L
ife starts to change in middle school and—whether by choice or perforce—students’ minds, abilities, and worlds open up with opportunity and possibility. How youth and their loved ones cope with these new roles and experiences has always provided rich fodder for middle school fiction. This year is no exception; we reflected the authors’ use of these inherent changes in our categories. Family Ties features books about changing family relationships, from connection to loss to betrayal. Protagonists in Future Dreams, many international or historical, come to realize that great life changes, however difficult, are both possible and worth pursuing. In Help Yourself, young characters discover how much they can achieve without adult help, from trouncing zombies and ghosts to escaping their pasts. Away from Home takes characters into a wider, more dangerous, and more exciting world. No matter the distance—to the moon or just a fallout shelter—their journeys will change them forever. Ready for More is less a theme in the books than a tribute to the many students who race towards the world beyond middle school, with all its dangers and opportunities. These titles will best suit mature readers, comfortable with violence, death, heartbreak, and complex new emotions. We and our students loved reading all these books, and hope you and your students enjoy them just as much. If so, purchasing the entire list would cost $474.58.

FAMILY TIES


Through a writing group, gentle, creative Mira explores grief (her grandmother is dying), gains confidence, and reaches out to her crush, Jide, a Rwandan genocide survivor. With a Jewish father and half East Indian, half English mother, Mira truly represents today’s multicultural Britain. This quiet jewel of a book will speak to thoughtful readers.

“The characters are multifaceted, and the true beauty of the story is the questions it inspires in its wake... questions that stay with us forever.” Frances, grade 6


When baseball fanatic Allie gets invited onto the boys’ team, she makes the hard choice to accept and leave her beloved girls’ team. Then, her new semi-stepbrother, Miles, quits and starts campaigning to join the girls’ team. Battling frustration with him, Allie also struggles to accept her mom’s relationship with Miles’s mother, which created their new, nontraditional family. This short book covers a surprising number of thoughtful topics.

“When it is done you say, ‘Wow, such a short book, but it imparted such a powerful message!’” Aman, grade 7


Annie and her brother live with their mentally unstable grandmother. To get by, Annie lies to her social worker and invents adventurous stories about her murdered father. Then, an escaped fugitive takes them all hostage, upending everything Annie believed about herself, her family, and their past. This powerful book depicts the nuances of family dynamics, offering complex characters, subtle metaphors, and a message of forgiveness.

“I enjoyed it because when I was reading, I felt like I was... Annie, telling stories of spies, pilots, and pirates.” Sydney, grade 5


Summer’s year started with her near-death from West Nile virus. Then, a family emergency took her parents back to Japan, leaving Summer and her brother traveling the harvest with their grandparents. As the days of grueling labor unfold, Summer ponders her responsibilities, her odd-duck brother, and how to satisfy her grandmother’s demanding standards. This gentle, introspective book about growing up and discovering your identity explores family dynamics during physical and financial stress.

“The characters’ feelings really came through the book.” Bryce, grade 6


When Mexican-American Erica learns about her mother’s breast cancer, it upends her life. As she takes on the care of her younger siblings, she also tries to keep her promise to God, about raising money for breast cancer awareness if her mother improves. Erica’s struggle is painfully realistic, but her charm and wit will quickly win readers over.

“When Erica learned a powerful lesson about asking for help when you need it, I felt proud.” Frances, grade 6

Jess’s father is in Afghanistan, so she gathers donations for the orphanage near his post. When the Taliban bombs the orphanage while Jess’s father and other soldiers are there, Jess struggles with guilt and grief. This heartbreaking novel offers a unique perspective on military families, and also touches on deep moral issues such as right and wrong, and when good intentions reap unfortunate rewards.

“I really like how one person can do so much for people she has never met, but knows are in need.” Mehek, grade 5


The center of everything for Ruby was her beloved grandmother Gigi, and their rooftop stargazing nights. Racked with guilt after missing Gigi’s final words, Ruby just wants to make things right. In local legend, tossing a quarter through the hole in a doughnut-wielding statue grants wishes. Will it work? This contemplative book will appeal to younger readers looking for sweet, intelligent stories about growing up and learning hard lessons.

“I liked how the story went back in time to relive the event.” Bridget, grade 6

FUTURE DREAMS


Tula feels trapped in a gilded prison. Thirsty for poetry and justice, she rebels against an arranged marriage, agonizes over slavery, and ultimately chooses impoverished freedom over the security of family control. Inspired by influential Cuban feminist and abolitionist Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (1814-1873), this captivating novel-in-verse shines a spotlight on an important period in Latin American history.

“I felt the frustration and hopelessness of the main character almost like it was my own.” Rachel, grade 8


Everyone in Zandelphia-Beaurivage is thrilled at Princess Poppy’s birth, except the exiled court torturer Boris and court poisoner Vlad. Plotting revenge, neither counts on their estranged children, Phoebe and Sebastian, intercepting a message and going straight to the king. Unfortunately, they are a little too late. This delightful, tongue-in-cheek fairytale will appeal to kids who love intelligent humor.

“It was like a perfect mix between classic fairytales and poetic justice. I thought the end was so improbable, it made complete sense.” Mehek, grade 5


Jodie, a compassionate fourteen-year-old, finds solace that humans cannot provide—in horses. Since her father’s death, her brother’s kidney disease and her mother’s uncertain financial prospects have compounded their stress. Then, an unexpected windfall brings damaged, spirited Samphire into her life, and Jodie briefly experiences the joy of caring for him until a series of calamities takes the stallion from her. A rivetingly suspenseful dénouement brings this heartfelt tale to its satisfying conclusion.

“I read the whole book in one day!” Kaelyn, grade 8


In modern-day China, Merighul, of the oppressed Uyghur ethnic group, learns traditional basket-weaving from her grandmother. She then applies her quick wits and creativity to

PUBLISHERS: HOW TO NOMINATE YOUR BOOKS FOR VOYA’S NEXT TOP SHELF FICTION FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL READERS

1. Select your finest fiction published between October 2013 and September 2014. You are limited to five titles from each imprint.
2. Send five copies of each nominated title to our selection committee chair: Rebecca Moore, Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers Selection Committee, 20301 NE 108th St., Redmond, WA 98053.
3. Be sure that the committee receives your books as early as possible, but no later than July 31, 2013.
4. Winning selections will be featured in the next edition of Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers, an annotated booklet, in the February 2015 issue of VOYA.
5. Refer procedural inquiries to VOYA Editor-in-Chief RoseMary Honnold by e-mail to rhonnold@voyamagazine.com.

NOTE: Submitting a nomination does not mean that you are also submitting the title for review. Please send review copies to VOYA Review Editor, Lisa Kurtdyia, 16211 Oxford CT, Bowie, MD 20715.

SELECTION CRITERIA APPLIED FOR TOP SHELF FICTION 2013

- Themes and subject matter are of particular interest to readers aged eleven through thirteen or in grades six through eight.
- Titles have special appeal to this age group both as outstanding companions to middle school curriculum and as free reading choices.
- Fiction books published between October 2012 and September 2013 are eligible.
- The final list reflects the geographic, ethnic, racial, intellectual, and economic diversity of North American middle school readers.
- The final list reflects top quality in books for middle school readers—“best” books that stand out among the rest, that take old plots and make them new and original, and that have something different to say and say it well.
- The list is limited to thirty titles or fewer.
her craft in a way that may lead to a brighter future. Despite many hardships—Merighul’s mother is depressed, her father gambles and drinks heavily—there are, nevertheless, moments of light in this well-researched story. The author brings to life obstacles many girls around the world face in their desire to attain an education and some degree of self-determination.


In newly independent Tanzania, thirteen-year-old Shida yearns to become a healer. Buffeted by forces beyond her control—a family tragedy, her village’s relocation, and school bullies—she courageously pursues her education and seeks answers to mysterious happenings that affect her community. Meticulously researched, this is a sympathetic portrayal of a nation—and a girl—in transition.

“I really liked how the girl’s dream became real for her. It showed the hardships of where she lived and also how people change.” Oona, grade 7


A 1931 West Virginia coal mine is often lethal, especially for gas-detecting canaries. Fed up, Bitty flies to the state capital to plead for the world in showing how to honor sacrifices especially for gas-detecting canaries. Fed up, Bitty flies to the state capital to plead for the world in showing how to honor sacrifices for kids, this satirical send-up of factory farming offers zombies, laughs, and a thought-provoking look at illegal immigrants.

“The book made my heart ache for the poor canaries.” Sofia, grade 5

HELP YOURSELF


Something is not right at the Delbe, Iowa, meat packing plant. Biracial Rabi, Joe, and Mexican-American Miguel get their first clue when attacked by their baseball coach for their brains. Things just get worse after reporting to the police, and then there are the zombie cows . . . The Jungle for kids, this satirical send-up of factory farming offers zombies, laughs, and a thought-provoking look at illegal immigrants.

“It was impressed that even when Miguel’s family is deported, the boys still don’t give up!” Keegan, grade 6


Women in Izzy’s family have fought supernatural creatures for one thousand years. Izzy’s latest mission, to plan a ghost haunting at high school, seems easy until she enrolls in her first school ever. What are these “friends?” What are these feelings for handsome boys? While trying to fit in, Izzy also struggles with losing her sister on a former mission and her mother’s resultant distrust.

“It was so suspenseful!” Bryce, grade 6

“It made me miss a full night of sleep!” Quinn, grade 7


In 1870, former slave and orphan Sugar is stuck harvesting cane at the Wills Plantation, though she prefers illicitly running wild with the owner’s son. Then, the “Chinamen” arrive to work, helping Sugar envision a wider world in her future. Sugar is a lively, engaging character, full of mischief, yearning, and courage. Rich with curricular possibilities, the book never gets bogged down in facts that hold up the plot.

“This truly showed that no matter the circumstances, people can do great things.” Aman, grade 7


Jess, having just lost her beloved great aunt Edie, also worries about her conjoined twin brothers and their dangerous separation surgery. In Edie’s desk, Jess finds an antique flask that seems to contain a presence no one else can sense—especially her boy-crazy best friend Zoe. Is it real? Rife with themes of connection, separation, holes, absence, and presence, this will resonate with readers who ponder what more there is in life beyond the obvious.

“I really, really, really loved this book.” Mehek, grade 5


In an alternate England, dangerous ghosts manifest everywhere. Children make the best ghost hunters, losing their sensitivity later. Psychic Lucy, seeking a new position after a disastrous mission, joins insouciant Anthony Lockwood. Another disastrous operation leaves them deeply in debt, forcing them to accept a mission to clear the most haunted house in England. No one yet has survived the Screaming Staircase. Stroud’s iconoclastic wit, exemplary world-building, and layered characters make this one a winner.

“It was great because of the suspense, action, and characters.” Quinn, grade 7

AWAY FROM HOME


Zach, Polly, and Alice have played their story-driven Game for years, but middle school and Zach’s father threaten to end it. Desperate, Polly pulls the others into a quest: They will lay the ghost of a murdered girl whose bones were made into a porcelain doll. As their adventures mount, they begin to wonder if Polly’s tale is real—and what might be the story’s place in their future lives. This subtle ghost story speaks heart-wrenchingly to complex end-of-childhood issues, and will resonate with many students.


Enslaved when the Greeks sacked Troy, Alexi now voyages with Odysseus, encountering the dangerous gods, monsters, and sorceresses of...
Homeric fame. Alexi must also survive his own tale, as sailor Ury strives to kill him in mistaken revenge, and Odysseus blows hot and cold. This action-packed, sometimes gory retelling presents Odysseus as sly, clever, and not always honorable. Alexi is brave and resourceful, and readers will root for his success and freedom.

“Fast-paced and . . . interesting, so that you couldn’t stop reading.” Alan, grade 5


Certified genius Lenny, clueless about girls, shrinks himself to nano-size to infiltrate his crush’s brain. During Lenny’s bloodstream adventures, simultaneous with Zooey producing her mutant-Santa Christmas play, sensible Harlan supports the ever-more discombobulated girl. This hilarious, action-packed romp is The Magic Schoolbus on steroids—perfect for reluctant readers, science aficionados, and science teachers alike.

“This was really fun—I loved that I could just tell it was all going to go so wrong!” Betsy, grade 8


In 1977, men in gold sunglasses recruit Mickey Price and other twelve-year-olds for space camp. Once the group arrives, NASA chooses five for a dangerous outer-space mission only children can accomplish. With belief firmly suspended, this rollicking adventure is impossible to put down. The characters are engaging and varied—a Latina computer whiz and a female go-kart racer—and the space flight details will interest readers in science.

“The adventure was so intriguing, I could think of nothing but the book in free time!” Says Tejesh, grade 5


In an alternate 1962, Russia bombs America. Formerly scornful neighbors force their way into Scott’s family’s fallout shelter, crowding ten into a space meant—and stocked—for four. As their situation grows ever more desperate, alternating chapters relate Scott’s “before” life, offering relief from, but also heightening, the tension. Enlightening, teaching about the Cuban Missile Crisis and other 1960s issues, Fallout can also help readers with issues of sexuality, body changes, politics, race, and friendship. Mature middle school fans of dystopia will appreciate this compelling take on the genre.


Joe Copper’s life changes forever when he discovers Merrynether Mansion harboring injured mythical creatures, like Cornelius the manticore, Danarial the seraph, Flarp the globble (a floating, mucous-covered eyeball), and Lilly the drunken cluricaun. Mrs. Merrynether needs Joe to help tend the creatures and to ward off Argoyle Redwar, a ruthless businessman after the Merrynether land for nefarious purposes. Fans of Brandon Mull’s Fablehaven series will gobble up this action-packed fantasy, full of distinct and sympathetic characters pulled from traditional mythologies and the author’s imagination.

ZEBRA FOREST

Sometimes things look simple from the outside—like a black and white forest—but on the inside, they are rich, complex, and not so safe as they seem.

So, too, is Annie and Rew’s family, which, like their favorite book, Treasure Island, lacks the first half of its story. The kids’ endless speculation about the book symbolizes how they cope with their own lives and their unsuspected complexities. Gewirz’s subtle metaphors weave through a story as rich and hazardous as the forest, with no rights or wrongs, merely believable characters and choices. This is a thought-provoking winner.—Rebecca Moore

THE SCREAMING STAIRCASE

Stroud charms and terrifies in his signature style, delivering humor with finesse, strong young narrators working together, and a mysterious and horrifying tale of love gone wrong. In a world in which ghosts and spirits are real and only children can see and fight them, brave, resourceful Lucy battles the forces of evil alongside her young boss, Anthony Lockwood, and his assistant, George. Stroud’s major accomplishment is creating a story in which children act as saviors in an adult world full of deception, intrigue, and cold, hard cash. I cannot wait to experience Lockwood & Co.’s next case!—Rachel Anne Bradbury

THE WRAP-UP LIST

This enchanting story charms the reader into suspending disbelief and accepting a world in which slyvery Deaths wander languidly among us. Ultimately, this book is about identity, acceptance, and belonging—weighty topics that will resonate with teen readers. Arntson weaves these topics into a memorable tale that delivers suspense, as Gabriela races to discover her Death’s Noble Weakness, experiencing laughter as they become friends of a sort and bittersweet tears as she connects with family and friends. It conjures up Philip Larkin’s famous line: “What will survive of us is love.”—Laura Simeon

ZOMBIE BASEBALL BEATDOWN

Holy zombie cow head, I loved this book right off the bat! The boys cover a lot of bases: issues of genetically modified foods and factory farming (think The Jungle for tweens in 2013); what it means to be biracial in America; and how immigration status affects daily life. To find all the nuances in this book, students will have to use their braaains. They will also use their laughing parts. Bacigalupi hits a home run!—Leah Griffin

DOLL BONES

This charming story addresses the confusing, scary, and exciting elements of growing up, including the realization that things must change as you get older. The honest portrayal of young friendship will remind readers of all ages about their childhood friends, and the unbreakable bonds formed during those tentative years. Mixed in with the warmth of friendship is a fun, suspenseful adventure story sure to draw in reluctant readers. This book will leave you feeling warm and fuzzy and completely satisfied.—Rachel Adams

Gabriela receives a crimson letter heralding her demise. In just days, one of the tall creatures called “Deaths” will take her, so she writes her wrap-up list. She wishes for first kisses for each of her diverse group of friends. While waiting, she struggles with faith, culture, duty, sexual identity, and self-sacrifice. Readers will identify with or learn from this funny tear-jerker that will appeal to fans of romance and the supernatural.

“I thoroughly enjoyed it . . . A very good read for diversity, magic, and deaths.” Pallavi, grade 8


In this *Seven the Series* entry, guitar-wielding Webb inherits a dangerous mission from his grandfather. Journeying to a remote part of Canada, with nothing to lose but his attitude, Webb faces bullies, bears, a violent villain, and non-stop action as he searches for his grandpa’s lost item. Violence and scenes of abuse limit appropriateness to more mature readers, but action and adventure lovers will clamor for more.

“Exciting read! I have already put the other books from the series on hold at the library!” Rachel, grade 8


*The Hunger Games* fans will thrill to Cia’s predicament, as she is tapped as a potential leader and taken away for testing. As the testing forces Cia and her cohort to fight their way across a destroyed North America littered with subhuman creatures, Cia struggles with trust, compassion, loyalty, and survival. If she survives, how will she warn others after her memory is erased? This fast-paced dystopian story will keep readers guessing.

“It was complex and I loved it because it explored the intricacies of the dysfunctional government.” Ema, grade 8


Covered in thick, dark hair, orphaned and nameless Wild Boy peers out from the shadows at the world around him. His power of observation affords him insightful knowledge of the colorful circus guests who gawk at him. When a murder occurs, Wild Boy, aided by a spitfire acrobat, must use his Sherlock Holmes-style detective skills to search for clues and clear his own name. This historical fiction vividly describes Victorian London’s epic filth, and will appeal to steampunk and mystery fans who don’t mind getting dirty.


Emma’s mother works for the Canadian Embassy, so Emma is used to frequent moves, living in a compound, and attending international school. When her father abandons the family, they move to Islamabad, Pakistan, without him. Emma can’t quite wrap her mind around the changes and dangers of life in Pakistan, putting herself at risk. This nuanced novel portrays the world of Third Culture children who must continually navigate new cultures and places.

“The storyline really drew me in . . . It’s a book that leaves you thinking.” Taylor, grade 8


Em must go back in time and kill the Doctor before he can wreak death and destruction on the world. Having tried and failed fourteen times before, this might be her last chance. When she encounters her innocent past self, the mission becomes harder. This smart thriller combines dystopia, time travel, and romance into a satisfying page-turner. Violence and torture make this most appropriate for mature readers.

“A fascinating fantasy book that shows how, with time travel, the future can affect the present.” Anna, grade 6

**MEET THE COMMITTEE**

Committee chair Rebecca Moore, a twenty-year school librarian and longtime *VOYA* reviewer, is the middle school librarian at the Overlake School in Redmond, Washington. She loves running activities like Bookfair and Battle of the Books to get students excited about reading. Her own reading interests include microhistories, fantasy, and mysteries.

Laura Simeon is the librarian and diversity coordinator at Open Window School in Bellevue, Washington. She enjoys maintaining a culturally relevant and responsive collection for her K-8 students. Simeon’s primary reading interests are African American history, mysteries, and anything British. She also enjoys storytelling and running the Geography Bee.

Leah Griffin is proud to be a librarian at University Prep in Seattle, Washington, whose school mission statement includes the phrase, “intelectually courageous.” Leah’s favorite parts of librarianship include teaching information literacy, creating fun programming, and looking over bibliographies. She prefers dystopian novels and British modernism with her coffee.

Rachel Anne Bradbury is a seventh grade English teacher at the Overlake School in Redmond, Washington. For fourteen years she has worked to inspire a love of reading in her students. Outside school, she enjoys spending time with her husband and two daughters, all of whom are avid readers.

Rachel Adams is a teen services librarian for Washington’s King County Libraries, one of the country’s busiest public library systems. She enjoys connecting underserved youth with life-changing information, and also loves helping middle school students find that one awesome book. Her reading interests lie mostly with the post-apocalyptic.