Children’s Literature Reviews: Innovative and integrative books

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Innovative and Integrative Books

Laura B. Smolkin, Craig A. Young, and Kristin E. Conradi

There’s no doubt that 2008 was a year in which the innovative and the integrative were celebrated in children’s literature. Newbery winner Laura Amy Schlitz and illustrator Robert Byrd brought forth another great offering from Candlewick Press, Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village, drawn from and designed to support performance of 17 historical monologues, all carefully nestled in Middle Ages detail. Newbery-honor-award winners Elijah of Buxton (Curtis, who also received the Coretta Scott King award for his efforts) and Feathers (Woodson), both addressed imperfectly integrated societies. Among the honored picture books, Caldecott winner Selznick’s The Invention of Hugo Cabret buttressed the boundaries of wordless representations in a ground-breaking, pencil-sketched, novel-length work featuring a fatherless boy and film fascination. Honor-award-winner Seeger also played with picture book conventions in First the Egg, her novel concept book where clever cutouts convey life’s conversions. In The Wall (also a Siebert award winner), Sis mixed media and memories to convey the world of his youth; Willems (Knuffle Bunny Too: A Case of Mistaken Identity) may be not “so one of a kind anymore” with this repetition of his earlier success, but the computer-generated art in which black-and-white neighborhood photos underlie cartoon-like Trixie and her beloved bunny continue to delight.

Following this path and this issue’s theme, we’ve decided to review books that strike us as meriting an innovative or integrative label. Although we’ve highlighted nonfiction, we’ve addressed unique fictional works and important poetic contributions as well.

BOOKS FOR YOUNGER READERS

Cool Daddy Rat

Written by Kristyn Crow
Illustrated by Mike Lester


Cool Daddy Rat is one cool cat (as well as one swell dad) in first-time author Crow’s jiving, scat-saturated picture book. Little Ace Rat wants to know what musician Cool Daddy does in his night-time travels, so he sneaks himself into Daddy’s “bass case.” After discovery (“peeky squeaky who dat/Real sneaky,” intones Daddy) and an utterly memorable, shame-faced cell-phone call home to Mama, Ace accompanies Daddy through the gigs of a swinging New York night. Crow knows her rhythm (“hippy zippy zee zat”), assonance (“heard the noise of his boy’s voice”), and rhyme (“We’d better scurry, your mama’s gonna worry”). This rollicking work becomes all the richer through Lester’s (remember A is for Salad?) pencil-and-watercolor cartoon art that vibrantly presents the goateed, beret-ascot-and-speck-bedecked Daddy along with the rapt, enthusiastic, occasionally sea-sick and ultimately scat-singing young Ace. The love between father and son undergirds all, from the opening double-page spread where Ace clings and swings on Daddy’s very long arm to the closing cab hailing, where shut-eyed Ace leans into Daddy’s leg. Both the preschool and the primary grade crowds are sure to call for encores! (LBS)
The Blacker the Berry

Written by Joyce Carol Thomas
Illustrated by Floyd Cooper


“‘When was your age,’ said Grandma, ‘They used to say/ Coffee will make you black.’”/Why? I wondered/ Meant to keep certain colors down,’/she said.” In Thomas’s latest collection of 13 free-verse poems, the range of African American skin colors springs forth most vividly. A more complex text than the Pinkney’s (2000) Shades of Black, this work highlights the elementary-aged child’s perceptions of the permutations of race, how their families’ histories have led to the color they are “wearing now,” and the discomfort of being too distinctive (“I look white/ I am light as snowberries in fall/ I walk that walk/ I talk that talk/YetStill some say/‘You’re not really Black!’”). Cooper’s trademark oil wash on board works perfectly in this text; its grainy effect supports the children’s contemplation as he carries Thomas’s “berry” theme forward. Each speaker’s face is distinctively different, from eye color to skin color to the varied missing-teeth smiles of childhood. Partnered with The Black Book of Colors (reviewed below), this work should lead to notable discussions of how we are the same and how we are different. (LBS)

How I Learned Geography

Written and illustrated by Uri Shulevitz


How does a refugee child overcome the bleakness of life in a city where houses are “made of clay, straw, and camel dung, surrounded by dusty steppes, burned by the sun”? Shulevitz begins this powerfully written, pro-

foundly illustrated childhood memoir with his family’s flight from the Warsaw blitz—a dramatic opening spread, with burning, bleeding wartime reds, reminiscent of Hiroshima No Pika (Maruki, 1982), heightened and reflected in the red word war on the facing page. The misery of his new, impoverished existence in Turkestan (“no toys and no books”) besieges the young Uri, who sits slumped, alone, surrounded by shadow in a bleak, blue-and-sand-colored world, outside the single small room he and his parents shared with “a couple we did not know.” Most pressing in this unwanted new life is the need for food; the distress displayed by both Uri and his mother when his father returns from the local bazaar with a map instead of the wished-for bread is intensified as the gutter between pages separates woman and child from smiling man. When Father hangs the map, however, Uri’s drab life explodes with color as the names and visions of places imagined bring “enchanted hours far from...hunger and misery.” Shulevitz has outdone himself in this work, his pen-and-watercolor illustrations finding greater impact because of his sparse, poetic, emotionally evocative text. For the many refugees, immigrants, and poor children in today’s classrooms, this work opens a world of hope in which fathers who stress learning may be “right, after all.” (LBS)

Tin Lizzie

Written and illustrated by Allan Drummond


Continuing his personal interest in America’s history, cartoonist/author Drummond (whose 2006 acclaimed work Liberty! pairs so well with Lady Liberty and Naming Liberty, reviewed below) integrates the thrill of automobile creation with its problematic consequences. Grandpa’s enthusiasm for old cars (“You gotta have wheels!”) and their history, shared with his growing gang of grandchildren, leads to a bumper-to-bumper, pollution-observed Tin Lizzie outing. As Grandpa rests, grandchildren Lizzie, Ed, and George ponder various solutions for “too
many cars” and possible oil shortages. Drummond’s invention/consequence format is reinforced in the afterword and dramatized through his endpapers: front end pages display automobiles from “Cugnot’s steam wagon—1769” to the British mini and French Citroen 2CV, while back end pages feature auto-related problems on the left-hand side with possible solutions on the right-hand side. Like the text itself, Drummond’s watercolor-washed, pen-and-ink cartoons keep a light touch in this thought-provoking, discussion-inducing picture book. (LBS)

The Black Book of Colors

Written by Menena Cottin
Illustrated by Rosana Faria
Translated by Elisa Amado


If we cannot see, how can the world have color? In this remarkably innovative picture book, now available in an English translation, author Cottin answers that question through a poetic text that relies upon gustatory (“green tastes like lemon ice cream”), olfactory (“and smells like grass that’s just been cut”), auditory (“Brown crunches under his feet”), and tactile (“black . . . is as soft as silk when his mother hugs him and her hair fall in his face”) images the unseen young Thomas shares with his friend. Illustrator Faria responds triumphantly to his words through her own creativity. Once beyond the grey pictures on its wrap-around black cover, readers encounter a world of black pages, white text with Braille above on each left-hand side, and raised glossy black pictorial depictions on each right-hand page. The book’s oblong shape reinforces a tactile journey as fingertips wander across the pages. Perfect both for sighted and visually impaired audiences (the Braille not quite as raised as might be wished), the book is additionally accessible to Spanish-speaking students, with the original work, a Bologna Children’s Book Fair award winner, available from Mexican publisher Ediciones TECOLATE. One caution for read-alouds: light must strike the pages at a perfect angle or both Braille and picture will be lost to viewers. (LBS)

Naming Liberty

Written by Jane Yolen
Illustrated by Jim Burke


Prolific Yolen presents an interlaced perspective of the statue in Naming Liberty, created for a young audience. Each two-page spread presents two tales. The right-hand side depicts young Gitl’s first-person, present-tense account of her Jewish family’s journey (loosely based on Yolen’s own family)—from the pogroms and wolf-ridden forests of Russia, past the woman who “holds up a lamp to welcome” them, and on to Ellis Island. The left-hand side recounts in third-person, past tense, Bartholdi’s 21-year effort to accomplish “the dream of my life.” Burke’s muted, realistic paintings, with his characteristic slight abstractions of form and flattened perspective, lead from single images per page to a two-page spread integration of the two stories as Gitl’s ship sails past the Lady Liberty. Concluding with an author’s note (“What is true about this book”), Yolen reveals to young listeners and readers her own research story, while Burke’s brief note on color choices, weathering, and oxidation appears on a final copyright page. This book can be contrasted by upper elementary students with Rappaport’s Lady Liberty, reviewed below. (LBS)

Books for Middle Readers

Duel!

Written by Dennis Brindell Fradin
Illustrated by Larry Day


From its cover artwork, where Alexander Hamilton faces a partially pictured Aaron Burr, through its first spread, in which illustrator Day incorporates a copyright page behind an elongated diagonal image
of Burr’s raised pistol above author Fradin’s present-tense rendering of an impending “illegal pistol duel,” readers are drawn into early United States history. Fradin moves rapidly into the past-tense portion of his tale of the two men and their mutual dislike, first situating each in fatherless childhoods that most likely determined the men they became. Hamilton, abandoned by his father on his native Caribbean island, gazes downcast at his mother’s grave; orphan Burr cowers behind barrels as the shadow of his abusive uncle (whip in hand, and reflective of Burr’s own stance on the cover) looms across the page. Both men served as aides to George Washington, but the General dismissed the “troublemaker” Burr, and became fond of the foreign-born, quarrelsome, chip-on-his-shoulder Hamilton. Exacerbated by Burr’s defeat of Hamilton’s father-in-law in a Senate seat race, the enmity between the two was further fueled by Hamilton’s continuous maligning of Burr’s character. The duel, presented most vividly in a return to present tense text on a sequence of double-paged, watercolor and gouache, pen-and-ink-supported spreads, left Burr charged first with murder (the indictment was quashed) and, in a later escapeade, with treason. Both Fradin’s and illustrator Larry Day’s dramatic presentations conclude on a final spread with thoughts on history’s unfair treatment of the two men “at fault for the most famous duel” in America. Fradin’s afterword includes information on the end of dueling as well as a bibliography and suggestions for further reading. Certain to appeal to middle graders, this work conveys how grip- ping dramatized history can be; it should also sup-port deep discussions of how victors are not always rewarded in history. (KEC; LBS)

**Boys of Steel**

*Written by Marc Tyler Nobleman*  
*Illustrated by Ross MacDonald*

Random House  
Children’s Books,  

As mild-mannered as Clark Kent, Jerry Siegel escaped from personal loss and Depression hardships into a world where he consumed and created amazing-hero stories, replete with ray guns, jet packs, and galaxies far, far away (his high school teacher called them “trash”). His poverty-stricken friend, fellow high school pariah, Joe Shuster, also found relief through imagination, wearing gloves and multiple sweaters as he drew on butcher paper in his heatless apartment kitchen. United, the two brought their vision of a bold, powerful, truth-and-justice-seeking comic strip hero to a publisher, only to be rejected. Reconceptualizing their hero as mythically powerful and social justice-inspired, they continued receiving rejections for their proposed comic-strip hero, until, one day . . . Nobleman’s picture book recounts this try-try-again story (in which ultimate success led to a presence in comic books, comic strips, radio, films, and even the new media, television) with language lifted both from this lore (“look up in the sky . . . see a bird or a plane”; “up, up, and away!”) and from interviews “with Joe and Jerry.” MacDonald’s trademark cartoon style (where Siegel and Shuster’s eyes are no more than thin-lined arcs behind opaque white glass lenses) mirrors Shuster’s own early Superman work in line, shape, and palette. (Of interest, well-known editorial cartoonist and movie-prop maker MacDonald has featured his own men of steel both on a cover for Forbes and in the acclaimed *Another Perfect Day*). Although the book itself portrays a simplified success story, Nobleman’s afterward presents a more complex situation, noting Nazi dis-taste for the Jewish duo as well as the long-term battle between the two and their publisher for the rights to Superman. This caped-crusader story supports both hold-to-your-dreams and legal recourse discussions in upper elementary classrooms. (LBS)

**The Willoughbys**

*Written and illustrated by Lois Lowry*

Houghton Mifflin,  

Newbery-winning author Lois Lowry offers up an homage to the old-fashioned with the 2008 release of *The Willoughbys*. Ascribing to the same formulaic structures of the stories she integrates—sometimes deftly, usually quite blatantly—throughout the book, Lowry departs from what readers might expect from her with the story of the Willoughby children. Tired of their “irascible” father and
“indolent” mother, the Willoughby four (Tim, the twins, Barnaby A and Barnaby B, and Jane) concoct a plan to become orphans like the literary orphans they know, including The Secret Garden’s Mary Lennox, Anne of Green Gables, Pollyanna, and even James and his giant peach. The children devise the “perfectly despicable plot” of sending their parents on a sea voyage with the Reprehensible Travel Agency, imagining they will lose their lives in a shipwreck or other natural disaster. As the children wait with a Mary Poppins-esque (sans the spoonful of sugar routine) nanny, they soon discover their diabolical parents have devised their own plan to eliminate the children while they are gone. The plot unfolds as the story jockeys back and forth between the children avoiding their own elimination while awaiting news of their parents succumbing to theirs. Each chapter features spot art by Lowry, and the cover serves as another reminder of classic literature, nodding to Virginia Burton’s The Little House. Redolent with typical flat characters from classic literature, including an abandoned baby, a lonely and crotchety tycoon, and the return of a long-lost child, The Willoughbys is an entertaining story, replete with the happy ending akin to old-fashioned children’s literature. Even those unfamiliar with Lowry’s classic references will revel in this ridiculous and laugh-out-loud romp. (KEC)

Lady Liberty: A Biography
Written by Doreen Rappaport
Illustrated by Matt Tavares

In a stunning work of integrated perspectives, Rappaport (Martin’s Big Words, Freedom River), undergirded by the talented Tavares, conveys the creation of the Statue of Liberty. Inspired by the “first-person accounts” of visionary Laoulaye, sculptor Bartholdi, newspaper editor Pulitzer, structural engineer Eiffel, poet Lazarus, and Spanish-exiled Cuban journalist Marti, Rappaport determined these individuals (and others, including child Florence De Foreest, who sent two roosters to support Pulitzer’s money-raising campaign) should present their personal thoughts and experiences. The free-verse writing is powerful and elegant (“The mighty Niagara Falls pounds liquid thunder”). Tavares, too, plays with perspectives in his outstanding pictorial design in ink, watercolor, and pencil. His single-image cover features a close-up of Liberty’s face, viewed from slightly below, with engraved copper lettering presenting title and author/illustrator names. Verdigris (the color of oxidized copper) end pages lead to another view of Liberty, this time from behind, as Liberty, facing southeast, is set against a morning sun. A title spread follows; Liberty (unseen) gazes across the Hudson at New York City. This contrasts with a closing picture, in which Liberty is viewed at a distance from the northwest, suffused in late afternoon light. In between, Tavares takes viewers inside living rooms, workshops, editors’ offices, and the Academy of Design (where an auction for Liberty was held). Outside, worm’s eye views (the French marveling at Eiffel’s skeleton) and bird’s eye views (workers hoisting Liberty’s copper sheets; rooftop parade watchers) abound. The pièce de résistance is Tavares’ fold-up image: Liberty emerging from the clouds. Rappaport provides superior back matter as well, including statue dimensions and a timeline. Her author’s note emphasizes original sources, and she directs both children and teachers to the National Park Service’s Statue of Liberty website. This exceptional work merits a place in all middle and upper elementary classroom libraries. (LBS)

Eleven: A Mystery
Written by Patricia Reilly Giff

“Eleven . . . two skinny lines. Maybe two trees in a bare winter field. A house number.” What is so frightening about such a simple number? The night before his eleventh birthday, Sam MacKenzie discovers a newspaper clipping showing him as a young child. However, what little of the article he is capable of decoding with his reading disability, coupled with disturbing memories that invade his dreams, leads Sam to question everything that he has ever known about his loving life with his grandfather. A castle-building project for history connects him to class newcomer, bookworm Caroline, who misses
her bus stops as she reads too avidly. Together, the two sleuths overcome personal difficulties to unravel a mystery and develop a lasting friendship. Patricia Reilly Giff, Newbery Honor winner (Pictures of Hollis Woods; Lily’s Crossing), has created two characters unique in their abilities and disabilities. The other fully developed character is Mack, Sam’s grandfather, a land-loving woodworker who desperately loves his grandson and holds the answers that Sam seeks. The story unfolds naturally over the course of several days, with Giff employing flashbacks in the form of Sam’s thoughts and dreams. “Sam’s Dreams” serve as breaks between chapters and create a sense of suspense leading to an ultimately satisfying conclusion. Readers as young as nine will enjoy this new look at what creates and makes a family. (CAY)

**Mature Readers**

**The London Eye Mystery**  
*Written by Siobhan Dowd*


On May 24th at exactly 11:32a.m., Ted and Kat Spark watch their cousin Salim enter the London Eye. Thirty minutes later, they patiently wait as all the passengers exit the pod. Everybody, that is, except Salim. How could a young man simply disappear from within an enclosed area of one of the world’s largest and most secure tourist attractions? As Salim’s family and the London police attempt to unravel this mystery, it is Ted with his Asperger-like syndrome and its accompanying “funny brain that runs on a different operating system” who is best able to tackle the task. Through Ted’s matter-of-fact thoughts and detail-filled narration of the progressive plot, we come to learn about each well-developed character, including Aunt Gloria, whose exuberant personality is likened to an approaching hurricane. Ted’s personal fascination with weather supplies numerous such examples of figurative language (his mother’s displeasure displayed when her “face was a Siberian permafrost”). Posthumously awarded the 2008 CBI/Bisto Book Award (Ireland) for this novel, Siobhan Dowd has created a carefully crafted mystery starring a new kind of sleuth. Her use of British vernacular is seamlessly contextualized, making the text accessible even to Yanks who have never used the metric system or navigated the tube. While young readers may enjoy this excellent mystery, mildly coarse language and a young boy’s death make this book most appropriate for grades 5 and up. In the end, Dowd has taken a unique protagonist and highlighted how his different-ness makes him the perfect, if unlikely, hero. (CAY)

**Click: One Novel Ten Authors**

*Written by David Almond, Eoin Colfer, Roddy Doyle, Deborah Ellis, Nick Hornby, Margo Lanagan, Gregory Maguire, Ruth Ozeki, Linda Sue Park, and Tim Wynne-Jones*


In an innovative collaboration, 10 internationally celebrated authors assemble a view of intergenerational gifts through their individually written stories related to the fictional George “Gee” Keane, photojournalist. Linda Sue Park (Newbery medal winner, A Single Shard) relied upon a personal friend and mentor to create the photojournalist whose work propels the action in this inventive “jump” novel. In her kick-off chapter, the seed story upon which all other authors build, she introduces readers to Maggie and her brother Jason, Gee’s grandchildren, who have separate inheritances from him. Jason receives a pack of pictures—personalized autographs upon Gee’s photos of notable sports figures—and Maggie is given a decorative box of seven seashells (one per continent) with the instructions to “throw them all back” (a challenge that could take the rest of her life). From this point forward, the other nine authors pick up various aspects of the tale of lives lived, incidents encountered, and experiences shared. Ultimately, Gregory Maguire (Wicked; Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister) catapults readers into a not-so-distant future as Maggie reviews the photographs that represented the stories of the novel and passes on Gee’s challenge to his great-great-granddaughter. Some readers may find the switches between first and third-person narration, the non-linear timeline, and the leaps between genres a bit hard to follow. However, those who willingly give up con-
trol and follow the flashbacks and flash forwards will be well-rewarded with the timeless tale of gifts received and passed between generations. An underlying theme threads throughout: living a life that allows for a myriad of snapshot memories is the ultimate challenge and blessing people can claim, if they choose to take the risk. Brief author bio’s give a glimpse into the talent responsible for this wonderful group writing effort. An end note clarifies the history and purpose of Amnesty International, which will receive all royalties from the sale of the book, making Click an interesting integration of fictional and social activism. (CAY)

Ain’t Nothing but a Man: My Quest to Find the Real John Henry
Written by Scott Reynolds Nelson with Marc Aronson
National Geographic Society, 2007, 64 pp., ISBN 978-1-4263-0000-4

Displaying that “history is something you do, not just something you read,” Scott Reynolds Nelson, the Legum Professor of History at the College of William and Mary (along with some help from Siebert Award-winning children’s author Marc Aronson), presents the compelling account of his own scholarly pursuit to unearth the facts behind the folk song “John Henry.” His first chapter, “Stuck,” sets the tone for the remainder of the book as Nelson sits, stalled, in front of his computer. He then notes a critical visual detail in a postcard that spurs him forward in his “endless scavenger hunt” through clues in the song itself, periods of immense patience with librarians (who initially deny but finally grant him access to the Virginia Penitentiary’s prison records), back to the racism of the Reconstruction, and finally forward to the back roads of abandoned railroad tunnels and a possible photograph of the real John Williams Henry, a prisoner who likely died from silicosis acquired as he labored in an actual con
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The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks
Written by E. Lockhart

Frankie Landau-Banks comes of age in E. Lockhart’s smart and funny book. However, unlike traditional coming of age stories, where characters grow into themselves by bending and breaking rules, Lockhart’s clever chronicle presents a protagonist who instead opts to make the rules herself. Frankie, longing to shed her identity both as “Bunny Rabbit” to her family and as “arm-candy” to her boyfriend, is on the outside looking in at a generations-old, boys-only secret society at Alabaster, an exclusive boarding school in the northeast. While the typical teenager might just want to be in the club, Frankie instead imagines herself at the very helm of it. Wanting neither to be boxed in by labels or boxed out by the Loyal Order of the Basset Hounds, the multifaceted Frankie devises a plan. Using research from her favorite class about real pranks, Frankie turns the campus—and the Basset Hounds—upside down with her mischievous scheming and her assumption of an alphadog@al.com alias. While the reader knows the plan is doomed from the very start—the book kicks off with her letter of confession to Alabaster’s headmaster—Frankie is successful at shedding the labels and concludes the book with her declaration, “that Bunny Rabbit is dead.” Readers in grades 7 and up will be enchanted with Frankie, who is at once just another high school kid longing to fit in and have a boyfriend, and also a self-aware, clever, and thoughtful, strong female who uses a diction peppered with imaginative negative positives, like [im]petuous and [im]maculate. (KEC)

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