

# Young Adult Literature Reviews: Contemporary Genre Selections

by Judith A. Hayn

Teen readers have specific favorites when selecting from young adult literature (YAL), often based on a genre of choice. Graduate students and their instructors at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock offer these reviews and classroom teaching ideas for a set of top-notch reads organized by category. The International Reading Association's Special Interest Group-Network on Adolescent Literature (SIGNAL) sponsored this column. For additional articles and reviews useful to classroom teachers, check out our website at <http://signal-ya.org>.

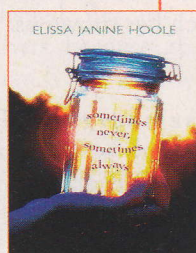
## Realistic Fiction/ Problem Novel

*Sometimes Never, Sometimes  
Always* by Elissa J. Hoole (Flux)

Like most adolescents, Cass is trying to figure out who she is. Propelled by an Internet survey in which she didn't have anything "good" to report about herself—and nagged by the English assignment in which she simply can't write a poem about herself based on Whitman's "Song of Myself"—Cass finds herself rebelling against her parents and their fundamentalist religious beliefs she feels are forced upon her. By starting an Internet advice blog using tarot cards, and failing to stand up for someone who needed help, Cass opens herself and her friends up to a cyber-bullying incident she never intended to happen. With the help of her gay brother, who has his own problems dealing with their fundamentalist parents, and her newfound boyfriend Darin, can Cass make amends and become a person she can be proud of being? A great book for Grades 9 and up because it has so many issues relevant to adolescents today.

**Classroom Connection:** Ask your students to do the very thing that Cass could not complete until the end of the book. Read Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" in class and have students write their own poems celebrating themselves.

—Heather A. Olvey



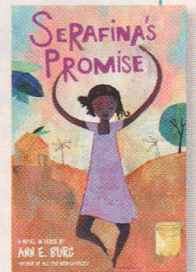
## Novel in Verse/Problem Novel

*Serafina's Promise* by Ann E. Burg (Scholastic)

Living in poverty-stricken Haiti, 11-year-old Serafina struggles to keep up with daily chores on their hardscrabble farm while yearning to attend school. Her best friend Julie Marie and an inspirational female doctor support her; eventually, so do her parents. First a flood destroys the family home; then an earthquake devastates the city of Port-au-Prince. In verse novel format, Burg uses the lilting Creole dialect and Haitian proverbs to add to the poignancy of the tale. Serafina is a plucky, determined heroine who perseveres despite the difficulties of her life.

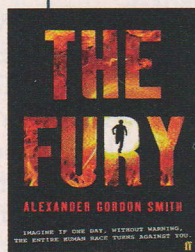
**Classroom Connection:** Using the book as a read-aloud creates opportunities to teach many literary terms, and a glossary in the back helps with pronunciation and meanings. Serafina gives her mother a heart-shaped rock. Ask students to find an item that they would pass on to someone; write about the object, the reason you are giving it, and to whom.

—Judith A. Hayn



## Horror/Action

*The Fury* by Alexander Gordon Smith (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)



Cal, Daisy, and Brick were just ordinary teenagers in England living their ordinary lives until everyone they knew, family and friends and even people they didn't know, became infected with "the fury." Brought together by circumstance as well as the question posed in an online forum, Why is everyone trying to kill me?, these three teenagers attempt to find out why everyone has turned against them and is now trying to kill them. The answer to this question turns out not to be as simple as it may first appear. Smith takes the classic zombie trope and turns it on its head, and although the book is a hefty weight (coming in just under 700 pages), it grips the reader right in the beginning with the author building and

weaving suspense through every chapter. Overall, Smith delivers an excellent addition to the YA horror genre that even adults would enjoy. This one is for use with Grade 9 and up, due to graphic content.

**Classroom Connection:** Instruct the students on how to turn the book into a cinematic venture by creating a book trailer for the novel. For the activity, break up the class into small groups of about three students. Have the groups come up with a script, storyboard outline, and then design and create their own book trailer.

—Amanda Valdivieso

## Nonfiction

### *The Nazi Hunters* by Neal Bascomb (Arthur A. Levine Books)

During World War II, Adolph Eichmann is a top ranking member of the SS guard and is put in charge of answering “the Jewish question.” In doing so, he is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Jews during the war. After WWII, Eichmann narrowly escapes Germany and relocates to Argentina. *The Nazi Hunters* focuses on the Israeli Special Forces detection of Eichmann in Argentina. The novel is full of suspense as various Israeli agents, many of them Holocaust survivors, go undercover to identify and capture Eichmann. In the final stages of the book, Eichmann is transferred back to Israel to stand trial and ultimately pay for his transgressions against the Jewish people. This book is for use with Grade 7 and up.

**Classroom Connection:** *The Nazi Hunters* would work perfectly alongside a unit on World War II and the Holocaust. This book could be used to build upon the horrors of the Holocaust by placing names and faces with certain people who were involved. The number of primary source documents and pictures will allow students to make a real connection to the people portrayed in the book.

—Brady Bone



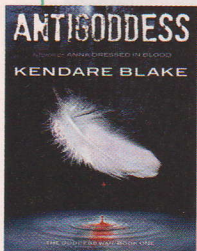
## Fantasy

### *Antigoddess* by Kendare Blake (Macmillan)

The gods and goddesses of Olympus are still alive after thousands of years, but their immortality is waning. Set in modern day, Hera is killing off gods and goddesses in an effort to absorb their energy. Athena and Hermes' only hope in fighting back is Cassandra of Troy. But Cassandra has no memory of her powerful past. Can Athena convince the overprotective Apollo to let Cassandra help in the war against Hera? It's a battle of the clock, as Hera sweeps closer, killing thousands as she searches to destroy her defiant stepchildren. The storyline is as complex and exciting as the Greek myths they're based upon. Any fan of mythology will enjoy the riveting modern-day, ego-saturated saga of the ancient gods. Not for the faint of heart due to battle scenes, this novel is recommended for fans of mythology or fantasy, ages 13 and up.

**Classroom Connection:** Divide the class into small groups of three or four. Each group must choose one god, goddess, or hero from Greek mythology that is not already featured in the novel *Antigoddess*. Have the students write their character into the novel, making sure to include a description of the character's modern day form, what illness has stricken the character, which “side” (Athena's or Hermes') the character chooses, and the ultimate fate of the character.

—Kristin Heldenbrand



## Adventure and Sci-Fi

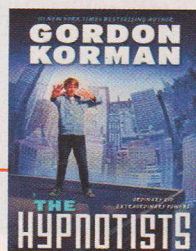
### *The Hypnotists* by Gordon Korman (Scholastic)

Typical. A teenage boy sprints to catch a bus so he won't miss his basketball game, but—UGH! he's too late! Wait a second... a bus heading his way surprisingly stops—and then whizzes him through the city on a death-defying ride. But the story doesn't stop there. He then beats the district MVP in his game, and later he almost sends his doctor flying from a window. Still typical?

Jax is beginning to realize that he's a little different. “Nobody truly understands the nuts and bolts of how mesmerizing power is transmitted,” Dr. Mako admits to him. Teenager Jackson Opus, the son of two profoundly gifted hypnotists, is realizing that although he has little trouble controlling the fates of others, controlling his destiny has its own unique consequences. A great book for readers ages 8–12, Gordon Korman's *The Hypnotists* explores how power changes relationships and creates responsibility. The first of its series, this book moves at a rapid pace with age-appropriate language, so readers are sure to be engaged the entire time.

**Classroom Connection:** Have your students hypnotize others by writing in the second person and describing their commands. This could be a great segue into teaching the four kinds of sentences or narrator perspective.

—Brandon McClinton



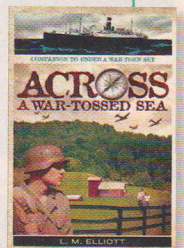
## Historical Fiction

### *Across a War-Tossed Sea* by L.M. Elliott (Disney-Hyperion)

Two brothers embark on a scary new adventure when World War II rips them from their parents and places them in the care of an American family. Charles and Wesley struggle to acclimate to the American way of life while their parents remain in London. Through scary dreams about U-Boats and sunken ships to scuffles and hunting trips gone awry, Charles and Wesley's story is one that entertains and educates the reader. While the reader follows the pair through their daily triumphs and struggles, the reader learns of biracial relations in the American South in the 1940s. The reader also empathizes with Charles and Wesley as they struggle to understand why Americans allow Nazi prisoners of war to work on their land and do not treat them the way that Nazis treat the people of Europe. This story takes readers through the trying times of war and adolescence just as Charles and Wesley see it. This book is a wonderful read and a great historical fiction for middle school-aged children through high school.

**Classroom Connection:** Create groups in the class. Have each group research a particular issue that occurs in the novel (race relations, assimilating into an unknown society, treatment of prisoners of war, etc.) and then develop a multimedia presentation on both historical features and how they are incorporated into the novel. You could also try working in collaboration with a history teacher in developing the assignment.

—Hannah Jones



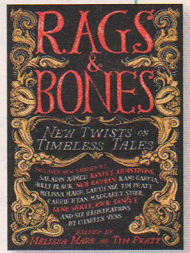
## Short Story Anthology

*Rags & Bones: New Twists on Timeless Tales* edited by Melissa Marr & Tim Pratt (Little, Brown, and Company)

The future, queens, magic, goddesses, immortality, love, loss...are you intrigued yet? Timeless tales are stripped to their barest of bones and meticulously reassembled by favorite authors in this compilation. In these short stories inspired by the authors' favorite tales, the reader is transported back in time, into the future, and everywhere in between, giving the audience a fresh perspective on each tale. The pieces span from stories we grew up on, such as "Sleeping Beauty" and "Rumpelstiltskin," to more classical works such as Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King" and Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*, and works that are not as well known in schools, including William Morris' *The Wood Beyond the World* and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*. Charles Vess contributes illustrations throughout, including a beautiful piece for Christina Rossetti's *The Goblin Market*. If nothing else, these stories may actually intrigue teens enough to seek out the original work and think about what it was that grabbed these authors' imaginations enough to revisit the tales and rewrite a portion, character, or idea from their own perspectives.

**Classroom Connection:** Work with the students to determine what these "rags" and "bones" could be, then have the students break down other tales, stories, poems, or other works to their "rags" and "bones," and create their own new interpretation.

—Diana Brown and Heather Olvey



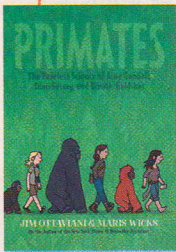
## Nonfiction/Science/Graphic Novel

*The Fearless Science of Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Birutė Galdikas*  
by Jim Ottaviani & Maris Wicks (First Second)

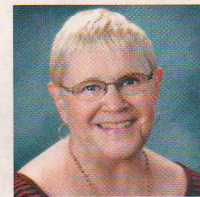
In science and in life, there are always new mountains to climb. With humor, expressive illustrations, and moving dialogue and narration, the graphic novel *Primates* will engage adolescent readers in the scientific accomplishments and life stories of three greats in primatology: Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Birutė Galdikas. Through dedication and hard work, the main characters illuminate professional accomplishments and persevere through personal struggles. The book addresses conservation as well as numerous facts about primate behaviors and the process of scientific inquiry. Sprinkled with anecdotes of mischievous chimps, exotic insect bites, dung swirling, treks through swamps, and the occasional barfing illness, this graphic novel is sure to keep adolescent readers turning pages. The book is a perfect complement to the move to develop literacy in the content area and to include more non fiction texts in the classroom. This book is for use with Grade 7 and up.

**Classroom Connection:** After reading the novel or a selected excerpt, direct students to research the accomplishments and life of another respected scientist. Create a storyboard that could be a-day-in-the-life of the selected scientist. Students could create and share their storyboards as posters or by using cartoon software such as [www.toondo.com](http://www.toondo.com).

—Karina R. Clemmons



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