

# CHAPTER 4 Contemporary Realistic Fiction: From Tragedies to Romances

## What Do We Mean by Realism?

When critic Northrop Frye used the term *realism* in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, he put it in quotation marks because when it is applied to literature the term does not—or should not—mean the same thing that it does in other contexts. He argued that expecting literature simply to portray real life is a mistaken notion. The artist who can paint grapes so realistically that a bird will fly up and peck at the canvas is not highly acclaimed. Nor would people want to listen to a symphony in which all the instruments imitated “real” sounds from nature—the cooing of doves, the rushing of a waterfall, a clap of thunder, and the wind whistling through trees.

In the 1990s when Norman Mailer was being interviewed on CNN by Larry King, he said that as soon as a character—whether real or imagined—is written about, fiction results because the character now lives as imagined in people’s minds rather than as a real person who can be talked to and touched. G. Robert Carlsen made a similar point when he said that a story exists first in the mind of its creator and then in the minds of its readers. Because it was never anything “real,” it cannot be tested against an external reality, as can the plans for a building, a chemical formula, a case study, and so on.

If we evaluate literature by its realism alone, Carlsen said, we would be forced to abandon most of the truly great literature of the world: certainly most of tragedy, much of comedy, and all of romance. We would have to discard the Greek plays, the great epics, Shakespeare, Molière. They succeed because they go beyond the externals of living and instead reach out and touch the imaginative life deep down inside where we live.

He was irritated with readers and critics who took a simplistic view of YA books, particularly novels like *The Chocolate War*.

I despair when a critic views *The Chocolate War* as a realistic novel, saying “Life doesn’t happen that way.” This book should be approached as a tragic vision exemplifying Shakespeare’s horrifying line [from *Lear*], “We are flies to the gods; they kill us for their sport.” Or Swift’s statement, “Man is the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the earth.” You may not like such visions, but that does not make them *dishonest* or *failures* as literature. The arts are beyond external reality. They deal with that mysterious realm of consciousness for which we seek adequate expression.<sup>1</sup>

Even though respected authors and critics argue against realism as a literary concept, we are using the term mainly because we can’t think of a better one. Also, because people commonly use *realism* to describe the books in this chapter we would be at a communication disadvantage if we invented a new term. We are writing about young adult fiction with real-world settings in historical periods not far removed from our own. The books feature young protagonists solving problems without the help of magic. Marc Aronson says that what makes realistic novels succeed is their level of intimacy. “Does a book have the potential to touch readers deeply so that, in the struggle with it, they begin to see and to shape themselves?”<sup>2</sup>



## The Modern Problem Novel

The general public seems to have an almost subconscious belief that children will model their lives after what they read. Since all of us want our children to be happy, we feel more comfortable when they are reading “happy” books. The problem novel, however, is based on the philosophy that young people will have a better chance to be happy if they have realistic expectations and if they know both the bad and the good about the society in which they live. This changed attitude is what opened the door to writers of irony and even tragedy for young people. Irony is like a tennis serve that you can’t return. You can admire its perfection, its appropriateness, and even the inevitability of the outcome, but you just can’t cope with it. There is a refreshing honesty in stories that show readers they are not the only ones who get served that kind of ball and that the human spirit, although totally devastated in this particular set, may rise again to play another match.

When, in the late 1960s, publishers began feeling comfortable in encouraging writers to create serious coming-of-age stories to be read by teenagers themselves, they identified the books as new realism or as problem novels rather than as the more literary term of *bildungsroman*, which is formally defined as “novels dealing with the development of a young person usually from adolescence to maturity.” The books are often autobiographical and are sometimes called “apprenticeship novels.”

In addition to their candor and the selection of subject matter, these new problem novels differ from earlier books in four basic ways. The first difference lies in the choice of characters. The protagonists come from a variety of social and economic levels, which ties in with the second major difference—that of setting. Instead of living in idyllic, pleasant suburban homes, the characters come from settings that are harsh and difficult places to live. To get the point across about the characters and where and how they live, authors use colloquial language, which is the third difference. Many of today’s authors write the way people really talk, including profanity and ungrammatical constructions. That the public has generally allowed these changes shows that people are drawing away from the idea that the main purpose of fiction for young readers is to set an example of proper middle-class behavior.

The fourth difference also relates to this change in attitude, and that is the change in mode. As it became acceptable to provide readers with more vicarious experiences than would be either desirable or possible in real life, the mode of YA novels changed. Most of the books for young readers—at least those endorsed by parents and educators—used to be written in the comic and romantic modes. Statistically, this may still be true, but several of the books currently getting critical attention are written in the ironic or tragic modes.

For example, John Green’s *Looking for Alaska*, which won a Printz Award, is far from a happy story. It is told by sixteen-year-old Miles Halter, who leaves his family home in Florida to attend the Culver Creek Boarding School in suburban Alabama. His roommate, Chip, is a poor but brilliant scholarship student who delights in “getting even” with the rich kids at Culver Creek. Both Chip and Miles—and most of the other boys in school—fall madly in love with Alaska Young, a beautiful and full of life—and death—young woman who chooses to

hang out with Chip and Miles. There is no happy ending for Alaska and the whole book is organized around the number of days before and after the tragedy that befalls her.

When the problem novel was first developing as *the* genre in young adult literature, it played a relatively unique role in openly acknowledging that many young people's lives are far removed from the happy-go-lucky images shown in television commercials and sitcoms. The best-known books from the 1960s and 1970s were new and interesting because they vividly demonstrated that young people worried about sex, drugs, money, peer pressure, and health problems. Such information does not come as news today because the mass media does a thorough job of communicating that many adults are less than perfect and that many young people are facing problems ranging from minor to severe. In fact, talk shows, reality shows, courtroom TV, soap operas, and even news programs and magazines make us privy to so many people's problems that we simply do not have the energy to empathize with all the sad stories that we hear. We shrug our shoulders and turn off our tear ducts, which leaves us feeling alienated and dehumanized. Also, most media treatments present a one-shot portrait chosen to tug at the emotions of viewers or readers. To increase the drama, they make a virtue of suffering and pain by portraying people as victims unable to move beyond their pain. In contrast, in the best of the problem novels authors take the space to develop various strands of their stories and to show differing viewpoints and alternate solutions. This differs from television sitcoms as well as from most series books, which preserve the status quo so that at the end the producer or the author can start all over again with a similar story.

In relation to the term *realism*, it is only fair to mention that some critics have justifiably pointed out that the large majority of high school readers are more likely to experience something akin to a wish-fulfilling romance than to the experiences described in many of the so-called realistic novels shown in this sampling of recent books and in those described in Focus Box 4.1, Challenges: Physical and Mental.

- Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now* (winner of the 2005 Printz Award) is about a futuristic war that breaks out in England where Daisy has been sent in hopes that with the help of her aunt and her cousins and the fresh country air, she will recover from her eating disorder. She says her food problem started when she was afraid that her father's new wife was trying to poison her, but then she confesses it became very satisfying to see both parents worrying about her. When she arrives at the old family farm, her aunt, who is active in a peace movement, is just rushing off to Oslo to give a speech and Daisy is left with her cousins. A strange kind of war breaks out and the teenage children are left to fend for themselves, which they do but only with some terrible consequences. An interesting technique is the way that Rosoff uses vague language when talking about the enemy so that readers are left to fill in their own images with whoever or whatever they fear the most.
- One of our students who read E. R. Frank's *America* responded with "grim, grim, grim." A fifteen-year-old boy named America was born to a drug-addicted woman who abandoned him, but nevertheless reappears for

## Challenges: Physical and Mental



**Accidents of Nature** by Harriet McBryde. Holt, 2006. A summer at Camp Courage, which is designed for teenagers with disabilities, proves to be life-changing for seventeen-year-old Jean. She has cerebral palsy and is assigned to share a cabin with the intelligent and thoughtful Sara, who is in a wheelchair and has a different "take" on the matter of disability.

**Boy Toy** by Barry Lyga. Houghton, 2007. Seventeen-year-old Joshua Mendel is almost ready to graduate from high school, but he is still struggling emotionally with the fallout from being sexually abused by Eve, the woman who was his seventh-grade history teacher. Older teens will be fascinated at how their relationship developed and its long-term effects.

**A Corner of the Universe** by Ann Martin. Scholastic, 2002. Hattie looks back on her thirteenth summer when Uncle Adam, someone she had never been told about, comes "home" to live with her grandparents because his "school" has closed. In this powerful look at mental illness, tragedy ensues when Hattie invites Uncle Adam to sneak out with her to a carnival.

**Cut** by Patricia McCormick. Front Street, 2000. This picture of life in a mental-health facility for teenagers is far from pretty with its constant smell of vomit, its lack of privacy, and the hostility and sadness of the patients. Callie, a girl who secretly cuts herself, is the narrator.

**Dreamland** by Sarah Dessen. Viking, 2000. Vivid characterization makes this story of Caitlin's drift into passivity all the more memorable and haunting.

**Every Time a Rainbow Dies** by Rita Williams-Garcia. HarperCollins, 2001. Thulani's mother died three years ago, and he is a relatively unwelcome "guest" in the apartment of his older brother and the brother's wife. Thulani spends hours with the pigeons he raises on the roof of their apartment house. When he witnesses a brutal rape, he rushes down to "rescue" the girl and takes an important first step toward reentering life.

**Inside Out** by Terry Trueman. HarperTempest, 2003. Zach, who is schizophrenic, waits every day for his mother to pick him up in a small restaurant where he gets caught in the midst of a holdup. Although he comes close to being a hero in this particular situation, there is no happy ending.

**Invisible** by Pete Hautman. Simon & Schuster, 2005. Seventeen-year-old Dougie has one good friend, and readers hope that will be enough to help him maintain his focus. When he hides his medication and resists help from his psychiatrist, readers begin to realize that Dougie has a secret too awful to reveal.

**Saving Francesca** by Melina Marchetta. Knopf/Borzoi, 2004. Francesca's mother, who used to be strong and successful, is so depressed that she cannot function and so Francesca has little help from home when she changes schools and experiences her first romance. Nevertheless, readers come away feeling positive for Francesca.

**The Sibling Slam Book** edited by Don Meyer. Woodbine, 2005. Although this is nonfiction, it fits with the books in this section. Eighty-one young people offer insights from

terrifying episodes. The boy's best memories are of living with Mrs. Harper and her half-brother. However, the half-brother introduces the preteen America to vodka and sex, and in guilt and rage, America sets the man's blanket on fire and escapes. Years later, a capable therapist is coaxing America's story from the reluctant fifteen-year-old, who is living in a residential treatment center and trying to gain control over his suicidal depression. Readers are left with hope for a boy who, so far, has been a survivor against incredible odds.

- In *Hush*, Jacqueline Woodson uses a similar situation to the one that Robert Cormier used in *The Cheese Stands Alone*, in which a family is uprooted and put into the Federal Witness Protection Program. In Wood-

having grown up in a family with a special needs child. The focused chapters reveal not only feelings of embarrassment, but also of protectiveness and of pride because of learning things that other kids don't know and of making a real contribution to one's family.

**Slam** by Nick Hornby. Putnam, 2007. A sixteen-year-old skateboarder gets slammed with something new—he's about to become a father. Hornby is being praised for treating such a serious subject with warmth as well as respectful humor.

**A Small White Scar** by K. A. Nuzum. HarperCollins/Joanna Cotler Books, 2006. Besides being responsible for his disabled twin brother, fifteen-year-old Will wants to be free to ride in a rodeo and to work like a man on his father's 1940s Colorado ranch. Nuzum has written a fictional account of many of the feelings treated in the real-life accounts in *The Sibling Slam Book*.

**Story of a Girl** by Sara Zarr. Little, Brown, 2007. Older teens will be touched by this story of a girl whose life is drastically changed when her father catches her at age thirteen having sex in a car, and she is immediately "branded" by her own family as well as by the school community as a slut.

**Stuck in Neutral** by Terry Trueman. HarperCollins, 2000. Fourteen-year-old Shawn McDaniel thinks his father is planning to kill him, a suspicion that readers gradually grow to share in this story of a boy who is born with cerebral palsy. The story is continued in *Cruise Control* (HarperCollins, 2004) told from the viewpoint of older brother Paul, who hates his father and is striving to learn to control his own violent behavior both on and off the basketball court.

**Surrender** by Sonya Hartnett. Candlewick, 2006. Fire and a haunting secret from the past play a part in this powerful story, which is on the Honor List. A major character is a dog named *Surrender*, and readers are left wondering whether the book is named after the dog or after the mental attitude of the twenty-year-old protagonist who lies dying.

**Under the Wolf, under the Dog** by Adam Rapp. Candlewick, 2004. A sixteen-year-old boy is living at a therapeutic facility for teens who have tried suicide and/or have troubles connected to substance abuse. The circumstances are dreadful, but a little more hopeful than the ones in Rapp's *33 Snowfish*, *Little Chicago*, and *The Buffalo Tree*.

**Wasteland** by Francesca Lia Block. Joanna Cotler/HarperCollins, 2003. People who think YA lit is easy to read and easy to understand need to immerse themselves in this powerful and sad story about Marina and her brother, Lex.

**The Very Ordered Existence of Merilee Marvelous** by Suzanne Crowley. HarperCollins/Greenwillow, 2007. Thirteen-year-old Merilee Monroe has her life in order, but then all kinds of troubles start intruding and readers get glimpses into the condition known as Asperger's Syndrome (not identified by name), alcoholism, senility, and plain old meanness.

**Wild Roses** by Deb Caletti. Simon & Schuster, 2005. Cassie Morgan is a normal seventeen-year-old with ambitions of becoming an astronomer, but then her mother marries a famous and arrogant violinist, whose attitudes and behavior cross way over the line of what the world is willing to accept from people with artistic temperaments.

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son's story, the family is African American, and the protagonist, Evie Thomas (née Toswiah Green), is twelve years old when her father testifies against other African Americans in a racially motivated murder. Instead of creating the kind of dramatic situation that Cormier created, Woodson shows the tedium and the depression that sets in when a family is torn from its past and has yet to build a future. Evie's mother finds a kind of solace in the Seventh Day Adventist Church, but her father spends his days staring out the front window, while her older sister plots how she can escape from this nonlife. Rather than being left with a happy ending, readers are left pondering what is a less-than-perfect solution to a very real family problem.

Of contemporary authors, Adam Rapp probably writes the most “downer” books. *Little Chicago* is the grim story of eleven-year-old Blacky, who is sexually abused by his mother’s boyfriend. Although he is brave enough to tell “all the right people,” no one helps him. His best friend makes it even worse by telling kids at school, who cruelly taunt him. He gets a gun and, with no money for ammunition, performs a sexual act to get bullets. His one friend, who suffers almost as much as he does, has told him that if you follow a deer long enough it will lead you to paradise. The book ends with Blacky following a deer into a forest, but only the most optimistic of readers can believe that this is going to make Blacky’s life better. Tyrrell Burns closed her *School Library Journal* review with, “The sense of hopelessness in this disturbing novel is almost physically painful.”<sup>3</sup> For *VOYA*, Kathleen Beck wrote that Rapp’s books are valuable because of their honest recognition that young people can suffer and face really difficult questions, but “Forget using them as bibliotherapy. . . . There are no solutions here.”<sup>4</sup>

In the February issue of *VOYA* when the “Top-Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers 2002” (a list of twenty-four “best books”) was published, *Little Chicago* received twice as much space as the other books, but its annotation was in a gray box under the unusual heading, “Adult Reader Recommendation.” The committee’s idea was that adults should read the book to keep such a story from ever happening. Their closing line was, “This book is not to be handed to young readers without forethought—not because it is unrealistic but precisely because it shows how heartlessly unprotected they might find themselves to be.”<sup>5</sup>

Rapp’s *33 Snowfish* is about four kids on the run. One of them has killed his parents and stolen their car. One is a prostitute; one has recently escaped from a pedophile, while the youngest is just a baby, whom the others think they might sell. Reviewer Joel Shoemaker said that the book is bound to be controversial: “The fearsome elements escape the pages like nightmares loosed into daylight, . . . but for those readers who are ready to be challenged by a serious work of shockingly realistic fiction, it invites both an emotional and intellectual response, and begs to be discussed.”<sup>6</sup>

In traditional literary criticism, tragedies have three distinct elements. First, there is a noble character who, no matter what happens, maintains the qualities that the society considers praiseworthy; second, there is an inevitable force that works against the character; and third, there is a struggle and an outcome. The reader of a tragedy is usually filled with pity and fear—pity for the hero and fear for oneself that the same thing might happen. The intensity of this involvement causes the reader to undergo an emotional release as the outcome of the story unfolds. This release, or catharsis, has the effect of draining away dangerous human emotions and filling the reader with a sense of exaltation or amazed pride in what the human spirit is called on to endure.

But rather than writing pure tragedies, most young adult authors soften their stories with hopeful endings. Even the books that include death, as with those listed in Focus Box 4.2, *Dying Is Easy; Surviving Is Hard* (p. 120), focus on recovery and the future. This goes along with the cherished belief that young readers deserve books with happy endings. Virginia Hamilton illustrated this belief when she was awarded the Newbery Medal for *M. C. Higgins the Great*, and a reporter asked her if she really thought that the retaining wall that M. C. was building on the mountain above the house would keep the mine tailings from sliding down

and ruining the family's home. She responded with something to the effect, that "Probably not, but this is a book for kids. They have to have hope."

Her statement illustrates a long-cherished belief that young readers deserve books with happy endings. These are the kinds of books that serve as a counterbalance to the depressing realism of the "true" problem novel. There is nothing magical in the books, so they are "real" in that sense, but as Richard Peck has observed, teenagers' favorite books are "romances disguised as realism." He was not saying this as a negative, because he was describing his own books along with those of many other well-respected writers. It is understandable that teenagers want both the happy endings and the assurance that happy endings are possible. Actually, most readers prefer happy endings, but it is assumed that adults have had more experience in coping with difficult life experiences so that they might be "turned off" by endings that come across as falsely hopeful. See Table 4.1 for suggestions of how to evaluate problem novels.

**TABLE 4.1** Suggestions for Evaluating the Problem Novel

A good problem novel usually has:	A poor problem novel may have:
A strong, interesting, and believable plot centering around a problem that a young person might really have.	A totally predictable plot with nothing new and interesting to entice the reader.
The power to transport the reader into another person's thoughts and feelings.	Characters who are cardboardlike exaggerations of people and are too good or too bad to be believed.
Rich characterization. The characters "come alive" as believable with a balance of good and negative qualities.	More characters than the reader can keep straight comfortably.
A setting that enhances the story and is described so that the reader can get the intended picture.	Many stereotypes.
A worthwhile theme. The reader is left with something to think about.	Lengthy chapters or descriptive paragraphs that add bulk but not substance to the book.
A smoothness of style that flows steadily and easily, carrying the reader along.	A preachy message. The author spells out the attitudes and conclusions with which he or she wants each reader to leave the book.
A universal appeal so that it speaks to more than a single group of readers.	Nothing that stays with the reader after the book has been put down.
A subtlety that stimulates the reader to think about the various aspects of the story.	A subject that is of interest only because it is topical or trendy.
A way of dealing with the problems so that the reader is left with insights into either society or individuals or both.	Inconsistent points of view. The author's sympathies change with no justification.
	Dialogue that sounds forced or inappropriate to the characters.
	"Facts" that do not jibe with those of the real world.
	Unlikely coincidences or changes in characters' personalities for the sake of the plot.
	Exaggerations that result in sensationalism.



## Dying Is Easy; Surviving Is Hard

**Before I Die** by Jenny Downham. Random/David Fickling, 2007. Sixteen-year-old Tessa has only a few months to live and she sorrowfully tries to cram in all the life experiences that she's not going to have. Except for the plot, this touching book has little in common with the 2007 *Bucket List* film starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman.

**The Bell Jar** by Sylvia Plath. HarperCollins, 1971. A young woman who has become famous for her writing commits suicide. Plath's partly autobiographical story continues to fascinate readers as shown by the enthusiastic reception of Stephanie Hemphill's 2007 *Your Own Sylvia: A Verse Portrait of Sylvia Plath*.

**A Brief Chapter in My Impossible Life** by Dana Reinhardt. Random, 2006. A sixteen-year-old girl has always known she was adopted, but hasn't thought much about it. Then her birth mother calls and wants to meet her. Everything changes when she learns that the woman is dying.

**Cures for Heartbreak** by Margo Rabb. Delacorte, 2007. A bonus for readers is the touching afterword that tells how closely this sad story follows the real events of the author's teenage years when she lost her mother to cancer and her father develops heart trouble. A vibrant New York City set-

ting, flashes of dark humor, and beautiful characterization make this a wonderful read for older teens.

**The Dark Light** by Mette Newth, translated by Faith Ingwerson. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. In Norway more than a century ago, a thirteen-year-old girl tries to work out the meaning of life, God, happiness, and revenge as she lies in a bed dying of leprosy.

**A Death in the Family** by James Agee. McDowell, Obolensky, 1957. Set in Knoxville, Tennessee, back at the turn of the last century, the Follet family with their two children lead a comfortable life until the father is struck down.

**Double Helix: A Novel** by Nancy Werlin. Dial, 2004. Eli Samuels is about to lose his mother to Huntington's Disease, but this is just the background for Werlin's mystery. Eli goes to work for Wyatt Transgenics Lab and gradually discovers why his father doesn't want him to work there. Werlin brings up some intriguing bioethical issues.

**Ghost Girl: A Blue Ridge Mountain Story** by Delia Ray. Clarion, 2003. It's the 1930s and pale April Sloane with her white-blond hair and her light blue eyes feels like a ghost, especially since the death of her younger brother a year ago. Her mother has fallen into a deep depression and during the four years that are covered in the story, it's pretty much up to April to pull herself out of her problems.

Three popular stories about young protagonists that were published as somber adult novels are J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Hannah Green's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, and Judith Guest's *Ordinary People*. In all three, worthy young heroes set out to find wisdom and understanding. They make physical sacrifices, including suicide attempts, and even though they receive help from wise and kindly psychiatrists (today's counterpart to the white witches, the wizards, and the helpful gods and goddesses of traditional romances), they must prove their worthiness through hard, painstaking work. This is what Deborah Blau's psychiatrist communicates in the sentence used for the book's title, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*. If Green had intended her book for teenagers, she would have been more likely to have ended the book with Deborah leaving the mental institution to "live happily ever after."

It is the details of a story and the author's attitude as much as the plot that determines whether a book is realistic or romanticized. For example, the plot of Joyce Carol Oates's *Freaky Green Eyes* is as somber as any tragedy, but Oates devised several techniques to soften the story of a girl whose father murders her mother and is sent to prison. First, the family is wealthy and the father is a celebrity so that Francesca (aka Franky) lives in a house and goes to the kinds of

*Green Angel* by Alice Hoffman. Scholastic, 2003. Mature readers will grieve with the fifteen-year-old girl who is now ashamed of her sullen behavior when she didn't get to go with her parents and sister to the city. They never came back.

*The Key to the Golden Firebird: A Novel* by Maureen Johnson. HarperCollins, 2004. After their father's death, three sisters—sensible May, frightened Palmer, and rebellious Brooks—are left pretty much on their own while their mother works to provide financial support. Their father's Pontiac Firebird helps each one heal in her own way.

*The Lightkeeper's Daughter* by Iain Lawrence. Delacorte, 2002. When the lightkeeper's daughter returns home to the island lighthouse with a three-year-old daughter in tow, she not only has to reestablish relations with her parents, but also has to come to terms with the death of her beloved brother.

*Missing May* by Cynthia Rylant. Orchard, 1992. Summer has been tossed from relative to relative. Then Uncle Ob and Aunt May take her into their loving home, and May dies. Uncle Ob is so devastated that Summer is afraid she will lose him too.

*My Brother Stealing Second* by Jim Naughton. HarperCollins, 1989. While star athlete and favorite son Billy is drunk, he kills himself along with a couple celebrating their wedding anniversary. Billy's family and the daughter of the couple are left to suffer.

*Strays* by Ron Koertge. Candlewick, 2007. Fifteen-year-old Ted O'Connor would rather communicate with animals than people. His situation is understandable in that he worked in his parents' pet store until they were killed in an accident and he was placed in an inappropriate foster home. But in a basically optimistic book, Ted gradually learns that he doesn't have to be a "stray."

*A Summer to Die* by Lois Lowery. Houghton Mifflin, 1977. While her older sister is dying of leukemia, Meg finds comfort and solace in the help of a seventy-year-old landlord, handyman, and photographer.

*The Truth about Forever* by Sarah Dessen. Viking, 2004. Always in control, Macy witnesses the death of her father, but does not allow herself to grieve. Then she goes to work for a catering service, where things are a lot more unpredictable. The job—and the people Macy works with—help her make her way back to life and living.

*Walk Softly, Rachel* by Kate Banks. Farrar, 2003. Three Rachels—One, a grandmother coming to live with a family; Two, the mother in the family who is a lawyer and a judge; and Three, the fourteen-year-old daughter. The change works as a catalyst to bring the Rachels together as they face the possibility of dismantling and remodeling a bedroom for Rachel One. The bedroom in question has been preserved as a kind of shrine to older brother Jake, who died seven years ago.

parties that other kids only dream about. Readers get to see her as a take-charge girl, both for herself and for wild animals that are being kept in cages simply for amusement. At the end she has a loving aunt to provide a new home for her and her sister. And most important of all, she now has Garret as a boyfriend. She met him when she went to visit her mother. They had made arrangements for an informal date, but her enraged father came and took her and her sister away before she could go out with him. She met Garret again only after her mother's death when she came with her aunt to take away her mother's belongings, and Garret wandered over and helped them load the U-Haul trailer. They exchanged email addresses, and at the end of the book she lets readers know that they keep in touch—"Sometimes daily." Also, Garret's family is going to change its usual plan of vacationing at Aspen and going to ski at Taos, where Frankie now lives, so "Garret and I will see each other then."

Devising happy, or at least hopeful, endings for tragic stories is a challenge for authors. Even a good book such as Laurie Halse Anderson's 1999 *Speak*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award and a Printz Honor Book, has a coincidence at the very end that stretches believability. Thirteen-year-old Melinda is raped at a summer party. When she calls the police, who come and

break up the party, she becomes a social outcast. No one knows why she called the police, and out of shame she hides behind silence for almost a whole year. Finally, a wonderful art teacher helps her not only to “speak,” but to speak about the incident. The boy who raped her is furious and vengeful. He stalks her and after school one day pulls her into a janitor’s closet and slams the door. She is saved from a severe beating or another rape—if not from death—by her own efforts, including cries for help, and the arrival of the girls’ lacrosse team. They are coming in from the field and when they hear Melinda, they pound with their sticks on the closet door, calling for additional help.

Another challenge for writers of problem novels is that they most often write the books in first person. Thoughtful readers must surely question how these malfunctioning and troubled kids can write so well. In A. M. Jenkins’s *Out of Order*, Colt, who is a star baseball player, tells the story of his senior year in high school. The story is beautifully written, but Colt’s main problem is that he has little interest and little aptitude for academics. Readers have to enter into a willing suspension of disbelief when they compare the pitiful essay he wrote for his English class with the rest of the beautifully written book.



## Buddies and Bullies

***Big Mouth and Ugly Girl*** by Joyce Carol Oates. HarperCollins, 2002. Popular Matt Donaghy says something in the school cafeteria that is interpreted as a threat to school safety. He is ostracized, except by Ugly Girl Ursula Riggs, who knows a thing or two about being on the outside.

***Boys Lie*** by John Neufeld. DK, Ink, 1999. Gina is traumatized by being sexually assaulted in a New York swimming pool. Rumors follow her to California where her family moves to help her start over.

***The Brimstone Journals*** by Ron Koertge. Candlewick, 2001. Fifteen students at Branston (aka Brimstone) High reveal themselves and their problems through poetic journal entries. Their problems cover the waterfront, but angry Boyd is the most frightening because he has already made a mental hit-list of students to "get even" with.

***Buddha Boy*** by Kathe Koja. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. This book would be way too grim if not for the friendship that develops between Justin and the very different Jensen, the Buddha Boy of the title, who is victimized by most kids at school.

***Fat Kid Rules the World*** by K. L. Going. Putnam, 2003. Troy Billings weighs nearly three hundred pounds and is contemplating jumping off a subway platform. To his surprise, he is stopped by a punk-rock guitarist and occasional fellow student from W. T. Watson High School. And so begins a strange friendship.

***Freak Show*** by James St. James. Dutton, 2007. Billy calls himself a "Gender Obscurist," even though other people at the Eisenhower Academy are more direct. Reviewers used such adjectives as "fast-paced," "snarky," and "playfully naughty" for this story about a queen who turns things upside down by running for Homecoming Queen.

***Friction*** by E. R. Frank. Simon & Schuster, 2003. Stacy enters the eighth grade at Forest Alternative School and disproves the stereotype that it is always the newcomer who gets bullied. She also demonstrates that bullying can be done through words as well as actions.

***Inexcusable*** by Chris Lynch. S&S/Atheneum/Ginee Seo Bks., 2005. While Keir, the protagonist, is indeed a bully, the more chilling part of Lynch's powerful book is the way that Keir rationalizes his behavior and views himself as a "lovable rogue."

***Leap of Faith*** by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley. Dial, 2007. An extra bonus to this story about a sixth-grade girl who pulls a pocketknife on a boy who has been sexually harassing her, is that the author follows the girl into a Catholic school and an exploration of both the comfort and the questions that this new experience brings to a girl who has been raised in a nonreligious family.

***Racing the Past*** by Sis Deans. Holt, 2001. To avoid being picked on by a school-bus bully, eleven-year-old Ricky starts walking, and then jogging, and finally running to school. He manages to make a success story out of what could have been a downward slide into the apathy and hopelessness of his alcoholic father.

***Rat*** by Jan Cheripko. Boyds Mills Press, 2002. Fifteen-year-old Jeremy Chandler was called Rat (short for gym rat) because he spent so much time hanging around the gym. He was the basketball team's manager, and for a kid with one useless arm (a birth defect) was a pretty good player himself. His nickname takes on a whole new meaning because he happens to see the coach molesting one of the cheerleaders. The team turns against him when he testifies against their popular coach.

***Scorpions*** by Walter Dean Myers. HarperCollins, 1988. Jamal's brother is in jail, and an old gang leader brings word to Jamal that he is to take over as leader of the Scorpions. He also brings Jamal a gun.

***Touching Spirit Bear*** by Ben Mikaelson. HarperCollins, 2001. Cole Matthews is a street-wise bully who permanently damages a classmate in a beating. He chooses to participate in Circle Justice, an alternative program for Native American offenders because he mistakenly thinks he can outsmart the system.

***The Tulip Touch*** by Anne Fine. Little, Brown, 1997. As Natalie looks back on the intense relationship she shared over the years with a classmate named Tulip, she gains important insights about friendship, accountability, and manipulation.

***Who the Man*** by Chris Lynch. HarperCollins, 2002. An alternate title might be *A Week in the Life of a Thirteen-Year-Old Bully*. Lynch does an excellent job of characterization, and by the end even Earl (the thirteen-year-old bully) has a bit more understanding of what drives him.

## Family Ties



***Between Mom and Jo*** by Julie Anne Peters. Little, Brown, 2006. A boy has two mothers and when they decide to separate, the boy (Nicholas Nathaniel Thomas Tyler) goes through all the pain normally associated with a family breakup, but since he is biologically related to only one of his mothers, there are extra problems.

***Blind Sighted*** by Peter Moore. Viking, 2002. The title comes from sixteen-year-old Kirk's involuntary job of reading to a blind woman. Kirk narrates this story of three very different friendships that help him get through the year that his alcoholic mother decides it is time for her to get her life together.

***Comfort*** by Carolee Dean. Houghton, 2002. Comfort is the name of the town, not the emotion, in this coming-of-age story about a boy whose mother forces him to lie about his age so he can drive his father to AA meetings when he comes home from the penitentiary.

***Honey, Baby, Sweetheart*** by Deb Caletti. Simon & Schuster, 2004. In a summer romance, Ruby gets involved with a bad boy on a motorcycle and then with her mother's book group, the Casserole Queens. It's a toss-up as to which of these atypical relationships will have the longest influence on Ruby's life.

***In Spite of Killer Bees*** by Julie Johnston. Tundra, 2001. The lives of three sisters, ages twenty-two, seventeen, and fourteen, are suddenly thrown into what many people would think was a dream-come-true. A grandfather they've never met dies and leaves them a fortune, but with strings attached.

***Looking for JJ*** by Anne Cassidy. Harcourt, 2007. Alice Tully is seventeen and has been given a new identity and a new chance in life. Her troubles started in her childhood when she alternated between living with a resentful grandmother and following her emotionally disconnected and transient mother. Even with all the new chances, her old life when she was Jennifer Jones, or JJ, keeps intruding.

***Lord of the Deep*** by Graham Salisbury. Delacorte, 2001. Thirteen-year-old Mikey Donovan helps his stepdad charter his boat to Hawaiian tourists for deep-sea fishing. Mikey feels betrayed when his father lets a customer claim a record he did not really earn. Thoughtful readers will recognize the situation as more complex than Mikey realizes.

***Miracle's Boys*** by Jacqueline Woodson. Putnam, 2000. Two orphaned brothers are holding on as they manage their individual grief; then a third brother is released from a three-year term at a detention center. The boys have to start over in building a tenuous new relationship.

***Not Like You*** by Deborah Davis. Clarion, 2007. Fifteen-year-old Kayla has always resented her unpredictable mother, and when they move to New Mexico in hopes of getting a new start, Kayla is helped by the new environment to take a look at her own behavior and how tempted she is to follow in her mother's footsteps.

***Pool Boy*** by Michael Simmons. Millbrook/Roaring Brook, 2003. Fifteen-year-old Brett has a major lifestyle change when his father is convicted of white-collar crime, and Brett and his mother and sister have to leave their posh neighborhood and move in with a great-aunt. Brett takes a job cleaning swimming pools in his old neighborhood, hence the nickname.

***Saving Francesca*** by Melina Marchetta. Knopf/Borzoi, 2004. Francesca's mother, who used to be strong and successful, is so depressed that she cannot function and so Francesca has little help from home when she changes schools and experiences her first romance. Nevertheless, readers come away feeling optimistic for Francesca.

***Sonny's House of Spies*** by George Ella Lyon. Simon & Schuster, 2004. It is the 1950s in Alabama and thirteen-year-old Sonny has not seen his father for six years. When he confronts a family friend for information, secrets come out with some harsh results.

***Tending to Grace*** by Kimberly Newton Fusco. Knopf/Borzoi, 2004. A shy, lonely, and awkward girl is taken out of ninth grade and dropped off with a great-aunt in rural New England. They argue and fuss and the girl even gets ready to run away, but eventually Aunt Agatha and her niece Cornelia unwind and manage a mutually beneficial relationship.

***Tyrell*** by Coe Booth. Scholastic/Push, 2006. Booth said that she wrote this book in a language that she thought would resonate with her younger brother and his friends. Before entering the writing program in The New School in New York, Booth was a social worker often pulled into emergency situations so she knows the kinds of situations that she writes about in this vibrant problem novel.



## Relating across Cultures

**Bat 6** by Virginia Euwer Wolff. Scholastic, 1998. World War II has been over for nearly four years, but pockets of prejudice are very much alive in the towns of Barlow and Bear Creek Ridge in rural Oregon. People choose not to notice until the prejudice erupts during the annual Bat 6 girls' softball championship.

**The Arrival** by Shaun Tan. Scholastic, 2007. In this unusual graphic novel, which is wordless except for an invented alphabet, Tan uses sepia drawings to depict the emotions and the challenges faced by a man bringing his family to a new country. While there is a sense of fear, there is also a sense of warmth and caring for others.

**Bone by Bone by Bone** by Tony Johnston. Roaring Brook, 2007. Set in the 1950s in small-town Tennessee, this haunting novel tells about the friendship of two boys, white David, age nine, and black Malcolm, age eight. Readers will be left with a deeper understanding of how far we've come.

**Born Blue** by Han Nolan. Harcourt, 2001. Blue-eyed and blonde Janie is abandoned by her heroin-addicted mother. Her one friend is an African American boy who has a set of blues tapes that he and Janie listen to so often and so deeply that Janie decides she is African American.

**Born Confused** by Tanuja Desai Hidier. Scholastic, 2003. A summer of growing up has some interesting new angles when the protagonist is an Indian American.

**Children of the River** by Linda Crew. Delacorte, 1989. Crew's story is about seventeen-year-old Sundara's life in Oregon after fleeing the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

**The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child** by Francisco Jimenez. University of New Mexico Press, 1997. Even though this collection of autobiographical stories was published by a university press, which meant it received only limited publicity, within several years it was in its fifth printing.

**Esperanza Rising** by Pam Muñoz Ryan. Scholastic, 2000.

Ryan's engaging novel about how her Mexican family became Americans is both joyous and lyrical. A *Publisher's Weekly* reviewer noted that only by the end of the story do readers recognize how carefully "Abuelita's pearls of wisdom" have been strung.

**Jubilee Journey** by Carolyn Meyer. Harcourt Brace, 1997.

Going on a family trip from Connecticut to a small town in Texas proves to be educational for thirteen-year-old Emily Rose Chartier, who learns about both racism and her family.

**Mister Pip** by Lloyd Jones. Dial, 2007. It's in the early 1990s when there's a civil war on the island community of Bougainville. Thanks to one white teacher who stays because he's married to one of the natives, thirteen-year-old Matilda is in love with Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, but even this contributes to misunderstandings.

**Seedfolks** by Paul Fleischman. HarperCollins, 1997. Fleischman traces the sprouting of the Bigg Street community garden in inner city Cleveland through the voices of thirteen young and old neighbors—Mexican, Haitian, Black, Vietnamese, Korean, British, Guatemalan, Rumanian, Indian, and Polish.

**Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood** by Ibtisam Barakat. Farrar, 2007. Barakat was three years old in 1967 when her family fled their home as the six-day war broke out. She now lives in the United States and tells her story through childhood memories, which are being praised for their power and at the same time for their lack of sentimentality and exploitation.

**Zack** by William Bell. Simon & Schuster, 1999. It is Zack's senior year in high school and his family (a black mother and a white father) move from the city of Toronto to a small town where, for the first time, Zack stands out because of his color.



# Margaret A. Edwards Award Winner (1995)

## *Cynthia Voigt*, A Writer Who Keeps on Learning

Cynthia Voigt ties with Anne McCaffrey in being honored for the most books, a total of seven, including *Homecoming*; *Dacey's Song*; *A Solitary Blue*; *Building Blocks*; *The Runner*; *Jackaroo*; and *Izzy Willy-Nilly*. A surprising fact is that these seven are fewer than one-third of the books that Voigt has published. Besides having written more than a dozen independent novels, between 1973 and 1989 Voigt wrote six books about the Tillermans and their associates; one of which (*Dacey's Song*) won the 1983 Newbery Medal. Between 1985 and 1999, she wrote four fantasy stories in the Kingdom series, while between 1996 and 2006, she wrote the Bad Girl series about Mikey and Margolo, who are really more "inconvenient" than "bad." They are based on some of the students Voigt remembers from the years that she taught middle school.

Another surprising fact about Voigt's books was noted by Jaime Hylton in "Exploring the 'Academic Side' of Cynthia Voigt" in *The ALAN Review* (Fall 2005, pp. 50–55). Hylton wrote that "After nearly a quarter of a century, every book that Voigt has published is still in print." She went on to give credit for this happy event to the fact that Voigt does all that we expect from an excellent writer; plus she provides a richness that "transcends topical stories with teen-oriented, identity-focused themes." Hylton's thesis is that Voigt achieves this kind of transcendency by suffusing her books "with allegory, literary allusion, classical mythology, and traditional folk and fairy tales."

Hylton's observation sent us back to check out a Focus Box statement that Voigt wrote for the third edition of this textbook under the title of "Learning and Knowing." In it she explored "a central and an essential difference" between adults and young people. She said that the real difference between the two is that kids expect themselves to *be learning* while adults expect themselves to *know*. For herself, Voigt chooses to be in the kid category so that her "attitude towards experiences, people, the whole side show, is characterized by questions and curiosity," which will guarantee that she will keep changing and adding to herself—"perpet-

ually growing up with no end in sight to the arduous and uneasy occupation."

At the beginning of *Izzy Willy-Nilly*, which is the story of a young girl who has been in an automobile accident and lost a leg, Voigt acknowledges learning a great deal from medical personnel who taught her about physical and mental aspects of amputation. And it is obvious that while writing *Come a Stranger* and *Building Blocks*, Voigt had to learn a lot about slavery and the Underground Railroad, and that while writing *David and Jonathan* she learned new things about the Holocaust. But as Hylton points out, the real power of Voigt's learning is in the uses she makes of her deep knowledge of the world as revealed through its great thinkers and writers. This is what keeps Voigt's books fresh and interesting year after year.

*David and Jonathan* is an allegorical story filled with biblical and Talmudic parables. In *Homecoming*, Voigt uses sailing as an extended metaphor, while in *The Runner*, she uses cross-country track. In *A Solitary Blue*, she builds the whole story around a glimpse of a blue heron that her protagonist, Jeff, gets. The heron, who is half-hidden in the marsh, seems to be all by herself, but as Jeff works his way toward an understanding of his two very different parents, he realizes that each of them has a place in his life. One of the things that helps him begin to accept both of his parents is his realization that the heron was not really solitary; herons build their nests in colonies "all of them together."

The literary allusions that Voigt uses to help put across her points range from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, and *Hamlet* to Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and de Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. In her later books, she includes pop culture references. Both Emily Dickinson and Judy Blume are alluded to in *Izzy, Willy-Nilly*, while one of Virginia Hamilton's books makes it into *Bad Girls*. Voigt's *Orfe* is a modern telling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, while *Homecoming* has many similarities to the Greek myth of Odysseus. In an interesting reversal, Voigt puts females in the place of the traditional male heroes. ●

## Literal Journeys/Figurative Quests



***An Abundance of Katherines*** by John Green. Dutton, 2006.

Colin Singleton is a budding genius but when he graduates from high school, he feels as though he's already wilting. So far he's had way too many girls—all named Katherine—give him the heave-ho, but as he and his buddy drive across the country, he finally meets a girl whose name is not Katherine.

***Chasing Redbird*** by Sharon Creech. HarperCollins, 1997.

Zinny does not travel far, only on an old Appalachian trail that she discovers and works to rebuild. Nevertheless, there's plenty to think about in this story of family relationships and young romance. Other Creech books based on journeys include *Bloomability* (HarperCollins, 1998), *Walk Two Moons* (HarperCollins, 1994), and *The Wanderer* (HarperCollins, 2000).

***Defining Dulcie*** by Paul Acampora. Dial, 2006. When Dulcie's

father dies, she and her mother move from Connecticut to California as a way of starting over. When it doesn't work for Dulcie, she takes the truck and in a somewhat mad-cap adventure drives back home. Although she learns that she cannot pick up the pieces of her old life, she nevertheless begins to heal.

***Dunk*** by David Lubar. Clarion, 2002. Chad's trip is only to the

Boardwalk in a Jersey beach town where he takes a summer job running a dunking tank. He learns some subtle lessons about the difference between using humor to insult and recruit potential customers and using a different kind of humor to help his best friend who is seriously ill.

***Ghost Boy*** by Iain Lawrence. Random House, Delacorte,

2000. It is just after WWII and Harold Kline, a partially orphaned albino, becomes friends with three sideshow performers in a traveling circus. He thinks that joining the circus will solve his problems, and in ways it does, but mainly because of the lessons he learns about the difference between outside appearances and inside beauty.

***Singerbread*** by Rachel Cohn. Simon & Schuster, 2002. Gin-

gerbread is the rag doll that Cyd's biological father, who was almost a stranger, gave her when she was five. Now as a teenaged "recovering hellion," she is sent from her San Francisco home to New York City to get acquainted with him and his family.

***The Great Turkey Walk*** by Kathleen Karr. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. In this wish-fulfilling and lively quest story set in 1860, fifteen-year-old Simon Green becomes part-

ners with his school teacher to buy 1,000 turkeys in Missouri, hoping to sell them to turkey-starved miners in Denver.

***Homeless Bird*** by Gloria Whelan. HarperCollins, 2000. This winner of the National Book Award is set in India and is about thirteen-year-old Koly, who through an arranged marriage that turns out badly, is forced on a journey toward making a life for herself.

***Hope Was Here*** by Joan Bauer. Putnam's, 2000. Sixteen-year-old Hope and her Aunt Addie leave New York City for promised jobs in Wisconsin—Addie as a cook and Hope as a waitress. They find their jobs—and much more. *Rules of the Road* (1998), along with its companion book, *Best Foot Forward* (2005) and *Backwater* (1999), all from Putnam, are also highly recommended Bauer books in which journeys play a role.

***A Long Way from Chicago*** (1998) and ***A Year Down Yonder*** (2000) by Richard Peck. Dial/Penguin Putnam. These books, one of which won the Newbery Medal, are set during the Great Depression when Mary Alice is sent to live in rural Illinois with her larger-than-life grandmother.

***Many Stones*** by Carolyn Coman. Front Street, 2000. Berry and her father travel to South Africa to attend a memorial service for Berry's older sister, who was killed while working at a church school in Cape Town. The title comes from the stones that Berry places on her chest each night, one at a time, to calm her troubled mind.

***The Orpheus Obsession*** by Dakota Lane. HarperCollins/Katherine Tegen Books, 2005. Sixteen-year-old Anooshka Stargirl lives in a small town in New York State, but when she goes to New York City to visit her older sister, ZZ Moon, she gets introduced to a twenty-one-year-old singer called Orpheus. She pores over his website and develops an obsession for him.

***True Confessions of a Heartless Girl*** by Martha Brooks. Farrar/Melanie Kroupa Books, 2003. A plot summary would make this book seem grimmer than it is. Brooks's main point is to demonstrate the power of community in the process of healing.

***Whirligig*** by Paul Fleischman. Holt, 1998. This is a perfect story to show how a journey provides time for reflection and growth. A boy who in a fit of rage causes an automobile accident that kills a girl sets out on a journey to memorialize her in each corner of the United States.



## Focus Box 4.1 Love and Friendship

***Freak the Mighty*** by Rodman Philbrick. Scholastic, 1993.

Opposites attract in this heartwarming but sad story about a "giant" and a "midget" who become the best of friends.

***Cold Sassy Tree*** by Olive Ann Burns. Ticknor & Fields, 1984.

Teenagers like this book that was published for adults and made into a successful film. It is the story of Will Tweedy's growing up, as well as his grandfather's love story.

***Heart on My Sleeve*** by Ellen Wittlinger. Simon and Schuster,

2004. The author of the Printz Honor Book *Hard Love* uses emails, postcards, IMs, and regular old letters to tell the story of Chloe and Julian's spring and summer relationship after they meet when Chloe is on a trip to scout out a college.

***If Beale Street Could Talk*** by James Baldwin. Doubleday,

1974. In this mature story told in frank, black English, pregnant Tish loves Fonny, who has been jailed on a false charge.

***If You Come Softly*** by Jacqueline Woodson. Putnam, 1998.

This story of love between a white girl and a black boy was chosen as one of the top-ten books of 1998 by the Young Adult Library Services Association.

***My Heartbeat*** by Garret Freymann-Weyr. Houghton, 2002.

Fourteen-year-old Ellen has a crush on her brother's best friend, but things get complicated when she finds out that her brother and his friend are more than friends. Nevertheless, she and the friend go ahead with their own sexual relationship and readers are left to ponder the difficulties of trying to put people in boxes.

***The Plain Janes*** by Cecil Castellucci, illus. by Jim Rugg. Minx,

2007. This amusing and quirky graphic novel is about the friendship of four girls who all feel like misfits until they form their secret club, the Plain Janes. This may be just the book to convince regular readers of realistic YA fiction that graphic novels can have their own kind of power.

***Prom*** by Laurie Halse Anderson. Viking, 2005. Readers

were happily surprised to learn that the author of such a serious book as *Speak* could also write a lighthearted

and humorous book about Ashley and what she does to save the prom—all because it means so much to Nat, her best friend. The trouble started when a dishonest teacher stole the prom money and most people were ready to give up.

***Son of the Mob*** by Gordon Korman. Hyperion, 2002.

Seventeen-year-old Vince Luca, whose father could easily be part of the Sopranos, usually manages to stay out of his father's business ventures, but then he falls in love with the daughter of an FBI agent.

***The True Meaning of Cleavage*** by Mariah Fredericks.

Atheneum/S & S, 2003. A reviewer for *VOYA* compared Fredericks's book to Judy Blume's *Forever*, but predicted that this one would escape the censor's sword because it is filled with chuckles minus graphic descriptions.

***The Unlikely Romance of Kate Bjorkman*** by Louise Plummer.

Delacorte Press, 1995. Kate Bjorkman is a high school senior who is six feet tall and much too smart and too funny to write a typical romance, but that's what makes this first-person story refreshing.

***Vote for Larry*** by Janet Tashjian. Holt, 2004. In this sequel to

*The Gospel According to Larry* (Holt, 2001), seventeen-year-old Josh Swenson comes back (he had committed *pseudocide* by faking the death of his online alter ego, Larry) to work with his friend, Beth, in hopes of mobilizing young voters and getting them to reject the commercialism that surrounds them.

***When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*** by Kimberly Willis Holt.

Henry Holt, 1999. It is the 1970s and the world is thinking about Vietnam, but thirteen-year-old Toby is much more interested in Zachary Beaver, a boy billed as the fattest boy in the world, who gets left by his manager in the parking lot of the neighborhood bowling alley.

***Who Am I without Him? Short Stories about Girls and the Boys in Their Lives*** by Sharon G. Flake. Hyperion, 2004.

Flake's stories aren't all wish-fulfilling; instead, she makes girls take a second look at what they are willing to give up to please the boys.



# Margaret A. Edwards Award Winner (2008)

*Orson Scott Card*, **A Writer with  
Talent and Versatility**

When the American Library Association announced that it was honoring Orson Scott Card with the 2008 Award, specifically for *Ender's Game* and *Ender's Shadow*, the committee praised him for writing two books that "continually capture the imagination and interest of teens." Tor published *Ender's Game* in 1985 and *Ender's Shadow* in 1999, with the later book being not a sequel but a companion book because it tells the same story except from the perspective of Bean, a boy who becomes Ender's friend and helper.

*Ender's Game* is set in a somewhat vague future time when humans fear another attack from the insect-like bug-gers. Seventy years earlier, a military genius in Earth's army saved the world, and military leaders are now looking for one more child genius who can be trained to repeat the act. Peter and Valentine Wiggin have the military genius but the wrong temperament to be the proper choice. However, their little brother Andrew, who is called Ender because that's how his two-year-old sister pronounces his name, has both the temperament and the genius. Government officials take him to Battle School in hopes that he will be the one to prevent the attack that seems imminent.

The announcement that the American Library Association had chosen Card as the 2008 winner was made on January 14, which coincided with the first day of our young adult literature class in the spring semester. We always start a new semester with students introducing themselves by telling about a favorite book, one that has meant something in their lives. This year one of the first students spoke lovingly about how much she, along with the rest of her family, loved *Ender's Game* and *Ender's Shadow*. Her concluding comment was that her older brother had just come back from two years in Poland and the only souvenirs—the only thing Polish—that he brought back were *Ender's Game* and *Ender's Shadow* translated into Polish.

It was fun to tell the class that just that morning the American Library Association, which was meeting in Philadelphia, had announced that Card was being honored for the very books that the student's brother had brought home from Poland. The conversation reminded other students of

Card favorites, including ones that they or their spouses have gone on to read as adults. The next day a graduate student stopped by and reminded us of how prescient she had been when in our Symbols and Archetypes class she had written her paper on the "Duality of the Warrior/Destroyer Archetype" in the two Ender books. But perhaps a more interesting point she made was that gifted children love the Ender books because Card so skillfully shows his characters grappling with a desire for belonging while at the same time being "different."

Card is a man of many talents and many ambitions. To get a hint of his wide-ranging interests check out his website at [www.hatrack.com/osc/about-more.shtml](http://www.hatrack.com/osc/about-more.shtml). He has written nearly three dozen plays, and if not for his love of drama, we might never have had his science fiction. One reason is that by writing plays and hearing his words spoken on stage he developed an awareness of how careful he had to be to keep his words from being misinterpreted by the reader. The other reason is more mundane. After college, he took a job as a copy editor, but in his spare time he established a theater company that performed on an outdoor, public stage that had been built during the Depression in Provo, Utah. The company did fine during the summer when they did not have to pay rent, but when winter came their expenses increased and debts piled up. Card knew he could never pay the debts from his modest salary and so he gave himself another part-time job of writing and selling science fiction.

When the short story that eventually turned into *Ender's Game* was accepted, the editor wanted to use the title "Professional Soldier," but even though Card was desperate to sell the story he insisted on keeping the title of "Ender's Game." He had devised the boy's name and the story title so as to make readers think about the "endgame" in chess. Fortunately the name also works for people who play more football than chess because it is reminiscent of an "end run." and as one of the boys says when he first meets Ender at school, "Not a bad name here. Ender. Finisher. Hey," which is exactly what Ender turns out to be when he plays the all-important video game named *The End of the World*."