

2017 Mark Twain Award Nominees
Annotated by the *Saturday Morning Book Club*
Winner is selected by children in grades 4-6

Applegate, K. (2015). *Crenshaw*. New York, NY: Macmillan/Feiwel and Friends. ISBN-13: 978-1250043238, 245 pgs.

In her first novel since *The One and Only Ivan*, winner of the Newbery Medal, Katherine Applegate delivers an unforgettable and magical story about family, friendship, and resilience. Jackson and his family have fallen on hard times. There's no money for rent, nor much for food, either. His parents, his little sister, and their dog may have to live in their minivan—again. Crenshaw is a cat. He's large, he's outspoken, and he's imaginary. He has come back into Jackson's life to help him. But is an imaginary friend enough to save this family from losing everything? Beloved author Katherine Applegate proves in unexpected ways that friends matter, whether real or imaginary. (SS) (Starred reviews in *Publisher's Weekly* and *Horn Books*)

Barry, D. (2015). *The worst class trip ever*. NY: Disney-Hyperion, ISBN-13: 978-1484708491, 224 pgs.

Dave Barry captures readers with his usual humor in this hilarious middle grade novel about an 8th grade class trip from a Miami middle school to Washington, D.C. This class trip turns into a fast-paced, slapstick adventure that finds Wyatt and Matt in constant trouble and at the center of a mystery. Two strange men the boys encountered on the plane (they were certain the men were terrorists about to do harm to the White House) have something to hide or they wouldn't be chasing the two teenagers around D.C. landmarks.

While the plot feels ludicrous at times, it's the humor that lures the reader in, coupled with the familiarity of well-known landmarks in the nation's capital. Barry's wit and pacing allow the reader to check their disbelief at the door, both at the continuing debacles to the teacher chaperones who seem to have less sense than the teenagers. (BLB)

Beasley, C. (2015). *Circus Mirandus*. NY: Penguin Group, ISBN: 978-0-525-42843-5, 292 pgs.

Circus Mirandus has just about everything you could want in a fantasy. You will find an orphaned boy, a dying grandpa, a loyal friend, and a grouchy aunt. It also brings a magical circus, a long-ago unfulfilled promise of a miracle, and a journey to get to that miracle in time for grandpa. With twists and turns you don't see coming, visual images to delight the imagination, and a sprinkle of humor throughout, this book will keep the reader intrigued from the first page to the last. I'm not sure how Cassie Beasley took these ingredients and made such an extraordinary tale – maybe, just maybe, it's magic. (LW)

Beatty, R. (2013). *Serafina and the black cloak*. NY: Scholastic Inc., ISBN-13: 978-0545948890, 320 pgs.

The children of the famous Biltmore estate are going missing. Serafina, the daughter of the estate's maintenance man, and Braeden Vanderbilt, the son of the famous owners of Biltmore, team up to find out exactly who the *Man in the Black Cloak* really is. Along the way, Serafina discovers about herself and the secrets of her own past. The mystery of the plot will be the first hook for many middle school readers, but the elements of magic, and Serafina's search for identity will pull them further into this first book in the Serafina series. (AO)

Benjamin, A. (2015). *The thing about jellyfish*. London: Little, Brown, and Company, ISBN: 978-1-5098-2134-1 (ROI), 336 pgs.

This book sneaks up on you. At first it seems like it's just a story about two middle school girls who are best friends. But soon you realize it's about the redemption of a young girl who feels responsible (in some inexplicable way) for the death of her best friend. The main character, Suzy, is socially inept but intellectually gifted. When she and her best friend Franny are young children, Suzy's lack of social skills aren't a problem, but when they start sixth grade, Franny starts hanging out with the popular kids, and Suzy is literally friendless. Suzy can't figure out what has happened and ends up retaliating against Franny in a way that devastates Franny. Then, Franny suddenly drowns while swimming in the ocean. Suzy becomes obsessed with finding out exactly what happened to Franny, which leads to an obsession about jellyfish. (You have to read the book to see the connection). This is a beautifully crafted book that is at times uplifting and at other times heartbreaking. Suzy, Franny, and the jellyfish add up to an unforgettable book. (JH)

Bertman, J. (2015). *Book scavenger*. NY: Macmillan, ISBN: 978-1-250-07980-0, 367 pgs.

Twelve year old Emily moves from state to state with her parents, never settling long enough to put down roots or make friends. Trying to find somewhere to belong, she gets caught up in an online community that hides books in public places. Finding the books requires solving encoded clues and ciphers. After moving to San Francisco, Emily discovers her favorite Book Scavenger game may be in danger. Along with her new friend, James, she discovers a mysterious book that may hold the secret. Scattered throughout this action packed story are historic references to San Francisco and Edgar Allen Poe. A great book for the classroom teacher to incorporate into an engaging classroom unit. (DP)

Bradley, K. (2015). *The war that saved my life*. NY: Puffin, ISBN: 978-0-8037-4081-5, 316 pgs.

It's hard to believe that a mother could be so ashamed of her daughter's twisted foot that she talks and treats her abusively and won't even let her out of the apartment. And yet, that is 12-year-old Ada's life in London during World War II. As it becomes more dangerous in London with the bombing, children are sent to the countryside to live with volunteer families. Jamie and Ada manage to escape Mam to get to the country along with the others. They end up living with reluctant Miss Smith. Ada has difficulties accepting any kindnesses and Miss Smith, because of her past, has problems with opening her own heart. Finally, as a bonding relationship begins to form, Mam shows up...

This book is full of adventure and intrigue. It is a great fiction companion for World War II and is conducive to questioning and discussion among middle grade readers. This is a very powerful book on many levels. (LW)

Hahn, M. (2015). *Took*. NY: Clarion, ISBN: 978-0-544-55153-4, 264 pgs.

In this West Virginia rural community, legend has it that a witch, Old Auntie, takes a girl every fifty years, then lets her go and takes a new one. Daniel and his sister, Erica, reluctantly move there with their parents and are considered outsiders and unaccepted by their new classmates. Erica withdraws and carries on conversations with her doll as though she was a real person and the family begins to fall apart in their unhappiness. Daniel starts to wonder if there is something real about the ridiculous Old Auntie folklore when Erica disappears and he realizes she has been

“took”. Does he have the courage to take his sister back? Be prepared to be scared as Mary Downing Hahn once again weaves a ghost story to keep you turning the pages and looking over your shoulder! It’s not for the very young or the faint of heart! (LW)

Holt, K. (2015). *House arrest*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, ISBN: 978-1-4521-3477-2, 298 pgs.

This book is written entirely as journal entries. At first the story seems fairly predictable. A young teenage boy has been forced to keep a journal as part of the conditions of his house arrest. Typically, in books like this the story would center around the transformation of the boy's attitude as he interacts with social service workers assigned to him. But at the center of this story is the plight of low income families trying to deal with the needs of physically disabled children. Tim, the main character, is in trouble because he stole money to pay for his baby brother's medicine. Tim and his mother are totally engulfed in the day to day struggles involving caring for an infant who can't breathe without help and trying to keep food on the table. Because the story is written as journal entries, it's easy to read and highly engaging. A great addition to any middle school classroom. (JH)

Holt, K.W. (2015). *Dear Hank Williams*. NY: Henry Holt and Co., ISBN-13: 978-1250079787, 218 pages.

In this epistolary novel, we are taken back to 1948, and to the state of Louisiana, and to Kate P. Ellerbee's sixth grade. It is the beginning of the school year and Tate's new teacher, Mrs. Kipler asks the students to choose a pen pal. Immediately, Tate knows she will write to Hank Williams, a singer she has been hearing on a weekly radio show, *The Louisiana Hayride*. Of course, the reader hears this story from Tate's point of view as she writes each letter to Hank Williams. As a historical novel, the author's notes explain where the facts came from and how Holt “threaded” them into her story. The School Library Journal comments are accurate,

“The strength of this novel lies in the insight Tate develops as she deals with tragedy and depends on the love of family. Artfully told, this middle grade novel pleases on many levels.” (SS)

Hunt, L. (2015). *Fish in a tree*. NY: Nancy Paulsen Books, ISBN:978-0-39-916259-6, 290 pgs.

“Everybody is smart in different ways. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its life believing it is stupid.” Ally has a secret and she has been able to fool everyone; her mom, her brother, and her teachers. Ally's secret? She can't read. Year after year she's managed keep her secret from everyone, until this year. Ally has a new teacher who sees through her veil of deception and realizes she is smart, very smart. As Ally begins to accept the fact that she just might have skills and abilities, she forms a friendship with two unique, diverse classmates. Along with her new teacher, Ally's friends help her discover the true value of herself. This book will touch the heart of anyone who's ever struggled to overcome a challenge. Basically, everyone! (DP)

Lupica, M. (2015). *The only game*. NY: Simon and Schuster, ISBN: 9781481409957, 320 pgs.

Lupica brings us another great sports book that incorporates friendships, family, and dealing with tragedy. A talented baseball player, the main character, Jack, quits baseball after losing his older

brother in an accident. His decision puzzles his best friend, but Jack finds himself working through his loss as he befriends a star softball player and a boy who is bullied about his weight. Lupica reminds us that friendships give us strength as we deal with life. Definitely a book for the baseball fan, it is a great way to engage sports enthusiasts in reading. (DP)

Lee, F. (2015). *Zero boxer*. Woodbury, MN: Flux, ISBN: 978-0-7387-4338-7, 351 pgs.

This science fiction pager turner is definitely a high school level read with its mature content. The main character, Carr, has risen in the ranks of the Zero Boxing Universe. Similar to present day cage fighting, Carr has trained since he was seven to beat his opponents in the cube. The cube is a zero gravity enclosure where two fighters face off to win in a brutal battle of physical and mental abilities. Win after win brings Carr to the ultimate fight for best zero boxer in the universe. As the pressure builds, Carr discovers a genetic secret that changes his life and throws him into a high pressure choice. Lee does an exceptional job of engaging the reader in each and every move carried out in the cube, making this the book one you don't want to put down. (DP)

Lowe, N. (2015). *The courage of Cat Campbell*. NY: Simon & Schuster books for Young Readers. ISBN: 978-1-4814-1870-6, 278 pgs.

Another book for late elementary girls who just can't get enough magic. This book is set in a world where magic is an accepted part of life because some girls (and only girls, it seems) are born with the "magic gene". The gene can apparently skip generations, and usually shows itself in magical ability by the age of 7. There can, however, be late bloomers which is what Cat, the main character of the book, is. Her magical ability doesn't show up until she is 11. Cat's mother Poppy has the gene but chose not to pursue a life as a witch because of an unfortunate event that happened when she was in training. She chose to become a baker instead, and she isn't happy when Cat develops magical ability. As the title implies, Cat, the late bloomer, ends up saving the day with her magic and her passion. The theme of the book is to follow your passion. A fun read for kids who love the idea of flying on broom sticks and having magical pens to write your homework. (JH)

Messner, K. (2015). *All the answers*. NY: Bloomsbury, ISBN: 978-1-61963-2, 246 pgs.

Ava is an anxious child, always worried about math tests, grades, being embarrassed or her parents' divorce. When she finds a 'smart' pencil--one that can answer fact questions she writes down, at first she is so relieved. Now she can ace all of her tests! However, having a smart pencil proves to have difficulties of its own, as the word leaks out and her friends want to try it. And is it just for small facts, or can it be used to see if her mom is healthy? This is a delightful story of family and of finding the courage in ourselves. The fantasy acts as a lever to our hearts. (CJG)

Pearce, J. (2015). *The double cross (and other things I learned as a spy)*. NY: Bloomsbury, ISBN: 9781619634145, 301 pgs.

A great middle school read for any child who has ever wanted to be a spy! Hale, age twelve, just a bit overweight, and not the cool kid at spy school, desperately wants to be a super-agent. When his parents disappear, this unheroic hero teams up with his little sister and some new friends to search for his them. Action packed, this novel will engage students with its twists and turns, spy tactics and gadgets! (DP)

Pearsall, S. (2015). *The seventh most important thing*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, ISBN-13: 978-0553497311, 278 pgs.

A middle school student learns the meaning of redemption in this excellent coming-of-age story. For the rest of the country, it was the year President Kennedy was assassinated. For Arthur Owens, it would always be the year his Dad died. Arthur is struggling to adapt. When he sees his Dad's hat being worn by the neighborhood "Junk Man," it is just too much. Arthur isn't a bad kid, but he picks up that brick and throws it just the same. The judge pronounces a "highly unconventional sentence." At the behest of the victim James Hampton, the "Junk Man," Arthur must spend every weekend of his community service helping to complete Hampton's artistic masterpiece. Inspired by real life artist James Hampton's life and work, "The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly", the plot avoids overt religious tones and sticks with the exploration of friendship, love, and life's most important lessons. From the "Junk Man's" neighbor, Groovy Jim, to no-nonsense Probation Officer Billie to Arthur's new best pal Squeak, and even his family, Pearsall has struck just the right tone by imbuing her well-rounded, interesting characters with authentic voices and pacing the action perfectly. Give this to fans of Mass's *Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life* (Little, Brown, 2006) and Choldenko's *Al Capone Does My Shirts* (Penguin, 2004). Reluctant readers may be intimidated by the page count, but a book talk or read-aloud with this title should change their minds. VERDICT: A recommended purchase for all libraries. (SS)

Riley, J. (2015). *Story thieves*. NY: Alladin, ISBN: 978-1-48`4-0920-9, 383pgs.

In this fantasy Bethany, half-human and half-fictional, has the power to jump into and out of books. She generally jumps into stories to see first-hand what is happening. When her friend, Owen, sees her jumping out of *Charley and the Chocolate Factory*, covered in chocolate, he wants to accompany her and experience fame and glory. Bethany has one rule, you *must not* change the story, but Owen disregards that rule and sets in motion terrible events that affect not only books, but real life. There is a strong sense of good versus evil in this book and magic versus science. This reader thought the *idea* behind the book was clever, while the *writing* became a bit monotonous in the nearly 400 pages. Students who loved *Half upon a Time* will enjoy this one. (CJG)

Ryan, P.M. (2015). *Echo*. NY: Scholastic, ISBN: 978-0-4398-7402-1, 592 pgs.

According to the Scholastic description of *Echo*, this book is "...richly imagined, structurally innovative and shows what is possible in how we tell stories." Once again, Ryan weaves a spell over the reader with her characters and unusual story line. This book begins with Otto, who is lost in the Black Forest. The stage is set when Otto becomes involved in a quest which has a prophecy, a promise and a harmonica. After reading about Otto, there is a switch to a boy named Friedrich in Germany and a setting that is decades after Otto's experience. And, yes, a harmonica. The reader finds that same harmonica playing a role in the lives of Mike in Pennsylvania and Ivy in California. All of these main characters face challenges and their lives are woven together by an invisible thread of destiny. Historical fiction/fantasy--Good read! (MH)

Senzai, N.H. (2015). *Ticket to India*, ISBN-13: 978-148142259, 288 pgs.

Twelve-year-old Maya and her family are visiting Karachi, Pakistan, following the death of a beloved grandfather. Maya's grandmother is distraught by his death and is determined to continue with their planned trip to India, despite the family's protests. Disturbed to realize her

grandmother had moved to Pakistan during the time of the 1947 Partition and realizing her frail grandmother is determined to go regardless, Maya and her sister beg to go with her to help her retrieve a lost treasure of family history. Once in India, things go awry when Maya's grandmother ends up getting hospitalized, but Maya is determined to continue on with the quest alone for her grandmother. This story gave me lots of information about a time and place in history I had not heard of, and the tension and suspense kept me on the edge of my seat as Maya faced one incredible danger after another. (FC)

Skye, O. (2016). *Witherwood Reform School*. NY: Square Fish Publishing, ISBN-13: 978-1250073471, 256 pgs.

Tobias and Charlotte never dreamed their father meant it when he said he was going to send them to a reform school. But when they trick their mean governess into eating tadpoles disguised as gravy, he drives them to the edge of town and drops them off at a weathered building named "Witherwood". He intends to teach them a lesson, but a freak accident leaves him with amnesia, forgetting he has children. At Witherwood the children discover mind-control.

Tobias and Charlotte are forced to overcome many manipulations at the reform school, desperate to determine the true mission of Witherwood. The incredibly fast-moving plot keeps readers captivated, as we wonder what comes next. The narrator adds dark humor while hinting at clues and providing snippets of background information. The witty descriptions and high-level vocabulary add to the novel's peculiarity while also challenging young readers. (BLB)

Smith, R. (2016). *Beneath*. NY: Scholastic, Inc., ISBN-13: 978-0545564878, 272 pgs.

Brothers Pat and Coop live in an upper-class DC neighborhood. Coop, the oldest, prefers to read more than anything-- *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and *Dracula*-- he loves to tap dance, and he prefers to eat only tuna fish sandwiches. But what he really likes is to be underground. Then one night, Coop takes his little brother Pat into the mile-long tunnel being dug under their neighborhood and accidentally hits a gas line. The explosion puts Pat in the hospital and is catalyst for breaking up his parents' dissolving marriage. This all sets in motion Coop's escape to follow his passion to explore the underworld. Written in diary form, the fascinating and unique story captures the reader with secret societies, secret tunnels, and the secrets only brothers can share. But the biggest secret Pat wants to learn is where Coop has gone to live and how far beneath the city it will take Pat to find him. This engrossing middle grade novel reads fast and tells a fresh story in a fresh style. (BLB)

Sonnichsen, A. (2016). *Red butterfly*. NY: Simon & Schuster Books For Young Readers, ISBN-13: 978-1481411103, 400 pgs.

This novel in verse will pull you into eleven-year-old Kara's situation without sugar-coating any of the stark realities of China's one-child policy or the bureaucracy that surrounds the lives of the country's orphans hoping for adoption. In the beginning, Kara lives with her American mother, who chose to stay in China and raise Kara, who was abandoned at birth. This is a story about family and yearning for more than what is. Middle school students will be fascinated by Kara's journey, which will surely open conversation to diversity and belonging in new ways. Be sure to point out to students that much of this fictional piece is based on Sonnichsen's own experience with adoption in China. (AO)

White, E. (2015). *Webster: tale of an outlaw*. New York: Aladdin, Simon & Schuster, ISBN: 978-1-4814-2201-7, 240 pgs.

Webster is a dog who has been abused and abandoned to several animal shelters. He narrates the book as a cynical yet lovable old soul, as he tries to once again escape into freedom from humans. But this last shelter he has landed in is different; here the owners are kind, there is plenty of warm food and a wealth of other dogs and cats who befriend him. He's skeptical when anyone shows him attention, and he tries to assume the "bad hat" or "outlaw" role. When he does briefly get out into the wild again, he quickly realizes that the shelter wasn't all that bad. The other animal characters are poignant, amusing and personify the plight of un-adopted pets everywhere. Mature readers will appreciate the irony, sarcasm and humor Webster provides. At the end of the book the author lists various animal shelters across the country who are dedicated to helping pets exactly like Webster. Ages 10-14. (LA)

** ** Members of the Saturday Morning Book Group include: Linda Aulgur, Barri Bumgarner, Fran Colley, Carol Gilles, Marty Hawkins, Janice Henson, Nancy Knipping, Missy Morrison, Anna Osborn, Gennie Pfannenstiel, Debra Peters, Becca Rackley, Pam Riggs, Caitlyn Rosbach, Sharon Schneeberger, and Linda Wycoff.