

Summer Reading Book Reviews

Middle School

You're a Brave Man, Julius Zimmerman by Claudia Mills

Booklist (October 15, 1999) Gr. 5-7. Julius Zimmerman, last seen in *Losers, Inc.*



(1997), is planning a big summer for himself. Or, rather, his mother is.

She's arranged for him to have French lessons and a babysitting job, and she has set his reading goals. Julius is willing to go along; he wants to

make his mom proud. But when he needs a private lesson to do the

hokey pokey in French class, discovers that his young charge isn't toilet

trained, and learns that *A Tale of Two Cities* has 454 pages, he's bummed. Mills relates

all this with her usual amusing take on things and makes Julius an endearing hero,

especially when he tries to toilet train Edison ("My wee-wee doesn't like potties"). Julius'

eventual success in ways his mother never imagined makes both of them happy and

leaves readers satisfied. The amazing new girl in town, a young actress, opens the way

for another book about Julius.

I Have Lived a Thousand Years by Livia Bitton-Jackson

Booklist May 1999) Gr. 8-12. Bitton-Jackson recalls her arduous life immediately after



World War 11. Building on her **I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Coming of Age in the Holocaust** (1997), she now tells how life begins again in 1945.

Fourteen-year-old Livia, her older brother, and mother return to their village, now part of Czechoslovakia. They vow never to be separated again and

plan to go to America, which Livia's brother is able to do within a year. While

waiting for the virtually unobtainable permits to emigrate, the two women

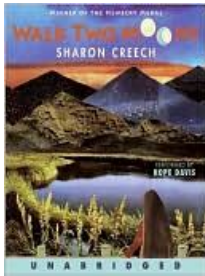
find work, despite lingering prejudice, and Livia attends Judaic classes. She participates

in clandestine operations smuggling Jews to Israel and, compromising that very covert

operation, smuggles her mother and herself onto an underground transport. The dangerous plan works, and Livia and her mother arrive in New York in 1951. Although the narrative switches quirkily between passionate entries and detached observations, the schism emphasizes the multiple and constant separations in Livia's life: "every parting is a minor death." A brief epilogue of the family's **years** to the present; a family chronicle of events; highlights of post-Holocaust events, and a glossary of terms add further context.

Walk Two Moons by Sharon Creech

Booklist (November 15, 1994) Gr. 7-9. Thirteen-year-old Sal Hiddle can't deal with all the upheaval in her life. Her mother, Sugar, is in Idaho, and although Sugar promised to return before the tulips bloomed, she hasn't come back. Instead, Mr. Hiddle has moved Sal from the farm she loves so much and has even taken up company with the unpleasantly named Mrs. Cadaver. Multilayered, the book tells the story of Sal's trip to Idaho with her grandparents; and as the car clatters along, Sal tells her grandparents the story of her friend Phoebe, who receives messages from a "lunatic" and who must cope with the disappearance of her mother. The novel is ambitious and successful on many fronts: the characters, even the adults, are fully realized; the story certainly keeps readers' interest; and the pacing is good throughout. But Creech's surprises--that Phoebe's mother has an illegitimate son and that Sugar is buried in Idaho, where she died after a bus accident--are obvious in the first case and contrived in the second. Sal knows her mother is dead; that Creech makes readers think otherwise seems a cheat, though one, it must be admitted, that may bother adults more than kids. Still, when Sal's on the road with her grandparents, spinning Phoebe's yarn and trying to untangle her own, this story sings.



Just Ella by Margaret Pete Haddix

Booklist (September 1, 1999) Gr. 7-12. The story of Cinderella continues, with 15-year-



old Ella discovering that life after the ball isn't necessarily lived happily ever after. Her prince is decidedly not charming, and castle life is cushy, but superficial and repressive. Then Ella meets tutor Jed Reston, a lively companion and social activist. Their relationship inspires her to rethink her wishes and priorities and to embark on a challenging quest to find true happiness in life and love. In lively prose, with well-developed characters, creative plot twists, wit, and drama, Haddix transforms the Cinderella tale into an insightful coming-of-age story. Ingenuity and determination, not magic wands, explain Ella's gown, coach, and famous glass slippers, and lend credence to her adventures and evolving character. Easy to relate to, Ella is a strong female protagonist who learns the rewards of bettering life for others, and that happiness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. A provocative and entertaining novel, this is a cut above many of the recent versions of fairy tales for older readers.

A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Bad Beginning by Lemony Snicket

Boy's Life (December 2000) Orphans are popular book heroes these days. Everyone's



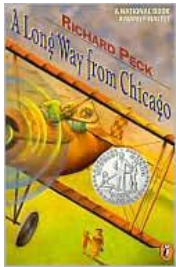
heard of Harry Potter, of course. Now here come the Baudelaire kids: Violet, Klaus and Sunny. They barely survive harrowing adventure after harrowing adventure in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*-a set of exciting, funny and clever mystery-adventure books for kids 10 years old and tip. (If you're 7 to 9 and a good reader, go ahead and try them.)Terrible things keep happening to the Baudelaire (bow-delair)

children, starting in the first book, *The Bad Beginning*, when their wealthy parents perish in a house fire. Author Lemony Snicket (that's a pen name) then introduces an arch villain, Count Olaf, who is determined to grab the orphans' inherited fortune for himself.

Evil Olaf, who even smells bad, chases after the three siblings from book to book, hiding behind outrageous disguises and committing the odd murder in his pursuit of their riches. One poor victim dies of a snake bite. Another is devoured by sharp-toothed leeches. Violet, Klaus and Sunny may have the world's worst luck, but by using their brains and imaginations, they manage to outwit the murderous count--at least so far. Try **A Series of Unfortunate Events** to see if they can keep one step ahead."

A Long Way from Chicago by Richard Peck

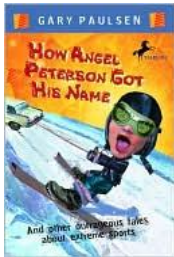
Booklist starred (September 1, 1998) Gr. 6-10. Grandma Dowdel is not a good



influence--and that's one good reason why Joey likes visiting her. Each August, from 1929 (when Joey is nine) to 1935, he and his younger sister travel by train from Al Capone's Chicago to spend a week with Grandma in her scrappy small Illinois town. In seven short stories, one for each summer, Grandma lies, cheats, trespasses, and contrives to help the town underdogs (including her own worst enemy) outwit the banker, the Holy Rollers, and the establishment. Part vaudeville act, part laconic tall tale, the stories, with their dirty tricks and cunning plots, make you laugh out loud at the farce and snicker at the reversals. Like Grandma, the characters are larger-than-life funny, yet Peck is neither condescending nor picturesque. With the tall talk, irony, insult, and vulgarity, there's also a heartfelt sense of the Depression's time and place, when a knot of people wait outside the store for the day-old bread to become half price, and Grandma defies the sheriff, poaches catfish, and fries it up to feed the Depression drifters with her home-brewed beer ("They didn't thank her. She wasn't looking for thanks"). The viewpoint is adult--elderly Joe is looking back now at the changes he saw in those seven years--but many young people will recognize the irreverent, contrary voices of their own family legends across generations. The first story, "Shotgun Cheatham's First Night above Ground," appeared in the anthology *Twelve Shots: Stories about Guns* (1997), edited by Harry Mazer.

***How Angel Peterson Got His Name* by Gary Paulsen**

Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy. (November 2004) As a teenage boy growing up



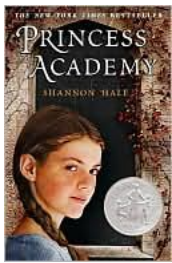
in Thief River Falls, Minnesota, Gary Paulsen--famed author of *Hatchet* (1986, MacMillan), *Soldier's Heart* (1998, Delacorte), and many more young adult novels--was never at a loss for ways to entertain himself. At age 13, he sealed himself in a wooden pickle barrel and attempted to shoot the 12-foot waterfall in town.

His problems started when he discovered the barrel wouldn't float but ended when the barrel fell 12 feet only to land on a sharp boulder and splinter into assorted pieces. Extreme sports were born. Paulsen and his friends did not have any of the expensive and fancy gear available from catalogs and high-end stores that teenagers have today, but they did have a veritable smorgasbord of adventure equipment available for next to nothing at the local army surplus store. Parachutes, rubber rafts, fighter plane target kites, possibly even whole jeeps (disassembled and packed in grease, according to popular legend) could be had cheaply there. Paulsen acknowledges the equipment as the genuine article from the battlefield; he even had a canteen with a bullet hole right through it. Angel Peterson, whose real name is (or was) Carl, got his sobriquet from remarks he made after breaking the land-speed record for snow skiing. Carl and the gang convince a local hot-rodder to pull Carl (about to become Angel) behind his souped-up car until they cruise on past the speed record and into the history and record books. The conditions are perfect on the day they make the attempt, but Carl has a slight equipment breakdown halfway through the run, and when the tow rope entangles the thumbs of his mittens (army surplus mittens, of course), he appears to give a permanent thumbs up to more speed. The boys break the record at 82'k miles per hour, and after they dig Carl out of the snow where he has been embedded, he tells them that he thought he heard the angels singing when he was careening at high speeds and scared beyond belief. From that point on Carl would be known as Angel. Paulsen or one of his buddies at one time or another attempted a litany of crazy stunts, including jumping off a water tower with an army surplus parachute (now called "base jumping" in extreme sports), getting airborne on an army surplus fighter plane target kite (hang

gliding), skateboarding, bear wrestling, and many others. It's hard to say which is funnier, the facts of the stories themselves or the way that Gary Paulsen tells them. He has a way of putting the reader right there with him so that the sights and sounds come through clearly and loudly. Paulsen looks at adolescence with a large dose of good humor. We can almost see him shaking his head and laughing in disbelief at the insanity of teenage behavior as he dedicated the book to "all boys in their thirteenth year; the miracle is that we live through it" (p. v).

Princess Academy by Shannon Hale

Booklist (June 1, 2005) Gr. 6-9. Miri would love to join her father and older sister as a

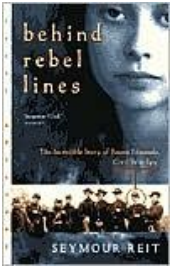


miner in Mount Eskel's quarry. Not a glamorous aspiration for a 14-year-old, perhaps, but the miners produce the humble village's prize stone, linder, and mining is a respected occupation that drives the local economy.

When the local girls are rounded up to compete for the hand of the kingdom's prince, Miri, the prize student in the Princess Academy, gets her chance to shine. In addition to her natural intelligence and spunk, she discovers an intuitive, and at times unspoken, language that grew out of work songs in the mines and uses linder as a medium. With this "quarry-speech" giving a boost to her courage and intelligence, Miri leads her classmates in the fight against being treated as social inferiors in the academy, at the same time educating herself in ways that will better the village. Hale nicely interweaves feminist sensibilities in this quest-for-a-prince-charming, historical-fantasy tale. Strong suspense and plot drive the action as the girls outwit would-be kidnappers and explore the boundaries of leadership, competition, and friendship.

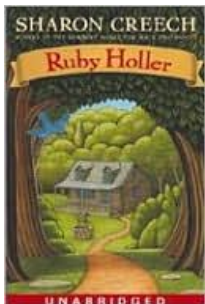
Behind Rebel Lines by Seymour Reit

School Library Journal Gr 5-8 According to the estimates of some historians, as many as 400 women fought in the Civil War disguised as men. One such woman was Emma Edmonds, 21 years old and Canadian born. She felt fiercely patriotic towards her adopted country, and was determined to fight for the Union. Not only did she serve as a field nurse, tending the wounded at the battle sites, but she also served as a Union spy. Reit has used Emma's own published memoirs (long out of print), research from the National Archives, and U. S. Army records. It should make for an exciting tale. Unfortunately, the finished product doesn't measure up to its promise. The style is far too episodic, with little unity between adventures, and not enough fleshing out of events. Some fictionalizing of dialogue and thoughts occurs. This is most likely to appeal only to those with a frenzied obsession with the Civil War.



Ruby Holler by Sharon Creech

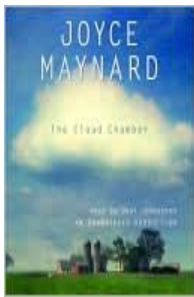
Publishers Weekly (April 2001). The characters introduced here two abandoned children, their villainous guardians and a kindly country couple might have stepped out of a Dickens novel, but as Creech (*Love that Dog*) probes beneath their facades, the characters grow more complex than classic archetypes. Florida and her brother Dallas, raised in an orphanage run by the cold-hearted Trepids, rely on each other rather than grownups for support. They become suspicious when Mr. Trepid informs them that they are going to a place called Ruby Holler to accompany old Mr. and Mrs. Morey on separate vacations. Florida is to be Mr. Tiller Morey's companion on a canoe trip; Dallas is to help Mrs. Sairy Morey hunt down an elusive bird. Ready for the trips proves to be a journey in itself as the Moreys, Florida and Dallas make discoveries about one another as well as themselves in a soothing rural environment. This poignant story evokes a feeling as welcoming as fresh-baked bread. The slow evolution of the siblings



who are no angels parallels the gradual building of mutual trust for the Moreys. The novel celebrates the healing effects of love and compassion. Although conflicts emerge, readers will have little doubt that all will end well for the children and the grandparently Moreys. Ages 8-12.

The Cloud Chamber by Joyce Maynard

Horn Book (September/October, 2005) Maynard's novel opens with the stark tableau of fourteen-year-old Nate and his six-year-old sister Junie getting off the school bus to find police escorting their bleeding father into an ambulance after apparently shooting himself in the head. In the aftermath, Nate's mother retreats into herself, while the rest of their 1960s rural Montana community avoids the family as if their troubles were contagious. Yet despite the bleakness, Maynard's prose has a haunting lyricism that involves readers beyond the point of gawking at the characters' misfortune. Before the suicide attempt, Nate's father was a misfit farmer but an enthusiastic father whose curious mind drove him to help his children cultivate passions, such as astronomy, outside the narrow world of farming. An initially half-hearted decision to construct a cloud chamber for the school science fair becomes Nate's fervent attempt to make his father, housed in a mental institution three hundred miles away, proud and happy again. Nate and Junie endure more than their fair share of setbacks, but Maynard keeps just enough hope threading through the story -- like a "spidery track of light, flashing for a nanosecond through the chamber" -- to give their perseverance a poetry of its own.



Cryptid Hunters by Roland Smith

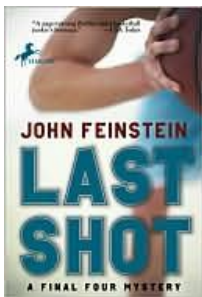
Booklist (February 1, 2005) Gr. 5-8. When twins Marty and Grace O'Hara discover that



their adventurous parents have gone missing, they leave their Swiss boarding school and join their mysterious uncle, Travis Wolfe, on his island in Washington State. They soon learn that their uncle is one of the world's foremost authorities on cryptids (think Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster). Wolfe is scheduled to look for dinosaurs in the African jungle, and he plans to leave Marty and Grace in Europe before the expedition starts. Things go awry, however, when an accident plunges Marty and Grace into the middle of the Congolese jungle. Soon the henchmen of the evil Noah Blackwood are pursuing the twins. The action is nonstop in this well-paced jungle adventure, and Smith adds a deeper layer in scenes of Marty and Grace discovering truths about their complicated family relationships. Several loose ends suggest more cryptid-recovery expeditions to come.

Last Shot by John Feinstein

Booklist (February 1, 2005 (Vol. 101, No. 11)) Gr. 6-9. Best-selling sportswriter Feinstein

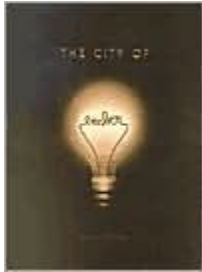


joins the parade of adult authors testing the waters of children's publishing. Unlike so many show-biz celebrities turned writers, he brings plenty of craftsmanship and a kid-friendly story to the table. The setting is college basketball's Final Four, and the stars are the two teenage winners of a writing contest, Stevie Thomas and Susan Carol Anderson, whose prize is a free trip to the tournament and an opportunity to cover the games. Friction between the pair quickly turns to camaraderie when they overhear one of the players from fictional Minnesota State being coerced into throwing the title game. Feinstein makes good use of his insider's knowledge of the Final Four as the intrepid junior reporters set out to expose the scandal, ultimately weaseling themselves into the bad guys' lair in classic Hardy Boys' fashion. The premise holds together, if a bit

shakily, and Feinstein keeps the action moving throughout. The draw, though, is the vivid background, complete with cameos by real-life media personalities and big-name coaches.

***The City of Ember* by Jeanne DuPrau**

Kirkus Review starred (May 15, 2003) This promising debut is set in a dying

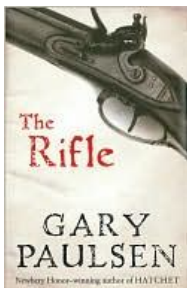


underground city. Ember, which was founded and stocked with supplies centuries ago by "The Builders," is now desperately short of food, clothes, and electricity to keep the town illuminated. Lina and Doon find long-hidden, undecipherable instructions that send them on a perilous mission to find what they believe must exist: an exit door from their

disintegrating town. In the process, they uncover secret governmental corruption and a route to the world above. Well-paced, this contains a satisfying mystery, a breathtaking escape over rooftops in darkness, a harrowing journey into the unknown and cryptic messages for readers to decipher. The setting is well-realized with the constraints of life in the city intriguingly detailed. The likable protagonists are not only courageous but also believably flawed by human pride, their weaknesses often complementing each other in interesting ways. The cliffhanger ending will leave readers clamoring for the next installment. (Fiction. 9-13)

***The Rifle* by Gary Paulsen**

Publishers Weekly (August 14, 1995) A gifted storyteller, Paulsen could have plucked



this plot straight from any newspaper—an accidental shooting with a loaded gun. This tragedy doesn't occur until the final pages, however; with consummate skill, Paulsen slowly sets the stage by focusing on the weapon itself, a rifle made in 1768 and subsequently

used in the Revolutionary War. He documents the painstaking, labor-intensive process of crafting a rifle by hand. And not just any rifle, but one that is "sweet"—a weapon of both beauty and deadly accuracy. He tracks its history, from the attic in which it languishes for centuries to the hands of an ultra-conservative gun freak (whose small-mindedness Paulsen exposes in withering detail), to the home of a mechanic who accepts it in trade for an auto repair. Only then do readers meet the boy Richard and sense impending doom. The remaining pages unfold with nerve-wracking leisure as readers squirm, awaiting the inevitable explosion. Although he sometimes uses his novel as a bully pulpit to fight the argument that "guns don't kill people, people kill people," his magnificent prose is as "sweet" as the rifle about which he writes. A truly mesmerizing tale, from beginning to end.

Reviews obtained through Follett website and DISCUS resources May 2009.