

Don Gallo

Bold Books for Teenagers: The Very Best Books for Middle School Readers

The list of titles below is the result of a survey that I conducted during the summer of 2005. I asked ten of the most knowledgeable people in the field of books for teens to recommend what they believed were the best books published for teenagers between January 2000 and June 2005.

Respondents were asked to name up to three titles in each of the following categories:

- > Books that will interest boys in grades 6 to 8 for personal reading
- > Books that will interest girls in grades 6 to 8 for personal reading
- > Books that will interest both boys and girls in grades 6 to 8 for personal reading
- > Books to teach to boys in grades 6 to 8 for in-common reading
- > Books to teach to girls in grades 6 to 8 for in-common reading
- > Books to teach to both boys and girls in grades 6 to 8 for in-common reading

(Click on any category above to jump to a listing of all titles appearing in that category.)

The same categories were used to ask about books for students in grades 9 to 12.

The ten respondents were a mix of classroom teachers, college educators, school librarians, a public librarian, a book review editor, and consultants. All

ten are extremely well-read individuals, all of them because they love to read, and some of them because they have to, since as members of award committees they are responsible for judging the quality of hundreds of books each year. (See the sidebar for the names and descriptions of those ten notable individuals.)

In each of the categories, titles recommended by more than one individual are listed first, followed by other titles in alphabetical order. Following each title are comments from the book's recommender or recommenders, along with the initials of the person who recommended that title. Each individual was allowed to recommend up to three separate titles for each category.

The Best Books That Will Interest Boys in Grades 6 to 8 for Personal Reading

Books Receiving Multiple Recommendations

Alex Rider Adventures series by Anthony Horowitz (New York: Philomel, various dates). Recruited by British Intelligence to become a secret agent, fourteen-year-old Alex outwits the bad guys while continuing to deal with the desires, fears, and doubts of a middle school boy. (RW)

Stormbreaker by Anthony Horowitz (New York: Philomel, 2001). A junior James Bond, fun and action. (MJW) Spies, technical gadgets, and wild adventure are perfect for teen boys and this is a teen spy, which is even better. (LR) Unequivocally, the most popular book with both reluctant and strong male readers in my middle

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

Linda Benson, a former English teacher, stay-at-home mom, and worker in advertising and real estate sales, is the book review editor/managing editor of *Voice of Youth Advocates* (VOYA) magazine, which she considers to be the best job in the world. Linda attributes her love of reading YA books to a youthful heart despite her aging years.

Cindy Dobrez, a middle school librarian with West Ottawa Public Schools in Holland, Michigan, has served on the Young Adult Library Services Association's (YALSA) Best Books for Young Adults committee, and recently chaired the 2005 Margaret A. Edwards Award committee for the American Library Association (ALA). She also reviews young adult literature for both *Booklist* and VOYA.

Sarah Herz taught English in the high school and middle school of the Westport, Connecticut, school system for twenty-four years and now conducts workshops on young adult literature and reviews articles for *English Journal* and *The ALAN Review*. She is the coauthor of *From Hinton to Hamlet: Building Bridges between Young Adult Literature and the Classics, Second Edition, Revised and Expanded* (Westport: Greenwood, 2005).

Teri S. Lesesne is professor in the Department of Library Science at Sam Houston State University, a book review editor for *Voices from the Middle*, a former president of ALAN (the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE), a member of YALSA's Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers committee, and the author of *Making the Match: The Right Book for the Right Reader at the Right Time, Grades 4–12* (Portland: Stenhouse, 2003).

Walter M. Mayes is library media specialist at the Girls' Middle School in Mountain View, California, and a nationally known presenter of seminars on books for teenagers. He is also the author of *Walter the Giant Storyteller's Giant Book of Giant Stories* (New York: Walker, 2005) and coauthor of *Valerie and Walter's Best Books for Children: A Lively, Opinionated Guide* (2nd ed.; New York: Harper, 2004).

Bill Mollineaux, a retired middle school English teacher, has served as president of ALAN, taught young adult literature courses at Central Connecticut State University and Saint Joseph College, reviewed books for VOYA, written "The View from the Middle" column in *Voices from the Middle*, and created "Bill's Books," which contains monthly recommendations for teens on the ALAN Web site (<http://www.alan-ya.org>).

Richie Partington is a former environmental activist, preschool administrator, and retail children's and young adult book buyer who has recently served on the YALSA Best Books for Young Adults committee and currently maintains an extensive schedule of booktalking in Northern California secondary schools while pursuing a degree at San Jose State University's School of Library and Information Science. He is widely respected for his reviews of new books, which are available at <http://richiespicks.com>.

Lynn Rutan, a middle school librarian in Holland, Michigan, is a former coeditor for the *Media Spectrum*, a journal of the Michigan Association for Media in Education, and has served on several ALA/YALSA committees, including Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults. She is currently serving as the chair of the Best Books for Young Adults committee.

M. Jerry Weiss, Professor Emeritus, New Jersey City University, has been one of the nation's most enthusiastic supporters of literature for teenagers. In addition to serving as a columnist for *The ALAN Review*, Jerry has edited a number of books for adolescent readers, including *From One Experience to Another* (New York: Forge, 1997), *Lost and Found* (New York: Forge, 2000), *Big City Cool* (New York: Persea, 2002), and *The Signet Book of Short Plays* (New York: Signet, 2004).

Rollie Welch, a young adult librarian with the Cleveland (Ohio) Public Library, has worked with teens in library settings for twenty-five years. He currently is a member of YALSA's Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers committee, chair of VOYA's Top Shelf for Middle School Fiction committee, and a VOYA reviewer.

school. This book and its sequels effectively blend adventure, danger, technology—including cool gadgets—and an interesting hero, teen spy Alex Rider, in thrilling plots. (CD)

Eagle Strike by Anthony Horowitz (New York: Philomel, 2004). Middle school boys, even the most reluctant readers, will be mesmerized by this action-packed, James Bond–like tale filled with gimmicks, as a fourteen-year-old spy foils a

plot to annihilate part of the world. Book four in the Alex Rider Adventures series. (BM)

Acceleration by Graham McNamee (New York: Wendy Lamb, 2003). Seeing how Wayne's and Duncan's arrests four years earlier for trying to steal toilets out of a house under construction, how Duncan's watching *Doctor Zhivago* with his mom in the midst of a summer heat wave, and how Vinny's obsession with Arnold Schwarzenegger all become parts of this

intricate puzzle and lead us toward the breathless climax makes *Acceleration* one mesmerizing trip through the heart and bowels of Toronto. (RP) This one is fast-paced and gets faster with every chapter. It is about some very foolish boys who go up against a serial killer. (WM) Combines a thrilling hunt for a serial killer with humor in the unique setting of the Lost and Found of the Toronto subway system. The jacket blurb says it all: “Me and you going after this guy . . . it’s like the Hardy Boys meet Hannibal Lecter.” This is very popular with boys who want a scary, creepy read and yet the humor is a welcome addition. (CD) [Also recommended for personal reading for boys in grades 9 to 12.]

No More Dead Dogs by Gordon Korman (New York: Hyperion, 2000). Middle school boys will love the humor and irony of a student being assigned to after-school suspension for telling the truth. (BM) Male readers will love this fast-paced story about an eighth-grade boy—a hilarious swipe at teachers who assign book reports. (SH) [Also recommended for personal reading for boys and girls in grades 6 to 8.]

Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story about Brain Science by John Fleischman (Boston: Houghton, 2002). Lots of gory detail plus great nonfiction information about the brain makes this a knockout for boys (and girls like it, too). (TSL) The mere thought of living with an iron rod embedded in one’s brain will fascinate and completely engage the middle school boy’s penchant for gross and gory. (LB) [Also recommended for teaching to boys in grades 6 to 8.]

Books Receiving Single Recommendations

The Boy Who Saved Baseball by John H. Ritter (New York: Philomel, 2003). Sports and fantasy. (MJW)

Cirque du Freak series by Darren Shan (New York: Little, various dates). Darren’s show of bravery by becoming a half-vampire hooks middle school boy readers, and the thrilling chapters featuring cliff-hanging endings allow them to anticipate the next book in the series. (RW)

Gold Dust by Chris Lynch (New York: Harper, 2000). A novel that uses baseball as a way to reveal the ups and downs of an interracial friendship between two boys. (SH)

How Angel Peterson Got His Name: And Other Outrageous Tales about Extreme Sports by Gary Paulsen (New York: Wendy Lamb, 2003). No exaggeration! I

was laughing so hard that I woke up my wife *and* both dogs! (RP)

Inside Out by Terry Trueman (New York: Harper, 2003). One of my all-time favorite booktalks. This story of how the kid with all the voices in his head turns out to be the voice of reason in a tense life-and-death situation is a spectacular read. And while there is great levity in the unique rapport that develops between Zach and the armed teens, beneath the hostage situation is the realization that no matter how the standoff ends, Zach will forever be hostage to those voices in his head. (RP)

Joey Pigza Loses Control by Jack Gantos (New York: Farrar, 2000). With the high number of boys diagnosed with ADHD, male readers will recognize themselves in Joey—wired, wily, and never quite gaining control in an out-of-control world. (LB)

Left for Dead: A Young Man’s Search for Justice for the USS Indianapolis by Peter Nelson (New York: Delacorte, 2002). The most successful nonfiction booktalk I have. Boys love this survival tale of adventure and of misplaced blame. (CD) [Also recommended for teaching to boys in grades 6 to 8, and teaching to boys in grades 9 to 12.]

Mortal Engines by Philip Reeve (New York: Eos, 2003). This action-packed, futuristic story of cities on treads devouring smaller cities and the resurrection of an ancient atomic weapon capable of mass destruction will mesmerize readers. (BM)

Pendragon series by D. J. MacHale (New York: Simon, various dates). Reluctant hero Bobby Pendragon discovers his special talent forcing him to battle evil by entering different parallel worlds. Bobby’s resourcefulness and nobility continue drawing boy readers back to the series. (RW)

The Schwa Was Here by Neal Shusterman (New York: Dutton, 2004). Boys will love the wild, funny adventures of three friends who decide to capitalize on Calvin Schwa’s knack for being “functionally invisible” and make some big bucks. (LR) [Also recommended for teaching to boys in grades 6 to 8, and teaching to boys and girls in grades 6 to 8.]

Shackleton’s Stowaway by Victoria McKernan (New York: Knopf, 2005). This gripping, fictionalized account of the 1914 Shackleton expedition is seen through the eyes of eighteen-year-old stowaway, Perce Blackborow, and will keep boys on the edge of their seats. Thrilling, informative, and inspiring all at the same time. (LR) [Also recommended for teaching to boys in grades 6 to 8.]

Touching Spirit Bear by Ben Mikaelson (New York: Harper, 2001). Interesting crime and justice. (MJW)

The Young Man and the Sea by Rodman Philbrick (New York: Blue Sky, 2004). Skiff Beaman reminds us of a Hemingway hero with his courage and tenacity. He also “jump starts” his father’s inertia. (SH) [Also recommended for teaching to boys in grades 6 to 8.]

The Best Books That Will Interest Girls in Grades 6 to 8 for Personal Reading

Books Receiving Multiple Recommendations

The Princess Diaries by Meg Cabot (New York: Harper, 2000). Splashes of romance, a likable girl as the main character who is not perfect, and the happy ending are all great traits that make middle school girls snatch up this title (and the many sequels!). (RW) Teenage girls will identify with Mia in this funny, slapstick tale about a girl just trying to fit in and whose life becomes extremely complicated when she discovers she’s a real-life princess. (BM)

The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants by Ann Brashares (New York: Delacorte, 2001). The guys-to-die-for romances, sibling rivalry, and heartbreaking tragedy are themes enabling the book’s popularity to gain legs as teen girls share the book and recommend it to others. (RW) Four gossipy adolescents share a used pair of jeans. It’s like eavesdropping on their daily lives—romance, parents, and jobs. (SH) Aptly illustrates true female friendship in all its permutations. Teens may be drawn to the book for its promise of magical jeans that make everyone look better, but it’s the four distinct girls and their problems and victories that keeps them reading. The quotations interspersed in the novel are a bonus feature in addition to the rules for wearing the pants. The 2005 summer movie release will bring even more readers to the series. (CD) [Also recommended for personal reading for girls in grades 9 to 12.]

What My Mother Doesn’t Know by Sonya Sones (New York: Simon, 2001). This is a perfect book for incoming middle school girls to begin the transition to YA lit. Innocence and humor and poetry and first love—what more can you ask for? (RP) This book flies off the shelves of my library. Teen girls navigating the murky waters of love and lust and teenage angst enjoy riding it out with this funny and sensitive life raft of a book. (CD) Teen girls love Sophie’s authentic voice

written in verse form as she struggles to understand life and love. (LR)

Who Am I Without Him? Short Stories about Girls and the Boys in Their Lives by Sharon Flake (New York: Hyperion, 2004). This is the antidote for the sappy romance genre: gritty and funny stories about boys and first loves. (TSL) This book is on a subject of primary importance to middle school girls, and it offers enough diverse views and situations that most teens will recognize themselves within its pages. (WM)

Zazoo by Richard Mosher (New York: Clarion, 2001). This amazing, multifaceted story of thirteen-year-old Vietnamese orphan Zazoo explores first love, old secrets, the nature of heroism, and relationships in a moving and lyrical voice. (LR) This is the book I’d recommend to all girls looking for something different. A story of mysteries, lies, romance, poetry, postcards, and family secrets all woven together as a young girl in France struggles to understand her past while she waits for the mysterious boy on the bicycle to reappear. This is a book I find difficult to booktalk, so I just clutch it to my heart and tell the teens to trust me and read it. Those who do, fall in love with *Zazoo*. (CD) [Also recommended to teach to girls in grades 6 to 8.]

Books Receiving Single Recommendations

Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging: Confessions of Georgia Nicolson by Louise Rennison (New York: Harper, 2000). This title was one of the first novels featuring frantic-girl-with-crazy-home-life-obsessing-over-cute-guy written in diary form for teens. And it is still one of the best. (RW) [Also recommended for personal reading for girls in grades 9 to 12.]

Best Foot Forward by Joan Bauer (New York: Putnam, 2005). Fun. A continuation of *Rules of the Road* (New York: Putnam, 1998). (MJW)

Bloody Jack: Being an Account of the Curious Adventures of Mary “Jacky” Faber, Ship’s Boy by L. A. Meyer (New York: Harcourt, 2002). Another strong female character, Jacky tackles the obstacles that life hands her with great aplomb in grand adventures that speak to the power in every grrrrrl. (LB)

The Boyfriend List by E. Lockhart (New York: Delacorte, 2005). Whatever you think about Chick Lit, *The Boyfriend List* is a delightful and frequently aching honest tale—warts and all—about what happens when girls and boys meet. From my post-adolescent perspective, so much of what I see in Ru-

by's relationships with her peers is strikingly similar to what I went through or observed with my own contemporaries. (RP)

A Corner of the Universe by Ann M. Martin (New York: Scholastic, 2002). A moving story about a teenager's compassion for her mentally ill uncle—her capacity to understand him contrasts the indifference of some of the adults. (SH)

The Goose Girl by Shannon Hale (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003). A magical retelling of a Grimm brothers' fairy tale that will grab fans of high fantasy with its plot twists, believable characters, beautiful writing, and happy ending. (BM)

Hope Was Here by Joan Bauer (New York: Putnam, 2000). Bauer's strong female character, who manages to turn the negatives in her life into positives through humor, resilience, and sheer determination, will resonate with girl readers. (LB) [Also recommended to teach to girls in grades 6 to 8.]

A Northern Light by Jennifer Donnelly (New York: Harcourt, 2003). Lots of mystery about a young woman's drowning and the dilemma of the protagonist make this a real page-turner. (SH) [Also recommended to teach to girls in grades 9 to 12.]

The Outcasts of 19 Schuyler Place by E. L. Konigsburg (New York: Atheneum, 2004). A spunky girl defends her uncles' construction plans. (MJW) [Also recommended to teach to girls in grades 6 to 8.]

The Search for Belle Prater by Ruth White (New York: Farrar, 2005). This sequel to *Belle Prater's Boy* (New York: Farrar, 1996) is about finding a person who disappeared mysteriously. (MJW)

Trickster's Choice by Tamora Pierce (New York: Random, 2003). Girls will relate to this fast-paced and often humorous high-fantasy tale of a girl who runs away and winds up as the leader of a rebellion. Book one in the Daughter of the Lioness series. (BM)

The Year of Secret Assignments by Jaclyn Moriarty (New York: Levine, 2004). Lots of laughs, plenty of attitude, mystery, and hijinks permeate this book that has been incredibly popular with our eighth-grade students. Three longtime girlfriends in high school—Emily, Lydia, and Cassie—who are connected through parents who went to law school together, are each required to become pen pals with guys in a cross-town school with a bad reputation. The story is told primarily through these letters back and forth, along with some journal entries, and a hysterically funny fill-in-the-blanks writing workbook that Lydia's dad has given her. (RP)

The Best Books That Will Interest Both Boys and Girls in Grades 6 to 8 for Personal Reading

Book Receiving Multiple Recommendations

The Amulet of Samarkand by Jonathan Stroud (New York: Miramax, 2003). With more complex and satisfying world building and more sophisticated heroes and villains than those of the ever-popular Harry Potter titles, this first book of the Bartimaeus Trilogy offers nail-biting scenes certain to please fantasy fans of both genders. (LB) Stroud is the best YA fantasy writer of the early twenty-first century. Danger, action, mystery, evil, and humor (and occasionally a lot of rain) make these books fantastic fantasy. But the eloquent vocabulary, vivid and melodic descriptions, significant themes, and Orwellian overtones make Stroud's trilogy a profound work of young adult literature. (RP)

Books Receiving Single Recommendations

Airborn by Kenneth Oppel (New York: Eos, 2004). This is one of the best world-building fantasy novels ever, with all the elements of great storytelling: compelling characters, a plot that is complex but still comprehensible, and an insistent narrative voice that will not let you go. (WM)

Al Capone Does My Shirts by Gennifer Choldenko (New York: Putnam, 2004). Though the main character is male, girls will find plenty of appeal in this family story that deals with a number of interesting issues while never losing its readers. (TSL)

And in the Morning by John Wilson (Tonawanda: Kids Can, 2003). A war story, including life in the trenches and romance at home. (Better, as far as I am concerned, than Crane.) (MJW)

Breathing Underwater by Alex Flinn (New York: Harper, 2001). Teens entering heterosexual relationships will be riveted by the two characters' viewpoints of a romance that becomes obsessive when the male enforces dominating control. (RW) [Also recommended for personal reading for boys and girls in grades 9 to 12.]

Can't Get There from Here by Todd Strasser (New York: Simon, 2004). Each of them has some real or imagined story about how they got there. But here they are: a small tribe of street urchins hostage to the natural and human elements of a winter on the streets in Manhattan. By melding remnants of childhood joy and

innocence with the bitter bleakness of life and death in filthy alleys and dumpsters, Strasser has written a story that will be the root of nightmares, prolonged discussions and, hopefully, change. (RP)

The City of Ember by Jeanne DuPrau (New York: Random, 2003). Middle schoolers will be fascinated with the efforts of Lina and Doon as they decipher the meaning of partial instructions that explain how to escape their dying domed city. (BM)

Coraline by Neil Gaiman (New York: Harper, 2002). Beware of this innocent-appearing book that opens with scenes that can be compared to a child's fairy tale. It is every bit as suspenseful and horrifying as any modern movie thriller. (RW)

Down the Yukon by Will Hobbs (New York: Harper, 2001). In this exciting sequel to *Jason's Gold*, Jason and his girlfriend, Jamie, participate in a 1,700-mile race on the Yukon River. (SH)

Eldest by Christopher Paolini (New York: Knopf, 2005). Sequel to *Eragon*. (CD)

Eragon by Christopher Paolini (New York: Knopf, 2003) and its sequel *Eldest* (New York: Knopf, 2005). Adventure fantasy involving a boy and a dragon. (MJW)

The First Part Last by Angela Johnson (New York: Simon, 2003). What is it like when a child has a child? After reading Johnson's *The First Part Last*, I have finally been able to *feel* what that is like. (RP) [Also recommended for personal reading for boys in grades 9 to 12, personal reading for boys and girls in grades 9 to 12, and to teach to boys and girls in grades 9 to 12.]

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire by J. K. Rowling (New York: Levine, 2000). Harry still tops the list of favorites for girls and boys. (LR)

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince by J. K. Rowling (New York: Levine, 2005). This will be the book most in demand in my middle school library this fall. We'll be camping with a group of friends over the release date in July and I've been designated to drive the teens to a local store to buy their copies so they won't have to wait until Monday. The tents will have lanterns lit into the night as the Harry Potter reading begins. (CD)

Have a Hot Time, Hades! by Kate McMullan (New York: Volo, 2002). Most middle school students love mythology, and Hades' slapstick version of the "real" truth about Zeus will result in a laugh-out-loud read. Book one in the Myth-O-Mania series. (BM)

Hoot by Carl Hiaasen (New York: Knopf, 2002). Middle school students invent clever pranks to save the

owls' nesting site from new construction. (SH) [Also recommended to teach to boys and girls in grades 6 to 8.]

The House of the Scorpion by Nancy Farmer (New York: Atheneum, 2002). It is an utterly gripping read and even appeals to kids who don't like science fiction. (WM) [Also recommended to teach to boys and girls in grades 6 to 8.]

The Last Book in the Universe by Rodman Philbrick (New York: Blue Sky, 2000). After the Earth is almost destroyed, a young boy and an old man risk their lives to save human intelligence. (SH) [Also recommended to teach to boys in grades 6 to 8 and to teach to boys and girls in grades 6 to 8.]

The Misfits by James Howe (New York: Atheneum, 2001). Middle schoolers will empathize with four "misfits" who show that words can hurt more than sticks and stones. (BM) [Also recommended to teach to boys and girls in grades 6 to 8.]

No More Dead Dogs by Gordon Korman (New York: Hyperion, 2000). Zany story about a boy who won't tell a lie and how this effects his school. (MJW) [Also recommended for personal reading for boys in grades 6 to 8.]

Son of the Mob by Gordon Korman (New York: Hyperion, 2002). The time-tested Romeo and Juliet theme of opposites from feuding families falling in love is presented in a fresh, fast-moving, and completely funny story. (RW) [Also recommended for personal reading for boys in grades 9 to 12 and for personal reading for boys and girls in grades 9 to 12.]

The Best Books to Teach to Boys for In-Common Reading in Grades 6 to 8

Books Receiving Multiple Recommendations

Left for Dead: A Young Man's Search for Justice for the USS Indianapolis by Pete Nelson (New York: Delacorte, 2002). The great and true tale of a young activist who took on the country's politicians and military bureaucrats to literally change how history will recount the issues surrounding the sinking of the USS *Indianapolis* at the end of World War II. (RP) Boys will not be able to resist this true story of how an eleven-year-old's research resulted in righting a horrible wrong . . . and there are gory details as well. (LR) [Also recommended for personal reading for boys in grades 6 to 8 and to teach to boys in grades 9 to 12.]

Mississippi Trial, 1955 by Chris Crowe (New York: Fogelman, 2002). Boys, like the story's main character,

will be horrified and mesmerized by the murder of an African American boy as they learn about the racial prejudice that existed in the Deep South. (BM) A teenage boy begins to understand the meaning of racism during the Emmett Till trial. (SH) With current attention again focused on the horrific murder of Emmett Till, Crowe's hard-hitting chronicle is a perfect vehicle for sparking discussion about the events then and now. Paired with Crowe's nonfiction account, *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case* (New York: Dial, 2003), some serious discussion about race and justice will result. (LB) [Also recommended to teach to boys in grades 9 to 12.]

Books Receiving Single Recommendations

B for Buster by Iain Lawrence (New York: Delacorte, 2004). Readers won't learn anything about the causes or large-scale troop movements of World War II, for it is Kak's very personal perspective that we are tracking here, from utterly naive boy—who witnesses horrific sights of death, destruction, and ghosts—to a young man whose every future day will be colored by the Second World War. *B for Buster* is filled with action and shows what it's really all about, the reality Army recruiters such as those in the Michael Moore movie couldn't begin to duplicate. (RP)

A Boy at War: A Novel of Pearl Harbor by Harry Mazer (New York: Simon, 2001). Adam's life is changed forever when he witnesses the bombing of Pearl Harbor. (SH)

Eyes of the Emperor by Graham Salisbury (New York: Wendy Lamb, 2005). His best book to date is a perfect one for history classes studying World War II. (TSL)

Hush by Jacqueline Woodson (New York: Putnam, 2002). Shows the effects of a witness protection program on a family. (MJW)

Island Boyz by Graham Salisbury (New York: Wendy Lamb, 2002). These short stories about fishing, bullying, and romance will grab readers. (SH)

The Last Book in the Universe by Rodman Philbrick (New York: Blue Sky, 2000). Another one I've read aloud a dozen times. (RP) [Also recommended as personal reading for boys and girls in grades 6 to 8 and to teach to boys and girls in grades 6 to 8.]

Lord of the Deep by Graham Salisbury (New York: Delacorte, 2001). Provides an exciting fishing narrative with an ethical dilemma for Mikey and his stepfather in which the black and white of childhood subtly changes to the gray decision making of adolescence. (CD)

My Brother's Keeper by Patricia McCormick (New York: Hyperion, 2005). The sudden, sobering adjustment from childhood to adulthood concerns middle school boys, and this book is marked by great confrontational scenes between younger brother and older brother described dead-on by the author. (RW)

Old Hickory: Andrew Jackson and the American People by Albert Marrin (New York: Dutton, 2004). Students will be fascinated by the vivid descriptions of the times and the actions of this unforgettable president. (BM)

Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story about Brain Science by John Fleischman (Boston: Houghton, 2002). If the title doesn't grab them, the pictures will. It is a great book about a fascinating subject and would be fun to teach. (WM) [Also recommended as personal reading for boys in grades 6 to 8.]

The Schwa Was Here by Neal Shusterman (New York: Dutton, 2004). Humorous pranks made possible due to a friend's ability to go completely unnoticed draw readers into a story that speaks to self-identity and the need to have one's existence validated. (CD) [Also recommended as personal reading for boys in grades 6 to 8 and for personal reading for boys and girls in grades 6 to 8.]

Shackleton's Stowaway by Victoria McKernan (New York: Knopf, 2005). This gripping fictionalized account of the 1914 Shackleton expedition is seen through the eyes of eighteen-year-old stowaway, Perce Blackborow, and will keep boys on the edge of their seats. Thrilling, informative, and inspiring all at the same time. (LR) [Also recommended as personal reading for boys in grades 6 to 8.]

Stuck in Neutral by Terry Trueman (New York: Harper, 2000). The voice of the narrator, Shawn, is realistic, and he mentions many concerns that have direct bearing to middle school boys, especially his feelings about his relationship with his father and what others—especially girls—think of him. (RW) [Also recommended to teach to boys in grades 9 to 12.]

The Teacher's Funeral: A Comedy in Three Parts by Richard Peck (New York: Dial, 2004). Hilarious account of life in rural Indiana when a teacher dies. (MJW)

Things Not Seen by Bruce Clements (New York: Philomel, 2002). Explores the many facets of invisibility in a humorous story that has multiple ethical issues to discuss and debate. (CD)

Travel Team by Mike Lupica (New York: Philomel, 2004). A boy and his father bond through basketball. (MJW)

You Don't Know Me by David Klass (New York: Harper, 2001). Middle school boys are fascinated by the unique mix of humor and stunning realism as the young male narrator relates his trials with girls and his abusive home life. (RW) [Also recommended as personal reading for boys in grades 6 to 8.]

The Young Man and the Sea by Rodman Philbrick (New York: Blue Sky, 2004). This heart-wrenching, adventure-filled young adult version of Hemingway's tale with a determined main character and a happy ending speaks to a boy's sense of adventure. Teachers attempting to teach the four conflicts that make a plot (protagonist vs. self, antagonist, nature, and society) will find this invaluable. (BM) [Also recommended as personal reading for boys in grades 6 to 8.]

The Best Books to Teach to Girls for In-Common Reading in Grades 6 to 8

Books Receiving Multiple Recommendations

Esperanza Rising by Pam Muñoz Ryan (New York: Scholastic, 2000). Elegantly written, using allusion and metaphor to great effect as it tells a story of privilege lost and family found. (WM) The vivid details of Esperanza's struggle to survive when she must flee her rich Mexican home and work in the California fields during the Depression brings this time to life and will fascinate teens who will love the details of Esperanza's babysitting and housework disasters. (LR) Offers many issues for discussion in this riches-to-rags story set during the Great Depression. A beautiful read-aloud with a fully faceted heroine written in lyrical language to savor. (CD) [Also recommended to teach to boys and girls in grades 6 to 8.]

Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli (New York: Knopf, 2000). It's all about being accepted for who you are and not conforming to boys' expectations—themes middle school girls will talk about at length. (RW) This is one of the great books about how rotten kids can be to each other, and even though it is set in high school, it is a perfect encapsulation of the emotional turmoil of middle school. (WM) [Also recommended to teach to girls in grades 9 to 12.]

Books Receiving Single Recommendations

Ashes of Roses by Mary Jane Auch (New York: Holt, 2002). Today's girls will relive the lives of young im-

migrants who survived the ordeals of New York City sweatshops in the early 1900s. (BM)

Before We Were Free by Julia Alvarez (New York: Knopf, 2002). Girls will empathize with twelve-year-old Anita, who is concerned about romance and her appearance, as she discovers the horror and fear of living under a dictator in the Dominican Republic. (BM)

Blushing: Expressions of Love in Poems and Letters edited by Paul B. Janeczko (New York: Orchard, 2004). Poetry about love and love letters from the masters. (MJW)

Cut by Patricia McCormick (Asheville: Front Street, 2000). A gripping story about fifteen-year-old Callie who cuts herself "to feel the pain." (SH)

East by Edith Pattou (New York: Harcourt, 2003). A powerful-yet-vulnerable white bear tugging at my heartstrings, an icy cold landscape so palpable as to make my lungs, toes, and eyeballs ache, and waves of romanticism woven through and through Pattou's *East* have me thinking back to Peter Lake, his majestic white horse, his love for Beverly, and the frozen Lake of the Coheeries. (RP)

Fever 1793 by Laurie Halse Anderson (New York: Simon, 2000). Historical fiction at its finest, this novel presents a strong female protagonist coping with the horrific yellow fever outbreak, with details accurately and compellingly presented. (LB)

Flower by Irene N. Watts (Plattsburgh: Tundra, 2005). A girl sent unwillingly to her grandparents finds a mysterious shadow of a girl who explains how British orphans were sent to Canada and elsewhere as Home Children. (MJW)

Homeless Bird by Gloria Whelan (New York: Harper, 2000). When I taught seventh-grade social studies, I would have given anything for this book! Girls will be fascinated and surprised with the descriptions of Indian culture and the role of women in modern India. (BM)

Hope Was Here by Joan Bauer (New York: Putnam, 2000). Female readers about to land their first job will identify with the plucky sixteen-year-old girl who takes on issues larger than just being a waitress. (RW) [Also recommended for personal reading for girls in grades 6 to 8.]

Mountain Solo by Jeanette Ingold (New York: Harcourt, 2003). A thoughtful story about a musical prodigy's conflict. How can Tess plan a normal life? (SH)

The Outcasts of 19 Schuyler Place by E. L. Konigsburg (New York: Atheneum, 2004). Making kids

aware of how important history and social conscience are while telling a good story is not an easy feat. This book proves Konigsburg's skill at doing both. (TSL) [Also recommended for personal reading for girls in grades 6 to 8.]

Pictures of Hollis Woods by Patricia Reilly Giff (New York: Wendy Lamb, 2002). This is a poignant story of family and how those without traditional families frequently fall prey to The System. It includes the mystery about the summer's tragedy and a love story about water. An absolute must-read for sixth-grade English classes. (RP)

So B. It by Sarah Weeks (New York: Harper, 2004). In the manner of some great award-winning stories of previous years in which young characters journey to discover who they are, Heidi's solitary quest touched my heart and made me just want to hug this wonderful young woman. (RP)

Tree Girl by Ben Mikaelson (New York: Harper, 2004). Fifteen-year-old Gabriela's dangerous journey to escape the guerillas shows her courage and intelligence. (SH)

The Voice That Challenged a Nation: Marian Anderson and the Struggle for Equal Rights by Russell Freedman (New York: Clarion, 2004). Excellent biography. (MJW)

Walking Naked by Alyssa Brugman (New York: Delacorte, 2004). Girls can fight and girls can be cruel. However, their viciousness is often verbal and the consequences can sometimes destroy. Bullying issues are at the forefront of many schools' behavior policies. (RW)

Zazoo by Richard Mosher (New York: Clarion, 2001). This amazing, multifaceted story of thirteen-year-old Vietnamese orphan Zazoo explores first love, old secrets, the nature of heroism, and relationships in a moving and lyrical voice. (LR) [Also recommended for personal reading for girls in grades 6 to 8.]

The Best Books to Teach to Both Boys and Girls for In-Common Reading in Grades 6 to 8

Books Receiving Multiple Recommendations

Hoot by Carl Hiaasen (New York: Knopf, 2002). Hiaasen does an incredible job of showing the different styles of activism that different people resort to. He presents the reader with the contemporary clash of free enterprise versus global ecological issues. He has a lot to say between the lines about parenting, and he has some great insights into the methods of dealing with

bullies. Yet it's such a hysterically funny story and one that middle school boys will easily get into. (RP) Using this laugh-out-loud ecological mystery is a very sneaky way to make students aware of and involve them in solving ecological problems. (BM) [Also recommended for personal reading for boys in grades 6 to 8.]

The Land by Mildred D. Taylor (New York: Fogelman, 2001). *The Land* is the story of two very different young men, born at the end of slavery, who have grown up on the same plantation and have slowly crafted a friendship that becomes closer than the bond between brothers. I've read *The Land* aloud, cover to cover, a dozen times. I've cried a dozen times (not counting the press conference when it failed to win Newbery or Printz recognition). I will vouch for the emotional impact it has on large numbers of middle school students—I've gotten to hear the discussions and read the essays. (RP) African American teens find this historical fiction (based on the author's family history) to be a fascinating account of one man's struggle to be the sole owner of his land in the post-Civil War South. (RW) [Also recommended to teach to boys in grades 9 to 12.]

Books Receiving Single Recommendations

Bronx Masquerade by Nikki Grimes (New York: Dial, 2002). An innovative teacher draws out feelings from students through their writing of poetry. (MJW)

City of the Beasts by Isabel Allende (New York: Harper, 2002). Two teenagers, Alexander and Nadia, solve the mystery of the beasts in this fantasy/realistic story. (SH)

Day of Tears: A Novel in Dialogue by Julius Lester (New York: Hyperion, 2005). History teachers will want to include this book during a study of slavery. English teachers will appreciate the multiple narrators and the format of the book. (TSL) [Also recommended to teach to boys and girls in grades 9 to 12.]

Esperanza Rising by Pam Muñoz Ryan (New York: Scholastic, 2000). The danger and adventure and vivid historical details will capture the attention of boys as well as girls. (LR) [Also recommended to teach to girls in grades 6 to 8.]

Flush by Carl Hiaasen (New York: Knopf, 2005). This very readable part mystery/part coming-of-age story tackles social issues about the environment and also features teens dealing with quirky parents. (RW)

The House of the Scorpion by Nancy Farmer (New York: Atheneum, 2002). Students will be fascinated by

the purpose of cloning and misuse of scientific technology, which will raise many questions about responsibility. (BM) [Also recommended for personal reading for boys and girls in grades 6 to 8.]

In Defense of Liberty: The Story of America's Bill of Rights by Russell Freedman (New York: Holiday, 2003). In the current political climate, it's more important than ever for teens to understand the Bill of Rights and their civil liberties guaranteed therein. This is an engaging read, providing background on the Constitution and the first ten amendments while forcing teens to consider the unending attacks on or interpretations of our inalienable rights. This book should be in every secondary classroom and should be read and discussed on an annual basis in conjunction with related current events. (CD)

Iqbal by Francesco D'Adamo (New York: Atheneum, 2003). Story of horrors of working conditions in carpet factories in Pakistan. (MJW)

The Last Book in the Universe by Rodman Philbrick (New York: Blue Sky, 2000). This action-filled, futuristic story will cause middle schoolers to raise questions about the responsibility of more advanced societies toward less fortunate ones. (BM) [Also recommended for personal reading for boys in grades 6 to 8 and for personal reading for boys and girls in grades 6 to 8.]

Millions by Frank Cottrell Boyce (New York: Harper, 2004). Provides some interdisciplinary themes for teachers to discuss. Social studies classes looking for economics material can discuss the effects of supply and demand as the sudden wealth changes things for the boys, and they can research the European conversion to the euro. Humor tempers the palpable grief of a family dealing with great loss, and the strong voice in this book made it a popular read-aloud choice in our sixth-grade classrooms last year. (CD)

The Misfits by James Howe (New York: Atheneum, 2001). This book has given life to a national No Name Calling Week. It's funny as hell and way more important than it is funny. This groundbreaking book should be taught everywhere, especially those places where adults are ignorant and afraid of anyone different. (RP) [Also recommended for personal reading for boys and girls in grades 6 to 8.]

On the Fringe edited by Donald R. Gallo (New York: Dial, 2001). Eleven stimulating, enlightening, disturbing, and thought-provoking short stories about teenagers who do not fit in at school and who are often ignored by society. (SH) [Also recommended to teach to boys and girls in grades 9 to 12.]

Pedro and Me: Friendship, Loss, and What I Learned by Judd Winick (New York: Holt, 2000). This moving story of love, loss, friendship, and AIDS awareness is my personal favorite for books that should be taught in every classroom. The emotions portrayed run deeply and the art is compelling. (LB) [Also recommended to teach to boys and girls in grades 9 to 12.]

The Rag and Bone Shop by Robert Cormier (New York: Delacorte, 2001). An interrogator nearly convinces a twelve-year-old boy he committed murder! (SH)

The Schwa Was Here by Neal Shusterman (New York: Dutton, 2004). Teens who often feel invisible will love the wild, funny adventures of three friends who decide to capitalize on Calvin Schwa's knack for being "functionally invisible" and make some big bucks. A strong female character makes this great for girls, too. (LR) [Also recommended for personal reading for boys in grades 6 to 8 and to teach to boys in grades 6 to 8.]

Shakespeare Bats Cleanup by Ron Koertge (Cambridge: Candlewick, 2003). The outstanding examples of poetic verse can be discussed in class along with the reasons why the teen adjusts his life's direction through his newly found talent of writing and also how he falls in love. (RW)

Shattered: Stories of Children and War edited by Jennifer Armstrong (New York: Knopf, 2002). A solid short story collection that teachers should share stories from. Our country's involvement in Iraq has increased student interest in reading about war, many of our students have relatives serving abroad, and these powerful stories put a human face on the headlines. (CD)

This Land Was Made for You and Me: The Life and Songs of Woody Guthrie by Elizabeth Partridge (New York: Viking, 2002). Because it offers a portrait of not just the man, but of his times, and can best be appreciated under the skillful tutelage of a classroom teacher who knows how to make the most of its richness. (WM)

Witness by Karen Hesse (New York: Scholastic, 2001). Prejudice in New England, and the arrival of KKK enthusiasts. (MJW)

A Year Down Yonder by Richard Peck (New York: Dial, 2000). A naked lady and a snake and overturned privies make this book a winner with boys and girls as Mary Alice spends a year with her cantankerous Grandma Dowdel. (LR)

In May we will add the list of books recommended for students in grades 9 to 12.

Titles by Category

Click on any title in the lists below to jump to the recommendation for that title or click on the category heading to jump to the beginning of that category. Note that some titles appear in multiple categories.

The Best Books That Will Interest Boys in Grades 6 to 8 for Personal Reading

Acceleration by Graham McNamee
 Alex Rider Adventures series by Anthony Horowitz
The Boy Who Saved Baseball by John H. Ritter
 Cirque du Freak series by Darren Shan
Eagle Strike by Anthony Horowitz
Gold Dust by Chris Lynch
How Angel Peterson Got His Name: And Other Outrageous Tales about Extreme Sports by Gary Paulsen
Inside Out by Terry Trueman
Joey Pigza Loses Control by Jack Gantos
Left for Dead: A Young Man's Search for Justice for the USS Indianapolis by Peter Nelson
Mortal Engines by Philip Reeve
No More Dead Dogs by Gordon Korman
 Pendragon series by D. J. MacHale
Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story about Brain Science by John Fleischman
The Schwa Was Here by Neal Shusterman
Shackleton's Stowaway by Victoria McKernan
Stormbreaker by Anthony Horowitz
Touching Spirit Bear by Ben Mikaelson
The Young Man and the Sea by Rodman Philbrick

The Best Books That Will Interest Girls in Grades 6 to 8 for Personal Reading

Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging: Confessions of Georgia Nicolson by Louise Rennison
Best Foot Forward by Joan Bauer
Bloody Jack: Being an Account of the Curious Adventures of Mary "Jacky" Faber, Ship's Boy by L. A. Meyer
The Boyfriend List by E. Lockhart
A Corner of the Universe by Ann M. Martin
The Goose Girl by Shannon Hale
Hope Was Here by Joan Bauer
A Northern Light by Jennifer Donnelly
The Outcasts of 19 Schuyler Place by E. L. Konigsburg
The Princess Diaries by Meg Cabot
The Search for Belle Prater by Ruth White
The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants by Ann Brashares

Trickster's Choice by Tamora Pierce
What My Mother Doesn't Know by Sonya Sones
Who Am I Without Him? Short Stories about Girls and the Boys in Their Lives by Sharon Flake
The Year of Secret Assignments by Jaclyn Moriarty
Zazoo by Richard Mosher

The Best Books That Will Interest Both Boys and Girls in Grades 6 to 8 for Personal Reading

Airborn by Kenneth Oppel
Al Capone Does My Shirts by Gennifer Choldenko
The Amulet of Samarkand by Jonathan Stroud
And in the Morning by John Wilson
Breathing Underwater by Alex Flinn
Can't Get There from Here by Todd Strasser
The City of Ember by Jeanne DuPrau
Coraline by Neil Gaiman
Down the Yukon by Will Hobbs
Eldest by Christopher Paolini
Eragon by Christopher Paolini
The First Part Last by Angela Johnson
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire by J. K. Rowling
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince by J. K. Rowling
Have a Hot Time, Hades! by Kate McMullan
Hoot by Carl Hiaasen
The House of the Scorpion by Nancy Farmer
The Last Book in the Universe by Rodman Philbrick
The Misfits by James Howe
No More Dead Dogs by Gordon Korman
Son of the Mob by Gordon Korman

The Best Books to Teach to Boys for In-Common Reading in Grades 6 to 8

B for Buster by Iain Lawrence
A Boy at War: A Novel of Pearl Harbor by Harry Mazer
Eyes of the Emperor by Graham Salisbury
Hush by Jacqueline Woodson
Island Boyz by Graham Salisbury
The Last Book in the Universe by Rodman Philbrick
Left for Dead: A Young Man's Search for Justice for the USS Indianapolis by Pete Nelson
Lord of the Deep by Graham Salisbury
Mississippi Trial, 1955 by Chris Crowe
My Brother's Keeper by Patricia McCormick
Old Hickory: Andrew Jackson and the American People by Albert Marrin
Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story about Brain Science by John Fleischman

The Schwa Was Here by Neal Shusterman
Shackleton's Stowaway by Victoria McKernan
Stuck in Neutral by Terry Trueman
The Teacher's Funeral: A Comedy in Three Parts by Richard Peck
Things Not Seen by Bruce Clements
Travel Team by Mike Lupica
You Don't Know Me by David Klass
The Young Man and the Sea by Rodman Philbrick

The Best Books to Teach to Girls for In-Common Reading in Grades 6 to 8

Ashes of Roses by Mary Jane Auch
Before We Were Free by Julia Alvarez
Blushing: Expressions of Love in Poems and Letters edited by Paul B. Janeczko
Cut by Patricia McCormick
East by Edith Pattou
Esperanza Rising by Pam Muñoz Ryan
Fever 1793 by Laurie Halse Anderson
Flower by Irene N. Watts
Homeless Bird by Gloria Whelan
Hope Was Here by Joan Bauer
Mountain Solo by Jeanette Ingold
The Outcasts of 19 Schuyler Place by E. L. Konigsburg
Pictures of Hollis Woods by Patricia Reilly Giff
So B. It by Sarah Weeks
Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli
Tree Girl by Ben Mikaelson
The Voice That Challenged a Nation: Marian Anderson and the Struggle for Equal Rights by Russell Freedman

Walking Naked by Alyssa Brugman
Zazoo by Richard Mosher

The Best Books to Teach to Both Boys and Girls for In-Common Reading in Grades 6 to 8

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