ALAN’s Picks is a monthly book review column that is compiled and edited by Dr. Pam Cole of Kennesaw State University. Be sure to check the site often to see a preview of the latest titles in YA Lit.

Reviewed this Month:

**Back Home** by Julia Keller  
*Egmont, 2009, 194 pp., $15.99*  
Iraq War/Relationships/Injury Rehabilitation  
ISBN: 978-1-60684-005-4

Rachel Browning is thirteen when her father comes home from Iraq. Her father is a hero and is severely injured from a roadside bombing. Rachel’s dad suffers from a traumatic brain injury and has lost his arm and leg in the accident. The reader observes how Rachel, her younger siblings, and mother deal with the tragedy that has befallen their family. Rachel’s mom struggles with the fact that her husband is no longer the same, and the children have to adjust to the man who no longer seems like their dad. The rehabilitation journey is difficult, and the ending is realistic.

Julia Keller’s book is a catalyst for future books that examine the effects of the Iraq War on families. Writing honestly and realistically, Keller describes a tragic situation with which readers can empathize. Young adult readers whose parents have been in war can relate to the many issues in this short novel. Based on traumatic brain injury and rehabilitation research that Keller conducted as a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, the book artfully describes a painful experience that examines an all too common reality for many families.

Reviewed by Joellen Maples, Rochester, NY

**A Blue So Dark** by Holly Schindler  
*Flux, 2010, 271 pp., $9.95*  
Mental Illness/Mother-Daughter Relationships/Families  

Living with a schizophrenic parent is difficult for any fifteen year old, especially for someone like Aura Ambrose, an only child of a single parent. Aura’s mother is an accomplished painter and art teacher, and Aura has her mother’s same creativity. In fact, the high school counselor wants to put Aura in the accelerated arts and letters program. Aura, however, believes that she will become schizophrenic like her mother if she develops her artistic talent. Aura promises her mother that she will not make her take her medication, but Aura has no clue what will happen the longer her mother is off her medication. Aura becomes the parent when her mother stops taking her medication and
begins spinning out of control. Realizing she and her mother need help, Aura turns to her grandmother who has not seen her daughter in years.

This story provides a realistic viewpoint of a teen living with a schizophrenic parent. Schindler shows how one teen copes with her ill mother, while trying to juggle the demands of school.

Reviewed by Ann Wolf, Boca Raton, FL

A Brief History of Montmaray by Michelle Cooper
Historical Fiction/Family/War

Sophie resides in her royal family’s castle on the island of Montmaray, not far from the coast of France. Her parents died many years prior, leaving her and her siblings to live with their uncle, the current king of Montmaray, who lives as a somewhat “mad” hermit in his room. Sophie’s brother is away at school, so Veronica, Sophie’s older sister, runs the castle. While Sophie dreams and yearns to be “presented at the English court,” Veronica has no such desire. The thought of going without Veronica tortures Sophie, so she searches for ways to change Veronica’s mind.

Through various visits from friends and foes, Sophie documents in her journal the trials and tribulations of her last months on Montmaray before the island is bombed by Hitler’s regime. While Sophie struggles to understand the larger picture of the world that Veronica desires, Sophie fantasizes about Simon who turns out to be connected to the family in a way no one anticipated.

Cooper establishes a realistic, yet fictional, account of a young girl’s journey into young adulthood. While Sophie is royalty and lives during wartime, she endures similar experiences as any teen today.

Reviewed by Abigail J Kennedy, Zephyrhills, FL

Diary of a Witness by Catherine Ryan Hyde
Bullying/Relationships/Violence

Diary of a Witness chronicles the lives of Ernie and Will, a pair of best friends. Ernie has a decent home life, but is morbidly obese. Will lives with his younger brother Sam and alcoholic father; his lack of social grace is compounded by his skinny frame and bad skin. Ernie and Will, thus, depend on each other to survive bullying from five popular school athletes. The pair escape their harsh high school environment by going fishing. Unfortunately, a tragic event on one fishing trip leads Will to contemplate whether he should commit suicide or take the lives of those who have been bullying him.

Diary of a Witness is an elegant portrayal of friendship and the harsh realities of high school bullying. Ernie and Will are genuine, sympathetic characters to whom readers can relate. Will shows the dangers of a young man stretched too thin by hardship, while Ernie shows how one caring friend can keep such a person from total destruction. Though what will become of Ernie and Will is ambiguous, the ending is hopeful. This novel is a valuable read for students coping with bullying, as well as for those who love and want to support such young people.

Reviewed by Adrienne Kisner, Boston, MA

The Doom Machine by Mark Teague
Blue Sky Press, 2009, 376pp., $17.99
Science Fiction/ Humor
ISBN: 978-0-545-15142-9

Jack Creedle is an adolescent savant when it comes to fixing engines. Isadora Shumway is the logical and brilliant daughter of a scientist whose car breaks down in Jack’s hometown of Vern Hollow. When a force of vicious spider-like alien creatures called skreeps arrives, a secret division of the military is soon to follow. The town is sealed off. To return home, Isadora and her mother, Dr. Shumway, must rely on Jack and his secretive Uncle Bud, who is anxious to get his refrigerator out of town. Before they can escape, they are captured by the skreeps and taken deep into outer space. Uncle Bud’s refrigerator turns out to be the key to the skreeps’ plans for intergalactic travel and conquest. Jack and Isadora escape during a garbage dump, and they soon find themselves in the center of a rebellion against the evil skreep queen. The fate of the universe lies in their hands.

Teague’s novel is a delightful mix of L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* and Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. The skreeps have abused their own planet so badly that death by gruzzle, a thick rain of garbage, is an imminent threat. Their plan to colonize Earth is reminiscent of Adams’ *Vogons*. They are dangerous, buffoonish, and concerned so much with self-importance and ceremony that their inevitable messy ending comes from this hubris. Like L’Engle, Teague examines time, space, and the perception of reality as he leads his characters through a number of alien worlds.

Readers from middle school through high school will enjoy this novel, particularly if they are interested in thoughtful and humorous science-fiction, fast-paced interstellar adventures, or just stories about unlikely friends who impact the universe.

Reviewed by Anthony Pennay, Canyon Country, CA

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*Hearts At Stake* by Alyxandra Harvey
Vampires/Interpersonal Relations/Brothers and Sisters/Friendship
ISBN: 978-0-8027-2074-0

Lucy and Solange are two best friends on the verge of their sixteenth birthdays. They may seem like two regular teenage girls, but there is one difference: Solange is about to become a full-fledged vampire. Solange, the youngest daughter in the Drake family, is about to undergo her “blood change” and is constantly under the watchful eye of her parents and older brothers. Lucy, her constant human companion, worries about Solange because she knows how intense the transformation process is for vampires, especially because Solange is being targeted by enemies of her family. Solange is seen by Lady Natasha, the current queen, as a threat to the throne; thus, bounty hunters are sent to track her down and kill her. When Solange is kidnapped, her family and Lucy will stop at nothing to track her down and save her before the blood change or the enemy bounty hunters can destroy her.

Through vivid imagery and emotional platonic and romantic relationships, Harvey accurately portrays the bonds not only between brothers and sisters, but between friends as well. While the plot is supernatural, the emotions and bonds are real and earthly. This book is recommended for readers in grades 9 through 12 because the fast-paced chapters, the change in point of view, and the intensity of the action will capture the attention of adolescent readers.

Reviewed by Jane Monnat, Baldwinsville, NY

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*In the Paths of Falling Objects* by Andrew Smith
Feiwel and Friends, 2009, 326 pp., $17.99
Relationships/Brothers/Survival/Violence
ISBN: 978-0-312-37558-4
Here is a haunting tale. Jonah is sixteen years old and has been abandoned by his mother and left with no food or money. Now, alone and destitute, he must care for his younger brother, Simon. In fact, with no immediate relatives, the only hope Jonah has can be found in the letters from his older brother who has recently been shipped off to serve in the Vietnam Conflict. The time is 1970, and the center of this painfully gripping tale is of two abandoned boys who decide to leave their New Mexico home to hitchhike across the Southwest desert to meet their father—a hardened soul who is being released from an Arizona prison. Not a pretty picture. Things get much worse, though, when they are picked up for a ride by two unsavory figures, Mitch and Lilly. As Jonah and Simon compete for their affections—especially Lilly’s—Mitch turns out to be more than the boys have bargained for: he is a violent killer.

Andrew Smith’s Vietnam era road trip is a young adult novel not for the tender-hearted. Jarring violence and utter despair compete with glimmers of hope and transparency as these two young teens fight for their lives in this most perilous of circumstances. What begins innocently turns into a brutal ride that leaves these two unsuspecting teens at the hands of complex and sadistic individuals who are bound to make their innocent lives anything less than normal. Gripping, disturbing, and brutally honest are all words to describe this relentless thriller, a tale bound to chill the bones of even the most hardened reader.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Kaplan, Orlando, FL

_One Crazy Summer_ by Rita Williams-Garcia
_Amistad, 2010, 218 pp., $15.99
_Relationships/Social Issues
ISBN: 978-0-06-076088-5_

In this amazing story three sisters are exposed to a variety of new experiences as they take their first airplane ride across the country from Brooklyn, New York, to San Francisco, California, to meet their mother who they’ve never known. The girls explore a new city, new causes, new beliefs, new eating habits, and they make new friends. Delphine, the oldest of the three, takes on full responsibility of her two younger sisters as they are forced to spend time in California on their own. Their mother, Cecile, does not show any of the normal maternal or motherly emotions that the girls were expecting to receive. She does not watch over them during the day, nor does she cook meals. However, using their training from their grandmother and father back home, the girls manage to take care of themselves as they walk the streets of San Francisco and spend their days at the Center run by the Black Panthers.

This book is a great read for children of all ages as it brings to light a sense of devotion and love; yet it shows that sometimes “different” and “new” really are OK.

Reviewed by Priscilla A. Boerger, Boca Raton, FL

_The Pillow Book of Lotus Lowenstein_ by Libby Schmais
_Relationships/French Language/French Culture/Francophilia/Existentialism
ISBN: 978-0-385-73756-2_

Sophomore Lotus Lowenstein reveals all her thoughts and problems in her diary, which she calls her pillow book. Lotus is inspired to keep a pillow book as a result of an AP English assignment based upon the pillow book of Sei Shonagon, a lady in waiting from 10th century Japan. Although she is failing her French class, Lotus is a Francophile. She loves everything French and dreams one day of living an existentialist lifestyle in Paris. She starts a French club at school with her best friend, Joni, and the new boy, Sean. Their goal is to organize a trip to France, but they soon realize that this undertaking is a
bit ambitious and shoot for Montreal instead. Sean and Lotus bond over their interest of existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre. However, Joni and Sean are also making a connection. Sean’s free-love attitude and his interest in both Joni and Lotus causes a rift in the girls’ relationship that seems unlikely to heal.

Lotus is an extremely likable character. Her Francophilia and her attempts to live a French lifestyle are humorous. Her life is filled with typical teenage problems and angst. However, Lotus also has unique relatives such as a chess champion brother and a father who is trying to write an existentialist play set in a modern gym. Although overall humorous, the book deals with many serious issues such as sibling, parental and romantic relationships. Lotus’ knowledge of the French language does not grow significantly; however, Lotus grows as a person.

Reviewed by Aimee Rogers, Tucson, AZ

*Rage: A Love Story* by Julie Anne Peters
Lesbian Relationships/Dating Abuse/Child Abuse
ISBN: 978-0-375-85209-1

Does anyone know how far he or she will go for love until tested? After Johanna’s widowed mother dies, her estranged sister returns home while Johanna finishes her senior year. Their frosty relationship continues as Johanna plods through school having no plans past graduation.

Johanna has a powerful, secret crush on beautiful and mercurial Reeve that would have remained hidden had she not begun assisting Robbie, Reeve’s autistic brother, with his senior essay. Robbie’s writings speak of abuse, and after Johanna witnesses their dysfunctional home, she feels heartsick and responsible for Reeve.

As the girls grow closer, Johanna, a relationship novice, is flummoxed by Reeve’s alternating caring vs. indefensibly cruel behavior, but she attributes the behavior to family problems. She tries increasingly harder to please, eventually lying about Reeve’s physical abuse and rationalizing her own behavior as its cause.

Despite Reeve’s wretched family situation, she is largely unlikeable and projects instability and danger, causing many to warn Johanna. Unfortunately, Johanna is first too besotted—and later controlled—to leave, even after Reeve causes her mortifying dismissal from her job and hospice volunteering. Johanna fails to realize she is nearing Reeve’s emotional brokenness until tragedy devastates Reeve’s family, with the aftermath allowing clarity and redemption for both as each moves forward separately.

Johanna narrates this gripping and relevant story; her blind adoration and crumbling under Reeve’s manipulation and abuse is telegraphed and cringe-worthy.

The girls’ mutual creation of their toxic relationship is shown gradually, with its entirety regrettably realistic. Peters’ fans will flock to this novel, and any unfamiliar with or having preconceived notions about abusive relationships may ponder current or future partnerships after seeing the stark, difficult truths unflinchingly portrayed by Johanna and Reeve.

Reviewed by Lisa Hazlett, Vermillion, SD

*Sisters Red* by Jackson Pearce
Relationships/Werewolves/Growing Up/Fairy Tale/Romance
ISBN: 978-0-316-06868-0
Scarlett and Rosie March, sisters who live in a small Georgia town, are so close that they think of themselves as sharing one heart. While one sister’s heart is set on finding and killing werewolves, the other sibling’s heart grows fond of their neighbor and childhood friend, Silas Reynolds. Knowing that the Fenris (werewolves) are hunting for a person designated as the Potential, the three move to Atlanta, where there is a heavier population of Fenris. While there, Scarlett’s focus on fighting the werewolves grows even stronger, and the desires of Rosie’s heart grow. As Rosie secretly explores her own interests, she finds herself drawn to a life of her own, a life less centered around saving the world and more focused on living a normal life. In an exciting and dramatic conclusion, the three make some difficult decisions, and the sisters discover that their hearts can be as one in a way that they had never believed possible.

Jackson Pearce offers a well-written, exciting story that will appeal to adolescent readers because of its readability and its fast-paced, adventurous story line. The sisters alternate as first-person chapter authors, allowing the reader passage into the minds of both girls as their hearts yearn for different but equally important lives. And, while easy to read and understand, the story contains descriptive words (“intrusive,” “riled,” “impending,” “falters”) that make the story richer and introduces adolescent readers to challenging words in an engaging text. The description of the violence in the werewolf encounters is well-written and suitable for teen readers.

Reviewed by Kandy Smith, Carthage, TN

Smells Like Dog by Suzanne Selfors
Little, Brown, 2010, 357 pp., $15.99
Adventure/Mystery/Treasure Hunting

With the inheritance of Dog, Homer Winslow Pudding’s dream of leaving the family goat farm to pursue treasure hunting begins. His uncle Drake Pudding, the famous explorer, was eaten by a tortoise under suspicious circumstances. In his will he left his twelve-year-old nephew a dog with a mysterious coin hidden in his saggy skin. The coin is a clue to the map to the treasures of Rumpole Smeller. The combination of a frightening man hanging from a cloud, Homer’s accidentally burning down the library, an invitation to the Museum of Natural History, and the inheritance send Homer and his fifteen-year-old sister Gwendolyn into The City. Luck seems to follow them as they meet strange characters such as the imaginative inventor whose head is literally in the clouds and helps them solve Uncle Drake’s last mystery. Their luck runs into some snags at the Museum, but the action heats up as more people join the hunt for Smeller’s map. What would a good book be without equally eccentric protagonists? And, of course, there are characters whose allegiance is uncertain.

The author promises that this will not be another “dead dog story.” And indeed it is not; it is a delightful, whimsical book that will appeal to boys and girls and is a perfect classroom read aloud. The first-person narrator deftly weaves in the definition of words and maintains a humorous tone. Selfors’ plot contains plenty of near misses, evil characters, whacky inventions, and carnivorous tortoises to capture and hold young readers’ attentions. There is even a lost love re-united.

Reviewed by Lottie Waggoner, Bloomington, IN