaded with unexpected turns, that girls especially will enjoy.

Jean Craighead George tells the powerful story of a young sandhill crane in *Luck* (Laura Geringer Books, 2006). Luck is a rehabilitated sandhill crane who begins a long migration from Texas to Siberia.

En route to Siberia Luck becomes fascinated by the man-made objects he sees below. His parents focus on the fields and rivers so they'll be able to trace their way back, but



Luck is continually distracted by windmills, baby carriages and other human inventions. Luck eventually meets Wise, a female crane, and together they begin the return journey to the Texas marsh. Wise uses the landmarks in nature to navigate, but Luck is confused and gets lost because his "landmarks" have all moved. He finally chances on the windmill where he was originally rehabilitated, and so returns to the girl who had first saved his life.

This is a beautiful story in both words and pictures. In a sense *Luck* has elements of a coming-of-age novel. Other parts bring to life themes of friendship and loyalty, and the emotional satisfaction of happy reunions. A sub-theme emphasizes our need to live in harmony with nature and not damage the land. The captivating illustrations by Wendell Minor remind the reader of the great beauty inherent in nature. This is a captivating novel that will please readers on multiple levels.

Primary

Lilly's Big Day (Greenwillow, 2006), written and lavishly illustrated by Kevin Henkes, is a hilarious story for young readers. When Lilly's mouse-teacher announces in

class that he'll be marrying the school nurse, Lilly is so excited! She imagines herself as flower girl at the wedding. As we might imagine, all kinds of things...happen. This is a fun book that young children are sure to enjoy.

Mrs. Crump's Cat by Linda Smith (Harper Collins, 2006) is the sweet tale of a stray cat and a lonely lady. Mrs. Crump is an older woman who lives alone until one rainy day, a beautiful cat appears at her front door. Although Mrs. Crump says she has no use for a cat, she braves the rain to give it some cream. She decides to let the cat stay, just until the rain stops. Day by day she creates excuses as to why the cat should not leave quite yet. As she takes care of the cat she begins to realize how much joy a pet can bring to her life; and she is lonely no more. This is a heart-warming little book, portraying the gradual bonding of two kindred souls—each in need of the other.



Peter Sis's book *Play, Mozart, Play!* (Greenwillow Books, 2006) is a resourceful way to introduce young children to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. In simple sentences and with detailed pictures Sis tells the story of Mozart's life. Readers are introduced to Mozart as a child genius who could play the piano blindfolded or backwards. The book is a tribute to an amazing talent and to the inspiration and enjoyment his music still provides.

Leslie Helakoski's *Big Chickens* (Dutton, 2006) is a marvelous read-aloud for young children. Four chickens try to escape from a wolf but keep moving into deeper and

worse predicaments, many of them side-splitting. Can the chickens escape that “big bad wolf”?



Children will enjoy the adventuresome text, and especially Henry Cole’s inspired, sometimes bizarre illustrations.

Do we know—**really know**—what a million of something looks like? Be prepared to be amazed when you read Andrew Clements’ *A Million* (Simon & Schuster, 2006). On the way to eventually counting to a million through various imaginative devices the reader learns some truly head-shaking facts. How many pencils, for example, would it take to draw a line 100 miles long? And—how far can a gray whale travel in 12 years?



Illustrator Mike Reed has managed to make looking at 1,000,000 dots fun. His illustrations demonstrate many aspects and perspectives of ‘millionness.’ This book is a must-have for libraries and brings to the surface the child in all of us who just likes knowing some neat “trivia” facts.

*By learning to read, our children are given the power of words, the power to express thoughts and feelings, the power to understand one another, the power to learn what they need to know.
Thanks to the authors and illustrators for creating these new books, and to the publishers for providing them for our review.*