

*Strike Two* by Amy Goldman Koss  
Dial Books, 2001, 134 pp., \$16.99

Friendship/Softball  
ISBN: 0-803726074

Gwen's life during the summer revolved around playing softball, and hanging out with her cousin Jess. This summer, though, everything changed – family, friends, even herself.

Koss presents a lighthearted look at friendship and values through the eyes of a middle school aged-girl. The catalyst for our young protagonist's growth is a newspaper strike, which splits her small town in two. The town divides between management and workers, and neighbor against neighbor. Eventually, it divides Gwen's softball team, too, as her teammates begin to choose sides according to their parents' politics.

Forced to make new friends, young Gwen is surprised to learn how oblivious she has been to the lives of the many people in her town. Propelled by a sense of moral outrage and inner helplessness, Gwen organizes a secret co-ed softball game for the townspeople to enjoy. Her hope is to regain some town unity, lost in the wake of the strike.

This is an enjoyable read for young teen readers interested in the potential power sports have to bring people together.

Mariana Van Meter  
Tempe, Arizona

*Finding H. F.* by Julia Watts  
Alyson Books, 2001, 165 pp., \$12.95

Homosexuality/Friendship  
ISBN: 31-55583-622-4

At 16, Heavenly Faith, who goes by H. F. to avoid embarrassment, lives in a small Kentucky town with her grandmother. Never having met her mother, who ran away when H. F. was a baby, H. F. is appreciative of her grandmother's generosity, but not taken in by her religious preaching. In fact, H. F. is confident that her grandmother would throw her out if she knew that H. F. is gay.

The only one that H. F. can confide in completely is her best friend Bo, who is also gay. When H. F. has her gay encounter, one that ends in humiliation, she is able to deal with it only by discussing it with Bo. After H. F. learns the whereabouts of her long-lost mother, Bo and H. F. take off for Florida on a journey that along the way connects them to gay runaways in Atlanta. On the trip, she learns more about relationships: "Girls can love girls if they want to, boys can love boys if they want to, and a girl and a boy can love each other as dear friends and nothing more or less."

This novel, laced with realistic teen voices, should fill a void for many teens who are coping with the sometimes-confusing realization of who they really are.

Kay Parks Haas  
Ottawa, Kansas

*Osama Bin Laden: A War Against The West* by Elaine Landau  
Twenty-first Century Books, 2002, 144 pp., \$23.90

Terrorism  
ISBN: 0-7613-1709-0

Personal glimpses into the lives of terrorists are rare. Violent and faceless attention is usually drawn to the devastation they create, rather than who they are, what they do, and why they do it.

*Osama Bin Laden: A War Against the West* offers an engaging, yet disturbing portrait of today's most noted international terrorist. Landau carefully and thoughtfully details the life of bin Laden, from wealthy, millionaire playboy to violent, Islamic terrorist, providing important background to understand the motivations and actions of this ringleader. More than an historical overview, the text provides keen insights into the personality and relationships of bin Laden through his own words, and those who know him best.

This book is carefully researched and documented, yet presented in such a way that it is stimulating and provocative. It gives depth and contour to an already intriguing and elusive character. While the bizarre cover is less than appealing, the pages of this easy to read will keep teens interested. And the experience will leave you more informed about a phenomenon that increasingly shapes our lives: terrorism.

William Gaudelli  
Orlando, Florida

## Young Adult Books In Review

### Recently Published Titles

Jeff Kaplan, Editor  
*3x5 inches to "Clip & File"*

*Please contact Jeff Kaplan at [jkaplan@ucf.edu](mailto:jkaplan@ucf.edu)  
if you are interested in reviewing  
YA books for this section.*

*Among the Impostors* by Margaret Peterson  
Simon & Schuster, 2001, 172 pp., \$16.00

In this sequel to *Among the Hidden*, Luke Garner, a third child born under the a futuristic government that allows two children per family, has been placed at the Hendricks School for Boys under an assumed name. The other boys mistreat Luke, who longs to read the final message given to him by Jen's father, hoping it will provide comfort. It doesn't.

Luke looks for another way to feel solace and discovers an open door. Once outdoors, Luke remembers his days at his parents' farm and starts a garden. When he finds it ruined, he begins to look at the other boys and discovers they are strange. Only a few of them look him in the eye.

Determined to solve the mystery of who ruined the garden, Luke discovers a group of boys and girls meeting in the woods. They are also third children, but Luke doesn't trust them completely. Is he justified in his mistrust? Could these boys have anything to do with the Population Police?

This novel answers some questions posed by the author's first book, but leaves many more, which logically point to a third book in this series. Young readers will enjoy the story as they ponder the implications of living in such a society.

Lu Ann Staheli  
Parson, Utah

*A Diamond in the Rust* by Carla Johnson  
Dial Books, 2001, 197 pp., \$17.99

The coal mines kill, and Katy's father, brother, and boyfriend are all deep in the mines every day. Yet 16-year-old Katy wants more, and her teacher, Miss Maplewhite, and her brother, Tim, see her potential to be an educated and successful woman. In early 1900s Illinois, though, women, including Katy's mother, marry young, have children, and wait in fear of the siren that cuts through the sky, shrieking the death of their coal miner husbands.

Katy inspires readers as she struggles to break away from traditional expectations to achieve new dreams. Teenage readers especially will connect with Katy as they themselves search for ways to become who they want to be in the face of expectations from society, their family, and their friends.

The characters in this book – from Katy's stoic mother to the coal mine's young, arrogant boss – are vivid and believable in their honest struggles with a changing world.

Susanne Nobles  
Fredericksburg, Virginia

Science Fiction/Social Acceptance  
ISBN: 0-68-983904-9

*The Beguilers* by Kate Thompson  
Dutton Children's Books, 2001, 183 pp., \$16.99

Rifka is different, and her community knows it. She has not made her Great Intention, despite being past the normal age of 14, and she is allergic to chuffies, the animals normal humans depend on.

Welcome to the world created by Kate Thompson in this story of a girl who can depend on herself to discover all she can be! This futuristic tale will engage fantasy readers as they are immersed in this new world, following Rilka on her quest to capture the mysterious beguilers. Yet, for readers not already tried-and-true fantasy lovers, this book might be a bit frustrating, as its focus jumps around, leaving Rilka's quest to touch on the mystery of the beguilers, the community's past, and a new friendship. While each thread is interesting as it develops, the novel's ending does not bring closure to all of them.

Knowing the potential frustrations in the ending, middle school and early high school students can find *The Beguilers* an engaging independent read as they learn from Rilka how to make it on one's own dedication and determination.

Susanne Nobles  
Fredericksburg, Virginia

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Fantasy  
ISBN: 0-525-46806-4

*The Gospel According to Larry* by Janet Tashjian  
Henry Holt & Company, 2001, 227 pp., \$16.95

Humor/Teen Problems  
ISBN: 0-8050-6378-1

Josh Swenson, gifted teenager, has always been a loner. Tired of complacency, he designs a Website, [thegospelaccordingtolarry.com](http://thegospelaccordingtolarry.com) in which he speaks out against consumerism. Josh keeps his identity a secret – even from Beth, the girl he admires – and uses the name Larry on the Website. He's not prepared for the popularity of the Website, however.

Josh cannot seem to tell Beth, and he worries when someone called Betagold is determined to identify Larry. Josh's mother is dead, and he cannot confide in his stepfather.

When Betagold identifies Larry, Josh finds his world falling apart. He can only plan his own death (though he intends to stay alive), and leave the world he has known to find a new identity. The poignant conclusion of this book leaves the reader wanting a sequel. Tashjian shows us the world of the bright adolescent in the trials and triumphs of Josh.

Connie Russell  
Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

*The Babbs Switch Story* by Darleen Bailey Beard  
Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2002, 166 pp., \$16.00

Twelve-year-old Ruthie finds that the simple life of 1924 Oklahoma is becoming more complicated by the minute. Although many of her experiences are typical of those who are coming of age, Ruthie's life is made more complicated by having to deal with the antics of Daphne, her sixteen-year-old sister who has the developmental level of a young child.

In this sensitively rendered text, Ruthie experiences conflicted feelings about "daffy Daphne." Alternately, she recognizes Daphne's kind spirit, and is embarrassed by her often inappropriate behaviors. When Daphne accidentally kills the pet kitten, and "attacks" a neighbor's baby, the whole family experiences a sense of ostracism. Ruthie is horrified, and no longer knows how to cope with the challenges of a sister with special needs. It is not until the town faces an imminent tragedy, and Daphne's life is in danger, that Ruthie recognizes the depth of the loving bond they share.

The gentle story is set against the historical background of the tragic Babbs Switch schoolhouse fire, in which dozens of people lost their lives. Readers will empathize with the full range of emotions expressed by Ruthie, and will be challenged to look for a sense of hope, even in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Patricia Crawford  
Orlando, Florida

*Benno's Bear* by N. F. Zucker  
Dutton, 2001, 244 pp., \$16.99

Fiction/Adventure  
ISBN: 0-525-46521-0

Benno and his father survive in their central European city by their practice of their "work." Benno is an expert pickpocket, and does his "work" while father plays the concertina and their bear dances.

When Benno and his father are caught, however, the father is sent to prison, and the bear is sent to the zoo. A kind-hearted policeman and his wife take in Young Benno. Though his life is improved by their help, Benno yearns for his bear and his father. He tries to locate the bear; when he finally finds her in the zoo, she's almost dead because without Benno to feed her, she has refused to eat. Benno's problems seem to multiply. After he is accused of theft at his school, he manages to free his bear from the zoo, and runs away with her to the forest.

*Benno's Bear* is a warm and touching book, and Benno is an affecting character.  
June Harris  
Sierra Vista, Arizona

Dealing with Loss/Historical Fiction  
ISBN: 0-374-30475-0

*Uncle Daddy* by Ralph Fletcher  
Henry Holt & Company, 2001, 133 pp., \$15.95

Nine-year old Rivers was raised by his mother and his great uncle (Uncle Daddy), his father having left him when Rivers was only three. Uncle Daddy is an elementary school principal who teaches Rivers to play baseball, and lets Rivers and his friends have the run of the school to celebrate Rivers' "unbirthday."

Uncle Daddy is portrayed as the almost "perfect" father; however, life for Rivers, his mother, and Uncle Daddy changes when Rivers' biological father reappears after a six-year absence. Rivers is unsure whether he can trust his biological father and feels torn. How can anyone trust someone who goes out for pizza one night, and doesn't come back?

Still, Rivers' father is patient, and slowly earns Rivers' trust. When Uncle Daddy experiences a near-fatal heart attack, Rivers and his mother accept the aid of Rivers' biological father in remodeling living quarters for Uncle Daddy. Though some may argue the ending is a bit too idealistic, the story moves fast, and may appeal to many slow readers.

Pam B. Cole  
Kennesaw, Georgia

*Daniel's Walk* by Michael Spooner  
Henry Holt & Company, 2001, 214 pp., \$16.95  
ISBN: 0-8050-6750-7

A voice calls out to Daniel in a dream that he should set out from his home in Missouri to search for his father, a trapper working along the Green River near the Rocky Mountains. The West of 1844 was a treacherous place for a young man, but Daniel was determined to find his absent father. He joins a wagon train heading out on the Oregon Trail.

There, young Daniel makes friends with Mr. Clyman, his assistant, Johnny, and young woman named Rosalie. He also makes a formidable enemy in one Mr. Haggard.

Haggard kidnaps Daniel and Rosalie, intending to sell them as slave labor to other outlaws. How Daniel manages to escape with his life makes for a suspenseful and absorbing read.

Students who love the action adventure of authors like Will Hobbs and Gary Paulsen will enjoy *Daniel's Walk*. Because of the detailed descriptions of life on the Oregon Trail, history teachers might want to include this book in a study of westward expansion and exploration. The book produces a fast-paced story, while the underlying themes explore racism, exploitation, and prejudice.

Teri S. Lesesne  
Huntsville, Texas

*Black Mirror* by Nancy Werlin  
Dial, 2001, 249 pp., \$16.99

Acceptance of Self/Murder  
ISBN: 0-8037-2605-8

Frances, a scholarship student at a prestigious prep school, is plunged into a morass of confusion and intrigue after the apparent suicide of her only brother. To be part of what was important to her brother, she decides she should join the school's charitable club that was so integral a part of her brother's school life.

At her first meeting, she feels prickly sensations signaling something is not right about this group. A mildly retarded groundskeeper is the only one she can turn to when she discovers the true nature of the organization, and questions whether her brother's death was a suicide or not.

In this fast-paced mystery, Nancy Werlin once again keeps readers in suspense until the end of the book, and then offers a provocative surprise. Her willingness to delve into the human psyche, and share deep insights about human loneliness, fear, and self-acceptance give readers much more than a riveting novel.

Diana Mitchell  
Williamston, Michigan

*The Tiger Rising* by Kate DiCamillo  
Candlewick Press, 2001, 116 pp., \$12.99

Dealing With Loss  
ISBN: 0-7636-0911-0

While not as humorous as *Because of Winn-Dixie*, Kate DiCamillo has created another multi-layered story about dealing with loss, "letting sadness rise on up," and embracing life. Rather than confronting his grief, twelve-year-old Rob Horton lets nothing get to him – neither bullies at his new school, nor his rash, nor living in the Kentucky Star hotel! After his mom's death, Rob packed away his complicated feelings in a bulging suitcase. Even his mom's name brings heartache, until he discovers a tiger in the woods. This caged, pacing tiger serves as a hauntingly fierce metaphor for his deep grief throughout the book.

Willie May, a hotel maid, plays prophetess in offering Rob advice. The new girl Sistine teaches him to defy ridicule. Even his hollowed-out dad finally realizes Rob needs help in facing Caroline's death. In sparse, tight prose, DiCamillo quietly weaves the extraordinary alongside the universal in this symbolic and sensitive story of letting the tiger rise on up.

Sherron Killingsworth Roberts  
Orlando, Florida

*Anna Casey's Place in the World* by Adrian Fogelin  
Peachtree Publishers, LTD, 2001, 224 pp., \$14.95

Growth to Awareness  
ISBN: 1-56145-249

Anna Casey is a twelve-year-old girl who is trying to adjust to life with Miss Dupree, her foster parent.

Anna has lived with her grandmother, and later with her aunt and uncle; now, she wants to have a chance to grow up and be a part of a "real" family. Adjusting to living in this new foster home—with a distant, first time foster mother and a ten-year-old boy from a neglectful home—provides Anna with more than her fair share of challenges and burdens.

The reader will see how Anna discovers a sense of self as she succeeds in finding her place in the world. Her friend Eb, her biology teacher, her friends from the neighborhood, and a homeless Vietnam veteran help her to establish a sense of belonging and a positive outlook on life. To be sure, Anna has been through much, yet her charm and good common sense manage to win the day.

Fogelin tells a strong believable story and draws credible characters in this sequel to *Crossing Jordan* (2000).

Jeanne M. Gerlach  
Arlington, Texas

*Shattering Glass* by Gail Giles  
Roaring Brook Press, 2002, 224 pp., \$15.95

Coming of Age/Manipulation  
ISBN: 0-7613-1581-0

Rob, the very popular leader of the senior class, decides for his own enjoyment to transform the not so popular class nerd into Prince Charming. What follows is a series of events that manipulates Rob's friends to carry out his wishes.

The reader will soon discover that this novel is not so different from Robert Cormier's famous coming of age book *The Chocolate War*. The pranks, the sinister accomplishments all carefully constructed by Rob, give the reader the utmost feeling of manipulation – very Archiesque. The problem for Rob, of course, is that all is not going to end as he has planned. His cruel challenges lead to violence and death.

A compelling read – one that is somewhat slow in the middle – but one that moves to a tension-filled close.

John Bushman  
Overland Park, Kansas

*In the Shadow of the Alamo* by Sherry Garland  
Gulliver Books, 2001, 282 pp., \$17.00

Alamo/Historical Fiction  
ISBN: 0-15-201744-5

The captivating story of fifteen-year-old Lorenzo Beonfiacio gives American readers a new perspective of the 1836 battle at the Alamo, an old mission near San Antonio, Texas. Lorenzo, a poor, motherless boy from a tiny village in Mexico, is conscripted by gunpoint to join the Mexican Army, led by General Santa Anna. Garland paints superb word pictures, portraying unspeakable living conditions and horrible scenes of death and war. The best part of the book is the characterization. The reader is pulled gently into the mind and heart of Lorenzo as he reveals his hatred toward Santa Anna, his love for his friends and family, and his fears about the future.

The author's thorough research is evident as she describes the landscape, climate, and culture and gives insights into the inner workings of the Mexican army. Designated for ages 10 and up, *In the Shadow of the Alamo* contains significant lessons about life, war and history.

Deena Williams Newman  
Rockledge, Florida

*A Sea So Far* by Jean Thesman  
Viking, 2001, 195 pp., \$15.99

Historical Fiction  
ISBN: 0-670-89278-5

*A Sea So Far* opens with the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, and the introduction of two young girls whose lives are forever affected by the event. The story alternates between the orphan Kate, who longs to go to her mother's native Ireland, and wealthy Jolie, who lost her mother and her own health in the earthquake. The two girls' lives become intertwined during the years following the quake, and the setting shifts to Ireland in the story's end, as the two young women begin to take stock of their immediate futures.

This novel will interest adolescent girls, especially in grades 6-9, because it not only touches on historical facts in both California and Ireland, but it also incorporates the themes of jealousy, friendship, and coping with death. Boys, however, may have trouble relating to the two female protagonists.

Patti Cleary  
Peninsula, Ohio

*Groover's Heart* by Carole Crowe  
Boyd's Mills Press, 2001, 156 pp., \$15.95

Adult Alcoholism/Relationships  
ISBN: 1-56397-953-5

Charlotte's parents were killed when she was an infant. Now, a precocious eleven-year-old, she lives with her mother's sister. When Charlotte accidentally discovers the existence of a black-sheep uncle, her curiosity is aroused. Taking matters into her own hands, she arrives at her uncle's door, finding him a recovering alcoholic on the verge of a relapse. She also encounters a world very different from hers, filled with down-to-earth working people rather than the affluent environment in which she has grown up.

Charlotte draws friends and relatives into her web in an attempt to bring family members together, and pulls it off successfully. In the process, she learns about strengths and weaknesses, not only of others, but also within herself.

The author addresses the topic of adult alcoholism matter-of-factly, and with sensitivity. She also deals adroitly with issues of guilt, responsibility, and keeping secrets. *Groover's Heart* gives the adolescent reader a sense of empowerment as Charlotte discovers how families and friends can work together to solve problems.

Kristen Sternberg  
DeLand, Florida

*The Thieves of Ostia* by Caroline Lawrence  
Roaring Brook Press, 2002, 160 pp., \$15.95

Murder Mystery/Historical Fiction  
ISBN: 0-7613-1482-9

It is Rome, 79 A.D., and a group of children from diverse backgrounds join forces to discover why selected dogs in their neighborhood are being, of all things, beheaded.

Slowly, this gang of would-be detectives snoops around the city of Rome, following a host of leads. Soon, young Flavia Gemina and her band of Roman friends discover that the killer (who may also be a big time thief) might be someone closer to their lives than they had originally believed.

With adroit and skillful writing, the author hooks the reader into this fast-paced, sharply pieced together mystery, and doesn't let up until she reaches a convincing and satisfying solution – our culprit is caught, and justice is served.

Moreover, the book is filled with appealing and believable characters, interesting historical information, and strong narrative descriptions. A nice addition to this book is the concluding glossary of terms and place names derived from ancient Rome.

This work is the first in a projected series, and is appropriate for discriminating male and female readers of ages 9-14.

Wendy Bell  
Asheville, North Carolina

*Charlotte's Choice* by Cathleen Twomey  
Boyd's Mills Press, 2001, 184 pp., #15.95

When fourteen-year-old Jesse Irwin finds her way to Turner's Crossing, Missouri, aboard the Children's Aid Society Orphan's train, no one could have predicted she would find tragedy instead of the promised salvation. Jesse's story is told through the voice of Charlotte Ann Matthews, Jesse's only friend. Charlotte Ann must decide whether to reveal Jesse's horrible secret of sexual abuse at the hands of her adoptive father—and risk their friendship, or to keep her silence—and watch Jesse face the possibility of hanging for her father's murder.

This novel presents a fictitious dark side to the Orphan Train experience. In addition to providing historical insights to Missouri of 1905, the characters of this good read speak through the rich textures of colloquial language. Charlotte's family interactions prove that adolescent discomfort with parental and sibling relationships transcend time. *Charlotte's Choice* would be a solid and engaging selection for middle school readers.

Margaret J. Ford  
Campbell, Ohio

*Fair Weather* by Richard Peck  
Dial Books, 2001, 139 pp., \$16.99

The World's Columbian Exposition is in Chicago during the summer of 1893. Thirteen-year-old Rosie Beckett is far away in isolated Christian County, Illinois, with her mother, father, seventeen-year-old sister Lottie, seven-year-old brother Buster, and her gregarious, cantankerous Grandad. When they accept Aunt Euterpe's invitation to visit her in Chicago and attend the fair, their lives change forever. Acclaimed young adult novelist Richard Peck expertly weaves the fictional Beckett family into the real World's Fair of 1893, complete with historical figures Susan B. Anthony, Lillian Russell, Little Egypt, and Buffalo Bill Cody.

Young Rosie experiences bright electric lights, displays from countries all over the world, the Transportation Building, the Fisheries Building, the Woman's Building, the first ferris wheel, and exotic foods like the newly invented hamburger during her short stay at the 1893 World's Fair. These experiences encourage young Rosie to mature from a child to a young woman. Peck's latest novel is humorous, engaging, and quite believable. I highly recommend it.

Susanne L. Johnston  
Stout, Wisconsin

*Orphan Train/Coming of Age*  
ISBN: 1-56397-938-1

*Hanging On To Max* by Margaret Bechard  
Roaring Brook Press, 2002, 160 pp., \$15.95

Sam fell in love with Max at first sight. And when Brittany admits the "mother thing" is not for her, Sam becomes custodial parent. At seventeen, it means that Sam must give up all his plans for his high school senior year and beyond: football, college and becoming a computer engineer.

At his alternative high school, Sam is the only male single parent. And so he wonders: Is he right on course?

Sam's father, a single parent himself (Sam's mother died when he was eleven), offers to help Sam finish high school and arranges for a job in construction afterwards. College is not in Sam's plans.

Parenting, as Sam learns, is not easy, and every day brings another challenge to keep Sam from achieving success. Slowly, Sam realizes that his own life – now with child in tow – will never be the same.

An easy read filled with practical wisdom, this book is highly recommended as an important edition for any adolescent classroom collection.

C. Anne Webb  
St. Louis, Missouri

*The Tower at the End of the World* by Brad Strickland  
Dial Books, 2001, 146 pp., \$16.99

Mystery/Fantasy  
ISBN: 0-8037-2620-1

When Lewis Barnavelt and his uncle Jonathan decide to join their neighbor Mrs. Zimmerman and Lewis' friend, Rose Rita Pottinger, for a vacation on an island in Lake Superior, they have no idea they will have to again do battle with a member of the evil Izard family. Ishmael Izard has reconstructed his father's Doomsday Clock, and Lewis, with the help of Rose Rita's courage, his uncles, and Mrs. Zimmerman's good magic, will have to save the world by destroying the clock before it strikes the hour of doom.

Brad Strickland keeps John Bellair's characters alive in this sequel to the *The House with the Clock in Its Walls*. It is a fast-paced story that combines both mystery and fantasy to keep the reader on edge until the resolution. The setting in 1950s Michigan, the likeable characters, straightforward plot, and crisp descriptions make this a fun read for younger students.

Jim Cope  
Kennesaw, Georgia

*Streets of Gold* by Marie Raphael  
Persea Books, 2001, 216 pp., \$9.95

Immigrant Experience/Historical Fiction  
ISBN: 0-89255-256-5

*Streets of Gold* is based on actual historical events. It tells the story of the Eastern European immigrant experience in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Fourteen-year-old budding artist Marisia Bolinski and her older brother Stefan make the choice to stay in America as their parents, younger brother, and ill sister are turned away at Ellis Island.

From Czarist-occupied Poland to the cramped tenements of New York's Lower East Side, we are treated to a richly descriptive account of Marisia's struggle as an adolescent who must make a difficult decision and face adult responsibilities.

Marisia learns about the loyalty of friendship, the work ethic, and the value of staying true to one's own beliefs and convictions as she traverses the paths from oppression to freedom, youth to adulthood, and ultimately, dependence to independence.

This intriguing and enriching book, illustrated with period photos, is not only a fine interdisciplinary supplement for a lesson on the immigrant experience within our nation's history, but also a tool for a comparative study alongside America's current immigrant issues.

Laura E. Bullock  
Petal, Mississippi

*Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher  
Greenwillow, 2001, 224 pp., \$15.95

Athletic Competition/Child Abuse  
ISBN: 0-68818-0191

The narrator of *Whale Talk* is a The Tao Jones (his given name and pronounced Dow Jones); he is Black, Japanese, and White. The son of a woman who abandoned him when she got heavily into crack and crank, he grew up as a child filled with rage. Now, thanks to the help of a good therapist and good, loving, ex-hippie adoptive parents, T. J. has turned out to a pretty decent and even-keeled human being. One thing he is not and will never be, though, is a conformist.

The Tao Jones (T. J.) is particularly sensitive to injustice; when the high school bully and big deal football star taunts brain-damaged Chris Coughlin, who wears his dead brother's football letter jacket, T. J. seeks revenge. His clever weapon of choice is the creation of a high school swim (despite the fact that his school has no pool) so he can prove that a band of school misfits are capable of winning coveted letter jackets, just like the cocky football players.

Chris Crutcher writes in a style that reminds me of Stephen King. Although the violence in the book may be unsettling to some, the work does manage to combine craziness and realism to underscore the impact of coming to terms with differences. The swim team, and the togetherness this band of unlikely characters enjoys, help school outcasts find the true acceptance and friendship they've never had before.

Kids read Chris Crutcher (*Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes, Ironman, Athletic Shorts*) because his works speak for them; he advocates in a manner that adults should pay attention to, as well.

Len DeAngelis  
Newport, Rhode Island

*3 Days Off* by Susie Morgenstern  
Viking, 2001, 89 pp., \$14.99

Coming of Age/Identity  
ISBN: 0-670-03511-4

*3 Days Off*, originally published as *Trois Jours Sans (Three Days Without)* translates well, but isn't particularly interesting. High school student William's life and surroundings are colorless; he personifies apathy to the extent of appearing robotic rather than human.

When William tells his teacher that he'd like to rip off her skirt to see underneath, he's suspended from school for three days, during which time he is to chronicle how he uses his time. His first day is spent in town where a tourist shows him the beauty of previously unappreciated surroundings, and then he assists manual laborers and discovers hard work.

However, this undaunted and reckless high school student next gathers his earned money to procure the services of a prostitute, only to find himself without luck until he manages to meet a university student who entertains his most clumsy advances – until her boyfriend arrives unexpectedly. These troubling experiences allow him to reevaluate his unbridled apathy and cynicism, and consider more appropriate and positive life changes.

This slim book has a colorful cover, and appears marketed to middle level students, but its content is clearly more appropriate for high school students. And while older, disaffected students may identify with William, it must be said that he is not an especially likeable character. Moreover, the plot, though intriguing and different, is told in a low-key style that will probably attract only most contemplative and cerebral of readers.

Lisa A. Hazlett  
Vermillion, South Dakota

*Clara's War* by Kathy Kacer  
Orca Book Publishers, 2001, 128 pp., \$5.95

Holocaust/Religious Persecution  
ISBN: 1-896764-42-8

A refreshingly different look at Jewish life in a concentration camp, *Clara's War* focuses on the positive attitude of people forced from their homes at the hands of Nazi Germany. The children continue to make friends, learn, and perform a children's opera. Fictional characters bring to life actual events from Terezin, one of many ghetto communities where Jews were taken prior to being shipped off to Hitler's death camps.

Upon arrival at Terezin, Clara and her brother Peter are separated from their parents. Scared and desperate, Clara reaches out to a newfound friend, Jacob, an ambitious young man who is busy working on an escape plan. Meanwhile, young Clara attends the ghetto school, and wins the part of the lovely sparrow in the school play, "Brundibar". Jacob, anxious to conceal his escape plans, earns a role in the play, as well. Together, they enjoy each other's company, all the while planning for their escape.

*Clara's War* is a nice companion to *Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank. It is another example of the sheer power of human will to overcome even the most horrible of human events.

Lu Ann Brobst Staheli  
Parson, Utah

*A Place For Joey* by Carol Flynn Harris  
Boyd's Mills Press, 2001, 90 pp., \$15.95

Culture/Immigration  
ISBN: 1-56397-108-9

Boston's North End is the setting of this heartwarming coming of age story about Joey Calabro, an Italian immigrant. Conflicted by his family's plan to move to rural farmland (or "la terra"), and his own desire to remain in Boston, Joey decides to quit school, find a job, and gain economic independence. Harris aptly shows us Joey's struggle, presenting a likeable and imperfect protagonist who is frustrated with learning to speak English.

Joey's dilemma culminates in a tragic event, when molasses tanks explode on the waterfront. Joey must decide whether he should perform a heroic act or resist fate. The resulting action allows us to see change, both in the way Joey sees himself, and in the way others see him.

While Harris' plot is often predictable, and the resolution somewhat contrived, the spirited prose and vibrant characters bring the story alive. Well researched and historically evocative, *A Place For Joey* would have particularly strong appeal for boys and recent immigrants.

James Joshua Keels  
San Francisco, California

*The Monsters of Morley Manor* by Bruce Coville  
Harcourt, 2001, 221 pp., \$16.00

Fantasy/Family Relationships  
ISBN: 0-15-216382-4

Anthony and his sister Sarah lead an ordinary life in Owl's Roost, Nebraska, until they inadvertently free a family of five monsters who have been imprisoned for decades in a small chest. Demonstrating a keen sense of loyalty to their newfound friends, Anthony and Sarah assist the monsters in reclaiming their home, reconnecting their family, and eventually saving the world from a race of alien warriors.

During the course of this fast-paced adventure, they travel through a mystical door to alien worlds, and other magical spots where they meet a cast of unique characters such as frog creatures, lost souls, and a beautiful angel. They even temporarily reunite with their recently deceased grandfather who helps them battle the problems of the universe.

Using Anthony as the first person narrator who candidly recounts his fear, awe, and growing respect for the mysteries of the world, Coville creates a humorous and entertaining tale. Coville's descriptions of characters and settings are imaginative and engaging. Although this story is fantastic, the theme of love and support of family and friends resounds realistically throughout the entire work. The plot of this easy-read, happy-ending novel moves quickly, making it a possible favorite for young, reluctant male readers.

Jennifer Good  
Auburn, Alabama

*Empress of the World* by Sarah Ryan  
Viking, 2001, 213 pp., \$15.99

Relationships/Lesbian and Gays  
ISBN: 0-670-89688-8

Fifteen-year-old Nicola Lancaster attends the Siegel Summer Program for Gifted Youth to develop her intellect, but she ends up learning more about the art of living and the joy of living.

Nicola had been pretty certain about her ability to order her life much like a scientist organizes a research project. However, when her first love is a smart, charming dancer nothing like herself, she begins to see the world through new eyes. Loving someone so different, yet of the same sex, opens Nicola's heart to new ways of being. She sees life as more unpredictable and people as less easy to categorize.

The writer understands the flow of realistic teen dialogue, and avoids easy stereotypes. Encouragingly, she eschews the hopelessness or pathos of many past books of same-sex adolescent love stories, while still exploring the problems young lesbians and gays confront in our heterosexist culture.

Rob Linne  
Garden City, New York

*Michelle Kwan: Quest for Gold* by Mark Stewart & Mike Kennedy  
The Millbrook Press, 2002, 64 pp., \$24.90

Ice-Skating/Olympics  
ISBN: 0-7613-2622-7

Michelle Kwan began ice-skating when she was six years old, and her talent was recognized early. Desiring to do tricks like the Olympics skaters she saw on TV, Michelle begged her parents to hire a coach so she too could become an Olympic contender. And indeed, before long, she did.

This crisply written and smartly produced biography of Olympic ice-skating medallist Michelle Kwan tells the story of her young life—her struggles, sacrifices, and glorious triumphs—as she moved through a childhood, destined for Olympic success. The book is particularly good at giving readers an inside look at how ordinary people—with the help of devoted parents, teachers, and coaches—can accomplish unbelievable things.

Winning competitions and learning to live with fatal missteps marks a young career that has only begun to blossom. Kwan is becoming a world-recognized role model for young and old alike. The author manages to capture this young talent's vivacious love for life, and her painstaking attention to detail, patience, and ultimately, victory.

Filled with great photographs and interesting human anecdotes, this is a must read for all youngsters interested in learning what it takes to go for the gold.

Jeffrey Kaplan  
Orlando, Florida