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Student Reviews

Authors
Linda R. Adams, Katie Northrup-Fox, Elizabeth Jensen, Sufian Abu, Chris Hales, Kerri Madsen, Sarah Brenner Jones, Angela Shumway, April Sessions Andreason, and Stephanie L. Dowdle

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Student Reviews


Reviewed by Linda R. Adams

Two boys of different races become friends while working together to save Peanuts’ grandfather who has suffered a heart attack. Both try to be sensitive to the other’s feelings. Dooley, the other boy, is sure the grandfather’s condition must be serious or his aunt would not have cancelled her beauty appointment. Therefore, a soul switch with a turtle (since that is the animal the grandfather looks the most like to Dooley) is in order. The grandfather lives and to Peanuts’ relief (and the reader’s), the turtle does, too.

As Peanuts reminisces throughout the story, many delightful experiences are shared as the reader goes through this serious experience with the boys. Details in the story transported me into the situation with the boys. I will always be thankful that my boys did not make holes in the bottom of the saucepans to convert them into bells! What a lovely relationship the grandfather had with Peanuts.

★★★★


Reviewed by Stephanie L. Dowdle

There were two moons last August—one that was almost full at the beginning when Mom was alive and all our lives were normal, and then a big full cheater moon at the end, one that looked down so beautifully on the world when everything was awful and changed and never would be the same again.

These are the words of sixteen-year-old Sidonie, a young girl who has just lost her mother to tuberculosis. Struggling to find some stability in a family that seems crazy and unstable, Sidonie pushes everything away from her that reminds her of her beautiful mother. She tries to understand her older sister Roberta’s unhappy, bossy attitude, while at the same time, trying to stay close to her.
Sidonie’s father, a doctor at the nearby sanatorium for TB patients, distances himself from the family—unable to cope with his grief at losing his wife. Then one summer, Kieran comes to town. The handsome sixteen-year-old, like Sidonie, is struggling to cope with an unstable home and family life. They become friends, and, together, help each other to overcome the tragedies and hardships they have faced. Together, they realize that they do not have to face life alone.

I feel that this is an excellent book for readers of all ages. Through Sidonie’s eyes, readers experience the deep feelings of pain, death, love, friendship, and reconciliation. Brooks’ novel intelligently addresses these ideas, while writing a very engaging story.

In the novel, there is not a great deal that appears to be offensive. There are several scenes in which Sidonie and her sister Roberta are smoking, and alcohol is also present, but not prominent. Aside from this, and the occasionally kisses between Roberta and Phil, and Sidonie and Kieran, I feel that the subject matter is tasteful and appropriate for an adolescent readership.


The story is told from 6th grader Susan’s point of view. Blood tests have recently confirmed that as a baby, she was accidentally switched at the hospital with another baby girl and sent home with the wrong biological parents. Susan’s biological parents want her to come live with them, as their daughter has recently died in a car accident. The parents Susan has lived with all her life want to try and help Susan adjust to her new situation. It is a rough emotional struggle for all involved.

The weaknesses of the book are fake dialogue, inconsistent character development, unbelievable reactions from Susan, and a plot that borders on the impossible. These seriously detract from the quality of the book. However, the story explores some significant themes: where does one belong, what does it mean to belong to a family, what are family ties, what is love, and what are the boundaries it can cross.
Brother Knight is a story about a boy named Rabon who learns that things are not always what they seem. Rabon lives in a desert village, and it is there he learns that he is the son of a "witch" and that he has a twin brother. One day Solmak, the ruler of the far-off city of Teress, comes to kill Rabon. Solmak wants to kill Rabon because it has been prophesied that some day Rabon will become the Sun Lord and take Solmak's place as the ruler of Tereu. Rabon escapes to the nearby swamp where he meets his twin brother, Lal. Lal is a huge, ugly monster who saves Rabon from death many times when Rabon and Lal go to Tereu together. Lal goes there to bury his mother's remains, while Rabon goes to Teren to kill Solmak who has killed Dorf, Rabon's adopted father. Throughout the story, Rabon thinks that Solmak is his father; but in the end, he learns that Luan, ruler of the Forbidden City, is his real father. In the end, both Solmak and Luan die, who are also brothers, and Rabon becomes the new Sun Lord while Lal becomes the new Night Lord with a girl named Nari at his side.

Brother Night has its merits, but it does not reach off the page and grab the reader until around Chapter 17 when the author introduces a young female character, Nari, into the novel. Introducing the young female earlier in the novel would spark more interest in the female audience. Another possible reason for the slow beginning may be that the reader is constantly guessing as to who Rabon really is, why Solmak came to kill him, and the mysteries surrounding the cities of Tereu and the Forbidden City. For example, Jenna speaks in riddles that baffle the reader and that are not answered until close to the last chapter. Jenna says that "the way lies only where the sun cannot reach" (17) in Chapter 2, but the reader does not find out what this means until Chapter 16. Rather than stimulate interest in the story, the reader is left feeling frustrated and impatient that he or she must plow through all the details of Rabon's journey before they discover the answers.

Brother Night reveals, too obviously, the theme that appearances can be deceiving; but perhaps for young adults this may be necessary to get the point across. For example, when Rabon finds his adopted father dead, he sheds no tears; while Lal, on the other hand, cries for his mother, whose corpse had been tossed naked on the sand. Rabon thinks that perhaps he "was the monster after all" (51) because he is not as caring as Lal.

The book does show the dangers of labeling and the evils of prejudice based on appearance. Rabon tells Lal that he is horrible, and "having once put the idea of ugliness into Lal's head, he [Lal] discovered it was firmly fixed there" (56). Even though Lal is good, he is sadly banned from the city or Tereu.
because of the way he looks. There is only mild violence, (spear throwing, etc.), one "damn it" (24), and no sexual descriptions.


A FI 4-7 Reviewed by Sarah Brenner Jones

Sheila Solomon Klass’s young adult novel Kool Ada follows the development of a young girl, born in the Appalachian mountains, who must learn to survive and grow in the big city of Chicago.

Born in the relaxed and rural setting of the Appalachian mountains, Ada is raised by her older brother and father. Then all at once, during his sixth grade year, she loses both her idolized older brother and father to what she terms as the “cold wind.” Because of her traumatic experiences with death, she finds herself unable to talk. Silent and alone, she is immediately sent to live with Aunt Lottie, her only other relative. In Chicago, she must face the isolation and violence of city life. She is taunted at school because of her hillbilly background and insists on defending herself with her fists. Although she has found her voice, Ada refuses to speak and is consequently placed in a slow learner class. However, with the help of friends such as the McCoys, her highly religious Aunt Lottie, and a special teacher, Ms. Walker, Ada is determined not only to survive but to learn.

Kool Ada provides an optimistic view of how the underdog, the so-called “slow learner,” and the social outcast can make something of herself through determination and hard work. Additionally, this novel also provides valuable insight into death and the value of life and love. Well written and insightful, Kool Ada is an interesting, non-offensive story which would be of value to any reader.


A 5+ FI Reviewed by Kerri Madsen

Jackie French Koller’s Nothing to Fear traces Danny Garvey’s maturation from youth to young adulthood. Struggling to find work during the Depression, Danny’s father must either leave to find a job or watch his family wither away in starvation. With Pa’s decision to leave, Danny feels he must be the man of
the family. Attempting to provide some financial support for his mother and sister, Danny does everything he can think of to eke out any income during those poverty stricken years. Seeing other families evicted from their apartments, Danny swears his family will never face that humiliation. Danny takes on the adult responsibility of Ma's laundry business when she discovers she is pregnant and must stay in bed. As the quality of the work decreases (when Danny takes over), the hotel he does laundry for fires him. With no word from Pa, life looks fairly grim as he joins his friend Maggie in begging for food.

Although Danny has stooped to what he considers the detestable--"taking charity"--he still retains some pride in his name, and bonds with his friend Maggie. As his mother takes in the destitute farmer, Hank, Danny confronts the possibility of eviction because they cannot make the rent. Hank's solution--that he stay and pay rent--threatens Danny's memory of his father, especially when he finds out his father has been killed. He seems to reach a new maturity level when he accepts Hank as part of his family but holds on to his father's name.

Nothing to Fear offers a heart-warming, realistic look back in time which flows with emotion. This book is highly recommended for those who enjoy reading a non-offensive and unforgettable story about the Great Depression.


Reviewed by Chris Hales

The story is set in a depressed mining town in England. Many of the men have been out of work since the main mine closed down. The residents begin longing to have their wishes come true. A man comes to town in a mysterious shadow, and, all of a sudden, people begin mysteriously receiving their deepest wishes. A mother gets her microwave oven, a little girl now has a doll that really speaks her mind. The little girl's brother doesn't agree with what the man is doing and he tries to stop this man of the shadows. However, he learns rather quickly that this isn't going to be very easy.

I would highly recommend this book because of its somewhat scary, and definitely exciting story. It moves quite quickly for the work of a first-time young adult writer. However, I would only suggest it for kids with reading levels between sixth and ninth grade.

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While the setting is real—the Connecticut shore and the islands surrounding it—the *Windcatcher* is a work of fiction. The precise description of the area makes one think that he is experiencing a true adventure with the protagonist, Tony Souza.

This is a story of eleven-year-old Tony Souza who does not wish to go on vacation with his old grandmother to Swallows Bay. However, when he buys a twelve-foot sailing boat, a Snark, he decides to visit his grandmother so as to learn sailing from a girl instructor chosen for him by his grandmother. While at Swallows Bay, Tony sees a very mysterious couple who were looking for the treasure of the famous ship, the *Swallows*. After a few lessons from his instructor, Tony decides to do some exploring by himself. He faces rough winds, loses his watch and compass, and encounters dangerous company. He finally has some luck and catches favorable winds.

If the reader is the adventurous kind, *Windcatcher* will be an exciting story to read. If the reader is interested in treasure hunt, detail and problem solving, the plot of *Windcatcher* will be most suitable. The dialogues are simple and easy to understand and there is no unsuitable language that may offend the readers.

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*Red Sky At Morning* is about a twelve-year-old girl, Callie Common, who lives on an Indiana farm in the year 1909. Because her father is in Oregon attempting to buy a farm, Callie is left with her grandfather to take care of the farm after her mother dies when giving birth. During the time with her grandfather, Callie deals with several problems that arise—such as the health of her sister, grandfather, and neighbors.

I would recommend this book for young teens to read because of the character building that takes place in Callie’s life as she accepts responsibility. The hardships she experiences make Callie sensitive and committed. I think that the events are evenly spaced in order to keep the attention of the reader and the character of Callie is developed in such a way that one feels close to her, and her feelings are easy to identify with.
Every child has a teddy bear and can relate to Golden Bear, who spends his days with his young companion, ice skating, reading stories, and making mudpies. At night, the two friends curl up and sleep together.

Ruth Young's text is simple and lyrical, but Rachel Isadora's tender illustrations tell a story of their own. The Golden Bear is portrayed as a child might imagine it—not as a stuffed toy, but as a friend. In one scene, Golden Bear and the boy bend down to examine a little bug. On the bear's face is an expression of curiosity. In another illustration, the bear sits on his knees, just like the child, talking on a pretend telephone with his young companion.

Golden Bear is a pleasurable read-aloud story. Children will enjoy the poetic text and the vivid, chalk-and-charcoal illustrations will inspire further discussion about what the boy and his friend are doing.

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On the third day of Christmas
My true love gave to me
Three French hens,

Two of the Three French Hens. Taken from The Twelve Days of Christmas. Copyright © 1986 by Jan Brett. Reprinted by permission from G. P. Putnam's Sons.