

TOP



SHELF

FICTION

FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL

READERS 2004

For the second year, our committee of librarians and students in the Albany, New York, area reviewed more than one hundred books to select the best for middle school readers. In many ways, the process ran more smoothly this year. With a year of experience, the adult committee members were able to examine the many publisher submissions more quickly. Many of the same middle school students participated again, and after reading their comments in print in last year's February issue of **VOYA**, they were eager to read more books and write better, more complete observations for this year's list. Their remarks are included in our annotations with grades or ages in parentheses. We were all more organized this year and focused on the books that were really contenders instead of wasting time with books not suitable for the list (those books aimed at younger readers or older readers).

Our list includes many subgenres from fantasy to realistic fiction. Despite the different frameworks, a significant majority of the books have the same underlying theme of overcoming difficult obstacles,

whether they are magical and mystical, such as feuding Chinese gods, or realistic, as with the impending death of a loved one. Our readers, both adult and teen, favored different genres and plots, but we all responded to the same universal theme of going against the odds, battling demons (real and imagined), and coming out okay in the end. Our list, as well as our experience writing it, reflects that theme.

Aside from several contested titles—Eoin Colfer's **The Supernaturalist** was a huge hit with the middle school readers and not well received by the adult committee members, and Joy Cowley's exhilarating **Hunter** did not attract much teen attention—adult and teen readers harmoniously agreed on the majority of our selections. The list spans the entire middle school range of grades six through eight, with some titles on the younger end of the range and some older. We chose twenty-four books that include fantasy, science fiction, realistic fiction, historical fiction, adventure, and multicultural subgenres. The total cost for the entire list is just under \$400.

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Bass, L. G. **Sign of the Qin**. Hyperion, 2004. 383p. \$17.99.



0-7868-1918-9. **VOYA** June 2004. **5Q 4P J S**

Based on Chinese legends, this engrossing first book in The Outlaws of Moonshadow Marsh trilogy introduces the major characters in an upcoming battle between good and evil, focusing on the Chosen One, the young Starlord prophesied to save the world from evil. "The description was wonderful, and there were so many different plot lines interweaving," said Beth (grade 8). "It was fantastic with all the different strange creatures and magic." Stephen (age 14) agreed and liked the book because it was "intricately written. I like how the author shows the good and evil sides." Andrew (age 13) liked it because it was "funny, serious, magical, mythical, and thrilling all at the same time."

Bloor, Edward. **Story Time**. Harcourt, 2004.

320p. \$17. 0-15-204670-4. **VOYA** April 2004.

4Q 3P M J

Just imagine having to take a test every day, in every subject, and you'll have only some idea of what school is like for middle school students George and Kate. "I like how the author shows the perspective of the students and how they would like to think that their teachers are evil, or that the things the teachers do are really just the demon inside of them," explained Emily (grade 7). Danilyn (grade 8) liked "the different way nursery rhymes are used in the story." Meaghan (age 14) was impressed with Bloor's language: "It expanded my vocabulary and was just plain fun to read. Bloor really went into depth with his great plot and I loved it!" Jessi (age 14) loved the book, as well, and thought it was "interesting and the plot was original."



Brugman, Alyssa. **Walking Naked**. Delacorte, 2004. 185p. \$15.95.



0-385-73115-9. PLB \$17.99. 0-385-90142-9.

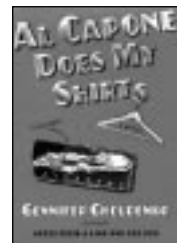
VOYA June 2004. **5Q 4P J S**

When popular high school student Megan befriends "The Freak," she ultimately must choose between that friendship and popularity. The decision, once made, has tragic results. Kara (grade 8) liked the book because "it makes you think about what you do to people." Hannah (grade 8) also liked the book a lot because "it is so close to real life." Jasmine (grade 8) was moved by this "poetic and touching story of high school life. I really enjoyed this book and would recommend it to anyone who likes poetry or just enjoys reading."

Choldenko, Jennifer. **Al Capone Does My Shirts**. G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2004. 225p. \$15.99.

0-399-23861-1. **VOYA** April 2004. **4Q 4P M J**

It's 1935, and Moose Flanagan's family moves to Alcatraz Island, home of famous criminal Al Capone. Life at this high-security prison could be pretty exciting for Moose, if only he didn't have to deal with his sister, Natalie, and her very troublesome behavior. Jennifer (grade 8) "loved this book! I thought that the setting was such a creative place to have a book take place in."



Colfer, Eoin. **The Naturalist**. Hyperion, 2004. 267p. \$16.95. 0-7868-5148-1. **VOYA**

August 2004. **5Q 4P S**

After surviving electrocution, fourteen-year-old Cosmo discovers that he can see supernatural creatures that are invisible to most of the inhabitants of Satellite City. "I liked this book because it shows what determination and



Publishers: How to nominate your books for VOYA's next Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers

If your new fiction publications for middle school readers fulfill this list's selection criteria, please nominate them as follows:

1. Select your finest fiction published between October 2004 and September 2005. You are limited to five titles from each imprint.
2. Send six copies of each nominated 2005 title to our selection committee chair: Rollie Welch, Top Shelf Fiction Committee, 11222 Loris Ave., Aurora, OH 44202.
3. Be sure that the committee receives your books as early as possible but no later than **September 2, 2005**.
4. Winning selections will be featured in the next edition of *Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers*, an annotated booklist, in the February 2006 issue of **VOYA**.
5. Refer procedural inquiries to **VOYA** Review Editor/Managing Editor Linda Benson by phone at (301) 459-3366, ext. 5702, or by e-mail to lbenson@voya.com.

NOTE: Submitting a nomination does not mean that you are also submitting the title for review. Please send review copies to **VOYA** Review Editor, 4501 Forbes Blvd., Suite 200, Lanham, MD 20706.

SELECTION CRITERIA FOR TOP SHELF FICTION 2004

- Themes and subject matter are of particular interest to readers aged eleven through thirteen or in grades six through eight.
- Titles have special appeal to this age group as both outstanding companions to middle school curriculum and free reading choices.
- Fiction books published between October 2003 and September 2004 are eligible.
- The final list reflects the geographic, ethnic, racial, intellectual, and economic diversity of North American middle school readers.
- The final list reflects top quality in books for middle school readers—"best" books that stand out among the rest, that take old plots and make them new and original, and that have something different to say and say it well.
- The list is limited to thirty titles or fewer.

teamwork can accomplish," observed Chrissy (grade 8). Jasmine (grade 8) was one of the many teens who enjoyed this "wonderful book that teaches a lot. It makes you realize that on the outside something might be an enemy but really on the inside is a dear friend."

Cowley, Joy. **Hunter**. Philomel, 2004. 153p. \$17.99. 0-399-24227-9. **VOYA** February 2005. **4Q 4P M J S**

When Hunter finally gets a chance to escape his cruel Maori masters in 1805 New Zealand, he is sidetracked by mysterious visions of three modern-day young children in trouble in this riveting multicultural adventure story.



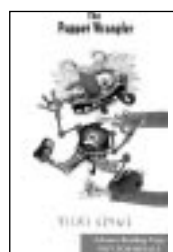
Golding, Theresa Martin. **The Truth About Twelve**. Boyds Mills Press, 2004. 171p. \$16.95. 1-59078-291-7.



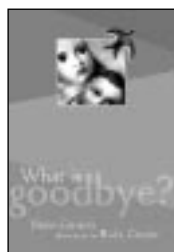
Lindy Perkins misses her old life in Philadelphia, but ever since the Awful Thing happened in her family, life has been very different. If only she could tell the truth about that traumatic day when her whole world changed. Jennifer (grade 8) "loved how confident Lindy was in herself and how she stood up for herself despite the fact that she was carrying such a depressing secret."

Grant, Vicki. **The Puppet Wrangler**. Orca, 2003. 212p. \$7.99 pb. 1-55143-304-4. **VOYA** December 2004. **3Q 2P M**

Meet Bitsie, a wisecracking and very much alive puppet, who is also the new best friend of twelve-year-old Telly. Hannah (grade 8) raved, "This book is really funny, and it grabbed me. I didn't want to stop at the end of a chapter, so I read chapter after chapter. That's how well it is written." Ericka (grade 8) agreed "its really good, really funny." Danilyn (grade 8) "loved the book because there was hardly ever a dull moment."



Grimes, Nikki. **What is Goodbye?** Jump at the Sun/Hyperion, 2004. 64p. \$15.99. 0-7868-0778-4.



Through alternating poems, Jerilyn and Jesse grieve for their lost older brother. Grimes's smooth and graceful verse powerfully captures the family's attempts to become whole again. Erin (grade 8) said, "It's very realistic and kids who have lost a loved one can really relate to this book." Alison (grade 6) loved the poetry, especially how it "talks about sadness and then being happy again."

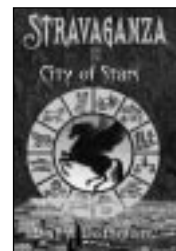
Hale, Marian. **The Truth About Sparrows**. Henry Holt, 2004. 260p. \$16.95. 0-8050-7584-4.

Twelve-year-old Sadie learns the true meaning of friendship, family, and most important, kindness, when she and her family move to Texas during the Great Depression. Jennifer (age 13) liked the realistic nature of the book, particularly how Sadie's problems "seemed as if they could have actually happened." The book kept her "wanting to read more and more, which in my standards, is [the mark of] a great book."



Hoffman, Mary. **Stravaganza: City of Stars**. Bloomsbury, 2003. 457p. \$17.95. 1-58234-839-1.

VOYA December 2003. **4Q 3P M J S**
Fifteen-year-old Georgia travels to an alternate reality, escaping her stepbrother's verbal abuse, involving herself in political intrigue, and running into old friends and new in this mesmerizing sequel to **Stravaganza: City of Masks**.



Hannah (grade 8) exclaimed, "I loved the book because it includes things from the prequel and is so suspenseful." Although Katie (grade 8) had not read the first book, she was still impressed and "liked this book because it had many adventures."



Hoobler, Dorothy and Thomas. **In Darkness, Death**. Philomel, 2004. 195p. \$16.99. 0-399-23767-4. **VOYA** April 2004. **4Q 4P M J**

Seikei, fourteen-year-old apprentice to the famous Judge Ooka, must investigate the murder of samurai Lord Inaba in eighteenth-century Japan. Sent on a special mission, filled with many surprises and much adventure, Seikei must unlock the secret of their only clue, a bloodstained origami butterfly. Sandy (grade 8) liked how this book "tells the samurai point of view of the ninja. Also, the suspense nearly killed me."

Kaaberbol, Lene. **The Shamer's Daughter**. 235p. \$16.95. 0-8050-7541-0. **VOYA** June 2004. **5Q 4P M J S**

Dina is not happy to have inherited her mother's powers as a shamer—powers forcing her to see people's darkest secrets. When her mother is accused of treason, however, Dina must overcome her fears and frustrations to save her mother and an innocent man accused of a heinous crime. Chrissy (grade 8) "liked this book because it was very descriptive and suspenseful." Jessi (age 14) also enjoyed the book and was hooked from the very first sentence that "just dragged me in from beginning to end."



Karr, Kathleen. **Exiled: Memoirs of a Camel**. Marshall Cavendish, 2004. 240p. \$15.95. 0-7614-5164-1.



VOYA August 2004. **4Q 3P M**
The United States Camel Corps drafts young camel Ali, shipping him from Egypt to Texas in 1856, where he has many adventures until the Civil War forces the program to end. Beth (grade 8) was intrigued with "reading a book from a camel's point of view" and enjoyed this "very good adventure story." Sandy (grade 8) also liked how the book was written from the camel's point of view.

La Faye, A. **Worth**. Simon & Schuster, 2004. 160p. \$15.95. 0-689-85730-6. **VOYA** October 2004. **3Q 2P M J**

After an accident crushes Nathaniel's leg, rendering him useless on the family farm, his father takes in John Worth, fresh off the train from New York City, to help with the chores. Mini (age 12) liked the scene where John and Nathaniel are fighting and enjoyed the amount of detail that the author gives the reader. Jasmine (grade 8) liked how "John becomes part of the family after not fitting in for a while" and exclaimed that "this was the best book I have read all summer."



Lowry, Lois. **Messenger**. Houghton Mifflin, 2004. 169p. \$16. 0-618-40441-4. **VOYA** June 2004. **4Q 5P M J S**



*As his once peaceful and accepting village begins a fight to close its doors to newcomers, Matty discovers that he has a powerful gift and is sent on a dangerous mission in this very satisfying sequel to both **The Giver** and **Gathering Blue**. While Beth (grade 8) thought that "the characters were very lifelike," Kara (grade 8) enjoyed it because "it was never boring and it really flowed. It ended the series in a good way that made you think." Ashley (grade 8) agreed and "liked that it wasn't just a simple solution."*

McGhee, Alison. **Snip**. Candlewick, 2004. 129p. \$15.99. 0-7636-2002-5.

The impending death of Sally's grandmother profoundly affects best friends Sally and Eddie during the summer between sixth and seventh grades in this beautifully written, poignant novel. Kate (age 14) enjoyed reading this "peaceful, mellow, thought-provoking book."



Morgan, Clay. **The Boy Who Spoke Dog**. Dutton, 2003. 166p. \$15.99. 0-525-47159-6. **VOYA** June 2004. **4Q 4P M**



Twice-orphaned Jack washes up on a deserted island inhabited by two groups of dogs and becomes an integral part of their civil war in this engrossing and compelling read. Ericka (grade 8) enjoyed this book because Jack "finds peace with the dogs."

Rees, Celia. **Pirates!** Bloomsbury, 2003. 380p. \$16.95. 1-58234-816-2. **VOYA** December 2003. **4Q 4P S**

Sixteen-year-old Nancy and Minerva, her plantation slave friend, escape on board the Deliverance when their lives are endangered. They soon find that they've merely exchanged one danger for another—the life of a pirate! Chrissy (grade 8) raved, "I really liked this book. It showed how strong women are [and] also how men and women are able to [work together] and accomplish the same goal." Ashley (grade 8) also liked how it "had lots of action and suspense." Erin (grade 8) agreed that the plot was "very suspenseful" and enjoyed this "twisting story that takes characters all over the world."



Rodman, Mary Ann. **Yankee Girl**. Farrar Straus Giroux, 2004. 219p. \$17. 0-374-38661-7.



Alice Ann cannot comprehend Valerie's reluctance to become friends or the clique's hatred of them both. Must she conform to 1964 Mississippi life and torment black Valerie, or will her Northern ideals prevail? Jasmine (grade 8) said, "I enjoyed this book because it is an amazing story about how everything started to change. I would recommend this book to anyone.

If you like history you will enjoy this book even more." Courtney (age 14) echoed, "I could really relate to the characters in this historical fiction. Their story sends a great message to readers." Katie (grade 8) also liked the historical aspect of the book and how "this really happened."

Schmidt, Gary D. **Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy**.



Clarion, 2004. 219p. \$15. 0-618-43929-3. **VOYA** August 2004. **4Q 3P M J S**

Black Lizzie Bright and white Turner Buckminster become friends, defying their segregated Maine community in the early 1900s with tragic consequences. Sandy (grade 8) was impressed with the writing, claiming, "It's a very emotional book, and it makes you want to keep reading and reading it." Danilyn (grade 8) agreed and liked the "story of friendship between two kids of different backgrounds even though the friendship is forbidden."

Whitesel, Cheryl Aylward. **Blue Fingers: A Ninja's Tale**. Clarion, 2004. 256p. \$15. 0-618-38139-2. **VOYA** October 2004. **3Q 4P M J**

Twelve-year-old Koji constantly lives in his twin brother's shadow, very unlucky in sixteenth-century Japan, until his life is drastically altered when he is kidnapped by a band of ninjas living in the mountains near his home. Sandy (grade 8) said, "It is interesting to learn how the ninjas train and lead secret lives. The story is full of suspense and is an all-around great book."



Woods, Brenda. **Emako Blue**. G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2004. 124p. \$15.99. 0-399-24006-3. **VOYA** August 2004. **2Q 3P J**

Emako Blue was the girl in high school everyone either loved or loved to hate, and the reasons why are revealed through the alternating voices of several classmates. Jessi (age 14) thought that the book was really interesting and liked how even though the "four people who knew Emako, knew her in different ways, but [they] saw her the same after she died." Meaghan (age 14) also "loved this book" and agrees that "each of them had a different story to tell but each story told of hardships, joy, and the realization that something really big was happening."



Wright, Randall. **Hunchback**. Henry Holt, 2004. 256p. \$16.95. 0-8050-7232-2. **VOYA** June 2004. **4Q 4P M J**

Hodge, a hunchbacked commoner, is relegated to the most menial of jobs at Castle Marlbry. He dreams of the day that he can serve the king, but when it comes, he is thrust headlong into danger and adventure beyond his wildest imagination. Emily (grade 7) liked "the uniqueness of the characters," and Allen (grade 7) liked that Wright kept "the tale so suspenseful that you couldn't stop reading it until the very last page."



Members of the Top Shelf Fiction List Committee 2004

- Britt Buckenroth, School Library Media Specialist at the Ichabod Crane Primary School, Valatie, New York, and Tween Book Group Coordinator at East Greenbush Community Library, East Greenbush, New York.
- Beth Nagel, Youth Services/Young Adult Librarian at Bethlehem Public Library, Delmar, New York.
- Mary Ann Prendergast, School Library Media Specialist at Goff Middle School, East Greenbush, New York.
- Sheila Di Maggio, School Library Media Specialist at Farnsworth Middle School, Guilderland, New York.
- Chair Jennifer McIntosh, Young Adult Librarian at East Greenbush Community Library.