

A vintage typewriter is shown in a close-up, slightly blurred view. The carriage paper is visible, with several handwritten notes or cards tucked into it. The text is centered on a white rectangular background.

WINNERS
OF THE
FRIENDS OF THE NORFOLK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

2023
BOOK REVIEW
CONTEST



Friends of the Norfolk Public Library is pleased to present the winners of the 2023 Book Review Contest, and very happy to welcome you all to the Pretlow anchor branch of NPL. Opened in 1923, the library was named for Mary Denson Pretlow, the second director of NPL. Mrs. Pretlow supervised the expansion of the library system from two to seven libraries, and served (among other roles) as the director of the YMCA in Paris during World War I. As an anchor branch of NPL, Pretlow boasts not only an extensive collection and this very meeting room, but also a Maker Studio, which includes facilities for activities including recording, photography and video, gaming, crafting, coding and robotics, and sewing. The Maker Studio was partially funded by FNPL, which supports Norfolk's libraries by engaging in political advocacy, providing volunteer support, and contributing financially to NPL facilities and programming.

After FNPL's campaign to reopen libraries that closed during the pandemic, we lobbied for increased and more flexible hours at all libraries, and we're pleased to report that in September, neighborhood branches will be open until 6pm, and anchors like Pretlow will stay open until 7pm Monday through Thursday!

FNPL continues to fund the Summer Reading Program, which serves hundreds of children from all over Norfolk, helping these students maintain the reading skills they developed during the school year. In addition, we provide books to the City's Summer Meal Program, ensuring that every child receives a free book along with their meal.

The Book Review Contest has been a highlight of our calendar for decades. All Norfolk students in grades four through twelve – whether in public or private school or homeschooled – are invited to select any book they like, read it and submit a thoughtful review. These reviews are coded to remain anonymous and judged by a panel of local educators and readers, who select the top entries in each grade. Each year, winners are honored at a reception held at a Norfolk Public Library – this year, the Mary D. Pretlow Branch. Parents and teachers of the winners attend to support their writers, all of whom receive gift certificates to local treasure J. M. Prince Books so they can continue their reading.

This year's Book Review Committee would like to express special thanks to Paula Cook, judging panel coordinator, and Jeremy Clark, our Norfolk Public Schools liaison – and especially all of our dedicated Norfolk teachers. We'd also like to thank every one of the students who each year make the judges' jobs that much more difficult. We look forward to seeing more of your work in the coming years!

For more information about the work FNPL does, visit friendsnplva.com. Thank you for being with us today!

Bobbie Fisher
President, FNPL

Kate Davis and Emily Peltz
2023 FNPL Book Review Contest Co-chairs



BOOK REVIEW CONTEST 2023 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Friends of the Norfolk Public Library and the 2023 Book Review Contest Committee extend sincerest thanks to all of the librarians, parents and mentors of the students who entered this year's contest. Additionally, and importantly, heartiest thanks to all of the teachers who encouraged their students to participate in this year's contest, and to every student who took up the challenge and did the work.

We also want to express our gratitude to our judges, whose very difficult task it was to read all of the reviews submitted, and after thoughtful consideration, choose winners from each grade.

Special thanks as always to our supporters, whose generosity each year allows us to offer this opportunity to the students of the City of Norfolk, and to acknowledge and reward the winners.

ENDOWMENTS

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in honor of Mary Lublin

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in memory of Barron F. Black

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in honor of Gordon L. Batten

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We are so excited once again to sponsor this year's Book Review Contest, and to express how grateful we are for the opportunity to feature these remarkable students, whose commitment to reading and writing shines through the pages of the reviews you're about to read.

What you see in these pages is the students' own work – the submissions have been reformatted into a consistent font and format for readers of this commemorative booklet, but all reviews are represented as they were submitted: typos, misplaced commas, and all.

We could not be prouder of these students, or more in awe of their maturity, comprehension and understanding. And we think you'll agree as you read these reviews!

**2023 BOOK REVIEW CONTEST
SPECIAL GUEST SPEAKER**

AARIAN DANIELS



Friends of the Norfolk Public Library is delighted to welcome Aarian Daniels, our special guest speaker today. Ms. Daniels is a graduate of Hampton University and earned her Master's degree from Regent University. She has worked with the City of Norfolk for more than two decades, currently serving as Public Services Coordinator and Project Manager in the Office of City Manager.

Ms. Daniels is the Vice President of Sinkinson Dyslexia Foundation. She serves on the Norfolk Public Schools Education Task Force, and is co-founder of Norfolk Office Administration Association. She is the Founder of Lex Talk Dyslexia, an advocacy group in Coastal Virginia dedicated to raising awareness for children with dyslexia through education and community programming. She is the author of *Carey Overcomes Dyslexia*, a book chronicling her family's experience when her daughter was diagnosed with dyslexia.

In both her professional and personal lives, Aarian Daniels knows the importance of reading critically and writing thoughtfully, on topics as wide ranging as public administration and the law, advocacy and personal development. It is our great honor to welcome her today.

2022 BOOK REVIEW CONTEST WINNERS

| Best Overall | Name | School | Teacher |
|---------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| | Olivia Chevalier | Granby High School | Ms. Waltz |
| Grade 4 | | | |
| First Place | Daphney Roberts | Norfolk Academy | Ms. Lonergan |
| Second Place | Maya Reed | Southside STEM | Ms. Lowe |
| Third Place | Pia Polizos | Norfolk Academy | Ms. Lonergan |
| Grade 5 | | | |
| First Place | Roman Krigsvold | St. Patrick's Catholic School | Ms. Barrineau |
| Second Place | Olivia Chang | Norfolk Academy | Ms. Dobbs |
| Third Place | Giovanni Sykes | Norfolk Collegiate | Ms. Maus |
| Grade 6 | | | |
| First Place | Lily Arndt | St. Patrick Catholic School | Ms. Boas |
| Second Place | Grace Ordell | Norfolk Collegiate | Ms. Cooper |
| Third Place | Leia Silverstein | Norfolk Collegiate | Ms. Copper |
| Grade 7 | | | |
| First Place | Alex Repole | Norfolk Academy | Ms. Rodgers |
| Second Place | Henry Dimirsky | Young Scholars/Rosemont | Ms. Lenaghan |
| Third Place | Gabriel Bond | Norfolk Academy | Ms. Rodgers |
| Grade 8 | | | |
| First Place | Anna Wernly | Young Scholars/Rosemont | Ms. Lenaghan |
| Second Place | Owen Kiernan | Norfolk Collegiate | Ms. Archer |
| Third Place | Ciara Clay | Young Scholars/Rosemont | Ms. Lenaghan |
| Grade 9 | | | |
| First Place | Elizabeth Hinton | Maury High School | Mr. Wright |
| Second Place | Davis McNulty | Norfolk Academy | Ms. Denson |
| Third Place | Aarush Desai | Norfolk Academy | Ms. Hopkins |
| Grade 10 | | | |
| First Place | Caspian Collett | Maury High School | Ms. Batton |
| Second Place | Claire Giglio | Maury High School | Ms. Batton |
| Third Place | Jacob Burnette | Maury High School | Ms. Batton |
| Grade 11 | | | |
| First Place | Elias Agguini | Maury High School | Ms. Marston |
| Second Place | Zoe Winters | Maury High School | Ms. Marston |
| Third Place | Zack McDonough | Norfolk Collegiate | Ms. Blount-Wilson |
| Grade 12 | | | |
| First Place | Karen Li | Maury High School | Ms. Wade |
| Second Place | Anastasia Oliver | Maury High School | Ms. Wade |
| Third Place | Patrick Stiles | Maury High School | Ms. Wade |

Best Overall

Olivia Chevalier
Granby High School, Grade 12

Ishmael
by Daniel Quinn

The novel *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn is a story about hope for humanity. “I think we have a much finer and more exciting destiny than ruling the world,” Quinn says. “This book shows that we can learn about what that destiny is from the life around us-and in *Ishmael* it just happens that life speaks with the voice of a lowland gorilla.” The story starts off with the unnamed narrator responding to an ad seeking “students earnest to save the world.” But he is shocked to discover his teacher is a telepathic gorilla. *Ishmael*, the gorilla, was saved from a circus by an old man, who gave him the tools to educate himself. The narrator is jaded, he wants to save the world but struggles to find hope. He is self centered but does his best to think of *Ishmael* as a friend. *Ishmael* divides all life into two groups: Takers, “civilized” people trapped by their culture, and Leavers, those who act like “uncivilized” animals in true peace. He explains how humans believe the universe and world were created for humans to conquer and rule, but they are flawed and destined to continue struggling to live, taking the planet and everything down with them. *Ishmael* shows how the myth of Adam and Eve is used in each culture to create two different perspectives. Takers use the myth to explain their creation, while Leavers use it to explain the expansion of Taker culture. The Takers (Eve) eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the tree that the gods eat from to know who lives or dies. Believing they know all, the Takers act like gods, though that power does not belong to anything on earth.

The genre is philosophical fiction, tackling the critical themes of sustainability, ethics, and global catastrophe. The two main characters, *Ishmael* and the narrator, speak through socratic dialogue, questioning human culture and our destiny. The plot is miniscule and unimportant to the main themes and ideas the two explore, though there we do get flashbacks to *Ishmael*’s capture, rescue, and education. Quinn’s style of writing is personal, making the reader feel as though they are actually part of the conversation.

I recommend everyone read this novel at least once, it will have you questioning long after you read it. *Ishmael* revealed to me the paradox of humans as both the savior and destroyer of earth, searching for a place in the hierarchy where humans find balance with nature. Human life is destined to repeat our mistakes and never learn. Quinn debates our discernment of good and evil, gives us a sense of foreboding, and finally calls us to action. This novel causes the reader to question what we have so easily accepted as fact, and to strive to better ourselves and the planet. *Ishmael* is our prophet of knowledge, teaching us the meaning of life – passing along his wish to save humanity from their fate, so they can find true balance with all life.

1st Place Winner Grade 4
Daphney Roberts
Norfolk Academy

Prairie Lotus
by Linda Sue Park

Prairie Lotus, by New York Times best-selling author Linda Sue Park, is a fast-paced, heart-warming, historical fiction filled with many up and downs. I truly enjoyed this book because of all the friendships and drama! The main character is twelve-year-old Hanna Lee who just moved to LaForge, South Dakota where she does not know a soul. The story takes place in the 1880s, in a rural community where Hanna lives with her father. Her dream is to become the first half-Chinese dressmaker in LaForge. Race is a major theme, as the Lees are the only blended, half-Asian family in the whole town. When people see Hanna, they give her a disgusted look or whisper names to each other. When Hanna starts her new school, she realizes that making new friends as an outsider is much more difficult than she imagined. This page-turner takes the reader on a rollercoaster of Hanna's emotions as she transitions to a new, sometimes unwelcoming community.

Park did a stunning job illustrating Hanna's experiences both in her family, and at school. For example, when Hanna gets bullied by a classmate, one of the students, Betty, stands up for her and becomes Hanna's best friend. Park's vivid description really helps the reader feel all the pain that Hanna is going through. Shy, quiet Hanna had never been bullied and we, the readers, hurt with her. Hanna's Chinese culture is very different from her new community in America's Midwest and she has to figure out how to stay true to who she is, and also try to fit in. Having one best friend who is also learning to fit in would help Hanna, but, like many relationships, Hanna and Betty have completely different opinions and bicker a lot. The story has dark tones but eventually, things start to look brighter for Hanna as she slowly makes more friends. Will Hanna be able to stand up for herself, or just get pushed even harder? How can someone who feels so different get her classmates to see her as an equal? I like the fact that even though the story takes place over one hundred years ago, the feelings are still relatable to me. Turns out, preteens have not changed that much over the last century. Hanna's experiences of overcoming racial, cultural and geographical differences are relatable feelings for most people-of-color.

If unique characters, nonstop tween drama, and unusual plot twists are your thing, then I highly recommend *Prairie Lotus*! This unique story is mostly told in a linear style; however, there are several flashbacks, which add great background information and context. The characters are relatable and while there is not much use of humor, we learn a lot about kindness in the midst of cultural differences, which is very thought-provoking. If you love the *Little House on the Prairie* series, then you will gobble this up! Go to your local library and get a copy today!

2nd Place Winner Grade 4
Maya Reed
Southside STEM

Serafina and the Black Cloak
by Robert Beatty

Do you ever imagine having supernatural powers? Serafina is a 12 year old girl, who has lived hidden in the basement of a mansion called Biltmore Estate for as long as she can remember. She has lived in the estate with her Pa without knowing of her supernatural powers until now! This stunning book of historical fiction is dark, mysterious, and scary. It is full of twists and turns. It is the first of a 4 book series and the author has written other enjoyable books.

Historical fiction is a style of writing that takes place in a real setting or time period, but has an imaginary plot. This book takes place in 1900 at the Biltmore Estate. This is a real place and time in history. People arrive in horse drawn carriages because they don't have cars yet. They are just now getting electricity in the house and everyone thinks it is new and unique technology. Most people still use candles. Serafina's Pa works to keep the power running correctly in the house. I like historical fiction as long as it also has a suspenseful or scary plot to make it exciting, which this book does.

Serafina bravely comes out of hiding to solve a spine-chilling, creepy mystery. She ends up befriendng the Vanderbilt family, the owners of the Biltmore Estate, especially their nephew Braeden, who is also her age. She protects them and their guests from dark forces and evil visitors throughout the book series.

This book takes place in the beautiful, local area of Asheville, North Carolina. If you want to visit, it is about a 6 hour drive from Norfolk, Virginia. It has such a vivid setting. I visited the Biltmore Estate and was able to spot secret stuff I recognized from the book, such as secret passageways, basement hiding areas, and accurate descriptions of historic rooms. There are many gargoyles and stone lions that are said to ward off evil spirits. In my opinion that didn't work because the plot of the book is that Serafina needs to help protect them from evil spirits, forces, and visitors.

I recommend this series of books for ages 9 and up because it may be too scary for younger kids. I also suggest one of the author's other books called Willa of the Wood. It is also in a local setting, the Appalachian Mountains, but is more fantasy than historical fiction. If you like books with dark or scary themes for ages 9 and up, I would also recommend The Sisters of Grimm by Michael Buckley and A Tale Dark and Grimm by Adam Gidwitz. Also, a new graphic novel version of Serafina and the Black Cloak comes out in April 2023, which I'm super excited to read. In conclusion this is one of my favorite books that I suggest you read over and over again like me.

3rd Place Winner Grade 4
Pia Polizos
Norfolk Academy

Bridge to Terabithia
by Katherine Paterson

The book *Bridge to Terabithia* deserves a five-star rating! It's about two unlikely friends, Jess and Leslie, who live next door to each other and meet by competing in a school race. The beginning of this story was interesting because they bonded over a mutual bully. They protected each other and plotted their revenge together.

The fantasy begins when the two main characters created their own world in the woods near their houses. They used a rope swing to cross a rippling lake into their imaginary world full of magical creatures, giants and animals. What I found most interesting is how they repaired an old treehouse to keep them safe from scary creatures in their fantasy land.

Something I found sad is how the book ended, but no spoilers here. Let's just say when one friendship ends, another one begins.

1st Place Winner Grade 5
Roman Krigsvold
St. Patrick's

Don't Stay Up Late
by R. L. Stine

They say that nightmares are just dreams, but what would happen if they became reality? In R. L. Stine's novel, "Don't Stay Up Late", Bad things happen in the town of Shadyside. Car crashes, fires, and deaths. It is a gloomy town that almost nobody wants to live in. the main protagonist Lisa Brooks is plagued with misfortune. She and her family are hit in a devastating car crash that lands all of them in the hospital.

Lisa decides to babysit to help gain money for her family. Babysitting takes up most of her time and the rules are strict, especially, "Don't stay up late". While she is babysitting, murders start happening. One by one.

This is hard on Lisa Brooks because she is a kind0hgearted, smart and funny person. She loves to hang out with her friends and relax. But she does not get to do that as often as she would like; because, the car crash gave her major head damage. So she has frequent hallucinations and nightmares. But the question is, are they real? She fears losing her mom and her friends but because of the constant babysitting, she is already being slowly pulled away from them. The other main characters are Harry The kid Lisa is babysitting. Brenda Harry's mom, and Alice Harry's aunt. All of them are kind of weird. Brenda acts nervous all the time. And Alice acts confused almost. Harry is relative normal, or so you think.

This is a thrilling book. It grabs you by the throat with its icy cold hands and does not release you until the book comes to a conclusion. This book is one of my favorites of all time because of how immersive it is. You really feel like you are in the house with Lisa. It had some extremely effective scares and made me actually scared for a night or two after the book was done. Even once the book had ended I just kept thinking about it and how much of an expertly crafted book it was.

R. L. Stine really describes the characters beautifully. He describes the characters emotions, fears, favorite moments ect. You can literally feel how the characters feel, see what the characters see, and hear what the characters hear. In this book you can understand how the characters feel when they see dead bodies. You can feel the feeling of shock and panic; it allows you to really understand what the characters go through and their daily lives. Overall, I highly recommend this book. It has a great storyline and scary moments. This book is a 5/5. Definitely give it a try but when you're reading this book keep the lights on and always remember, don't stay up late.

2nd Place Winner Grade 5
Olivia Chang
Norfolk Academy

Out of my Mind
by Sharon M. Draper

“Cathedral. Iridescent. Crystallization. Words are all around us, but I have not been able to speak a single word since my birth. I am eleven years old now...” Melody Brooks is an eleven-year-old girl that suffers from cerebral palsy. When she first enters the classroom in her wheelchair, most kids believe that this sickness also affects Melody’s brain. Melody, however, proves them wrong by joining the school’s quiz team and going on her way to the nationals. Although Melody and her team are a perfect fit, there will still be some significant problems. Draper’s description of Melody’s life allows you to experience everything she is going through. We can feel her frustration as Melody strives to prove she is normal. Her ecstasy when she makes a friend is unbelievable. My favorite part was when halfway through the story, Melody experiences the possibility of communicating with her loved ones. I found this to be an excellent plot twist because now, Melody can be accepted the same way as most kids. Draper has woven magic through these pages as she signifies the importance of speech. The suspense keeps us on the edge of our seats. Will Melody finally be able to speak and participate in more chances that she could not partake in earlier? If you enjoyed *Restart* by Gordon Korman or *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, *Out of My Mind* will be sure to capture your heart from the beginning pages to the startling conclusion.

3rd Place Winner Grade 5
Giovanni Sykes
Norfolk Academy

Two Degrees
by Alan Gratz

Three kids, three situations, one world. *Two Degrees* by Alan Gratz, shows the world is changing. The kids have to fend for themselves during some of the worst situations imaginable. Gratz found a way to show the main issues about global warming: wildfires, melting glaciers, and hurricanes. Gratz has spent years writing historical fiction and has created numerous immaculate books such as this one.

Akira is running from the blazing wildfire “Morris” as it tears through everything in its way. Owen and George find themselves in a bad situation as they stumble across a mother polar bear when they are going to the bathroom, and leave their crack shotgun in the snowmobile., Natalie is hunkering down during Hurricane Reuben as it tears through her walls and rips her away from her house and sends her into the murky waters of flooded streets.

All of the characters develop and become brave, independent, and confident. The author, Alan Gratz, is trying to demonstrate that the effects of global warming can be catastrophic. I learned that sometimes people have to get things done themselves. The details Gratz includes are very descriptive and expressive.

The book *Two Degrees* by Alan Gratz is amazing just as any other book he has written. I love the suspense Gratz is able to put throughout each person’s story. He also manages to create individuality in each of the characters. There are many twists and turns during the story so the reader would never suspect what will happen. The story is very believable because global warming is a very real problem. I would recommend this book to anyone who likes realistic fiction and action. I’d say that this book is a great 10/10. The suspense of this story is one of the best parts of this book. Even the New York Times encourages you to get this book! “Two Degrees, a Hollywood thriller of a book.” -New York Times

1st Place Winner Grade 6
Lily Arndt
St. Patrick's

Wings of Fire: Moon Rising
by Tui T. Sutherland

When you walk into the cafeteria I bet you aren't overwhelmed by hundreds of thoughts rushing toward your brain, overpowering your mind. Well, the main character of this story, Moonwatcher, a nightwing dragonet, has the ancient lost ability to read minds and see into the future. The nightwings are only one of the many species of dragons inhabiting Pyrrhia and they once had the ability to read minds, have prophecies, and tell the future, but when they left their secret home their powers mysteriously vanished.

In the welcoming wings of the Dragonets of Destiny, who run Jade Mountain Academy, Moon meets many new dragons who could be loyal friends or power hungry enemies. She meets a kind, caring, and optimistic Kinkajou. A quick-thinking, observant, and loyal Qibli. A cold hearted and arrogant dragon named Winter. Then, most peculiar, a worried dragon named Turtle whose mind she can't seem to read.

Moonwatcher leaves the jungle, where she grew up, to go to the Jade Mountain Academy. There she has to figure out to deal with her dangerous powers and keep them a secret for there are many dragons who would have her head on a stick for having such powers as her's. She is scared and alone in this new place until one day she hears a voice speaking to her in her mind who is about to change her life forever...

I most enjoyed the characters in this book because they are more complex than they appear. I feel like we are all more complex on the inside than what we show on the outside. I especially favored the antagonist because they don't think that they are evil and don't have any evil motives. They only want happiness, but are willing to do anything to get it. They made me reflect on my actions and how good I really am.

This book is for readers who love magic, mystery, dark secrets, and a bit of humor on the side. Fourth graders to seventh graders would best enjoy this book because it has many twists and turns with some deeper meanings that younger children might not understand. This book is impossible to put down and is filled with wonder and magic. "Something is coming to shake the earth. Something is coming to scorch the ground. Jade mountain will fall beneath thunder and ice until the lost city of night can be found."

2nd Place Winner Grade 6
Grace Ordell
Norfolk Collegiate

A Wolf Called Wander
by Roseanne Parry

A Wolf Called Wander, by Rosanne Parry, tells the heartwarming story of a 1,000-mile journey. Based on a true story, a young wolf loses his family and desperately searches for a companion. The reader learns the importance of determination, the meaning of friendship, the strength of family, and freedom in the unknown.

Originally, the main character is given the name Swift, as he is the fastest, smartest, and swiftest wolf in their pack. But when his pack is attacked and taken by an enemy, Swift is the only one left. Swift takes a 1,000-mile journey looking for his home away from the mountains (his real home), and his pack with a new howl. In all the foreign lands he journeys across in the middle of nowhere, he manages to make these lands his somewhere. A favorite quote is when he's talking about his father. "He hears the yowl of cougars and the yip of coyotes and the rattling call of ravens. He hears the running water, the splash, grunt, huff of the bear, and the split, splat of the salmon hitting stones on the side of the river. And then the long, contented tear and chew of a bear eating fish. I listen to him listening."

The memories of family, friends, and determination ring throughout the book. Swift uses his knowledge from his family to stay alive. He uses the help of friends to encourage his journey. And he uses the strength of determination to keep moving forward. From the start to the end, these strengths play a big part in each character's development. Swift realizes he never would have made it without family and friends to open his eyes to the real world.

The author does an outstanding job writing this inspiring, descriptive, creative, and compelling novel. She does an excellent job telling the story from a wolf's point of view, showing the world through their eyes, and letting the reader walk 1,000 miles in his shoes. The one thing that stands out to me the most is the creativity, basing it off of a true story and taking it and making it a reality, her descriptions of their world are truly well told.

This book is recommended to all, whether fantasy, adventure, or realistic fiction, this book catches everyone's eye. Readers from 4th-7th grade are happily driven by this wonderful novel. This book is the perfect representation of walking into the scary unknown full of unknown surprises. So come with me on a 1,000-mile, one million-foot, inspiring journey, with the wolf called Wander.

3rd Place Winner Grade 6
Leia Silverstein
Norfolk Collegiate

The Assignment
By Lisa Wiemer

The Assignment, by Lisa Weimer, is an inspirational and powerful book. It tells the story of two high school students who must face reality when their favorite teacher gives them an assignment to defend the Nazis' reasons for murder during the Holocaust. The characters question their teacher's motives on how they can defend an act so treacherous. The inspiring characters and intriguing plot leave readers motivated to fight for their beliefs and not lose hope even in the darkest times.

The Assignment is the story of the complicated school and home lives of Logan March and Cade Crawford, seniors at Revier high school. Their lives get crazier when their favorite teacher Mr. Bartley assigns the class an assignment where they are required to defend the Nazi's reasons for starting the Holocaust. When Logan and Cade refuse to do the assignment, things take an unexpected turn. Their principal does not support them, and Logan and Cade receive online threats after their story is leaked to the public. After a series of unfavorable events, Logan and Cade are almost out of hope, but soon they find support in an unlikely place.

Weimer portrays Logan and Cade as sympathetic and relatable even to younger readers. The reader can relate with the characters no matter what age they are and feel the emotions that Logan and Cade are feeling as the story progresses. The plot of the book is both compelling and unique to the story. The plot excites the reader, motivating them to continue reading.

The themes of the book are courage, resilience, and showing kindness. The main characters display courage when they stand up to their teacher and refuse to do the assignment. The theme is also evident when Logan and Cade break into the museum to get the information to convince their principal they should do an alternative assignment. An example of them using resilience is when they continue to speak out against the assignment even when their community is against them. Another example is when they receive threats from total strangers to stop fighting and move on and they continue to fight for what they believe in. The whole community shows kindness when they show up at Cade's house to remove the vandalism and put up signs around the town that say "humanKIND welcome here." (Page 137)

The Assignment is a great book for middle or high school students because the main characters are seniors in high school. This book is relatable to students this age because they might be put into a similar situation with an assignment like this one. It's also important to note the novel is based on a true story centered around a New York City high school of a similar assignment, inspiring Weimer to write about the event.

1st Place Winner Grade 7
Alex Repole
Norfolk Academy

The Body in the Library
by Agatha Christie

Agatha Christie has done it again. The famous mystery novelist does not disappoint with *The Body in the Library*. Published eight years after her most iconic work, *Murder on the Orient Express*, many similarities exist between these works. Both begin with unexpected events in unusual circumstances and process to a climactic finish including a characteristic twist. As the title suggests, a body has been found in the library. The discovery was not in just any ordinary library, but the one belonging to Colonel and Mrs. Bantry, the two people least likely to commit this egregious crime. Who would be able to solve this mystery? Would it be the authorities? Or would it be Miss Jane Marple, the elderly spinster who is known for her “ability to link up trivial village happenings with graver problems in such a way as to throw light upon the latter?” (Christie 15).

In a book full of suspense and twist, the second you think you know who did it, new findings derail your theory. Yet Miss Marple continues to sift through the information and misinformation. After a dramatic encounter catching the murderer red-handed, Miss Marple proves that despite her self-described “terribly amateurish” (Christie 210) methods, she is in fact “an expert in solving mysteries (Christie 102).

I enjoyed this book and would highly recommend it to anyone who loves a good mystery. While less action-packed than many newer works, Christie manages to keep the reader interested with three plot twists. And at the end, the murderer is...

2nd Place Winner Grade 7
Henry Dimirsky
Rosemont

To Kill a Mockingbird
by Harper Lee

To Kill a Mockingbird is a novel written by Harper Lee. It is a commentary on the social injustice and racism of the 1930s that truly describes the problems of the past (and even some problems today) within its world. At a base level, To Kill a Mockingbird shows how unfair the world can be, but there are those who are willing to fight against it.

Set in 1930s Maycomb, Alabama the story is viewed through the eyes of a young girl known as Scout Finch living in a town with clear racial prejudice, Scout has a father named Atticus Finch who is a lawyer with a strong sense of justice, no matter who he is defending. The story takes place over a couple of years span, and during the time we get a very good look at the thoughts and views of the people in Maycomb. A prime example of this is when Atticus is tasked with defending a black man, and despite having most of the town against him, still argues for the mans innocence. Another example is the mysterious Boo Radley who was supposedly shunned from the town due to some rumors from when he was a kid, some think he is just a myth, but the Radley house across the street from the Finches is both eerie and wondrous even still.

To Kill a Mockingbird explains through metaphors and meanings how good and evil can exist within one person and how the world is truly an unjust place for some people. The book also shows however that those in the world can fight against the prejudice in an attempt to change it. To Kill a Mockingbird is a must read for anyone who sees problems in the world and feels the need to look, explain, and may even attempt to fix them. "Remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird. Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy, they don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us."
-Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird

3rd Place Winner Grade 7
Gabriel Bond
Norfolk Academy

A very biased review of *Keeper of the Lost Cities Stellarlune*
by Shannon Messenger

Have you ever seen what lengths friends go to find each other? Sophie has in *Keeper of the Lost Cities Stellarlune* by Shannon Messenger. The book follows Sophie Foster and her entourage of friends as they attempt to stop the terrorist group Neverseen from overthrowing the council. From losing one of her best friends to going to England this book has it all. As the awkwardness with Fitz increases and she searches everywhere for Keefe this book leads to many drastic revelations in the overall series.

This book is certainly deserving of the praise heaped upon it. To start this book shows a likeable relatable human in our protagonist Sophie Foster. In a beautiful scene Sophie trying to confess to her crush Keefe tries to get out of confessing but eventually realizes “But she had her speech prepared. And Keefe was sitting all alone next to Verdi’s pasture, drawing more of his memories. And Sandor was off checking with the patrols, giving her a little goblin-free privacy. She was out of excuses.” (Messenger 639) Also this book balances its comedy and seriousness with great skill. While there are many times to make you laugh out loud there are just as many to remind you of the stakes. Finally the terrorist group, the Neverseen, are written with such egotistical lines that makes you wish they would just do something.

While this book has many things to praise it also has its fair share of things to critique. As is customary in this series Sophie continues to have a sub plot of who to like that book. With this letter from the last book the whole half a book with Fitz is essentially brushed aside in place of a crush on Keefe. While her crush is written beautifully they spend too much time setting it up and then barely give any payoff. Secondly, it is also customary in this series that half of the clues never make sense. Finally for a critique is that this book struggles under its own weight. You are constantly trying to remember things like Mr Forkle had a brother, who is Stina, and what is Lady Gielsa’s plan again.

Overall, this is a masterfully written book. Filled to the brim with laugh out loud moments and tense action pieces this book is very much worthy of the title *Keeper of the Lost Cities*. I would recommend this book to those who love fantasy. Due to the implications of death in this book I would probably wait until 2nd or 3rd grade to read this book. Overall though it is an incredible book.

1st Place Winner Grade 8
Anna Wernly
Rosemont

The Book Thief
By Markus Zusak

There is no escape from death, especially in a story told by death. In Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* readers follow the life of Leisel Meminger, a nine year old girl living in Germany during World War II. The reader is constantly wondering if the characters will be able to escape the horrific effects of the war. The narrator and character development both help show the contrast between the beauty and evil of humans.

In *The Book Thief* the narrator is arguably the most important character. One of the reasons this book is so unique is because death is telling the story. Death keeps the story engaging by filling the text with rich figurative language, providing his thoughts on events and characters, and their deaths. Many readers may be annoyed when death spoils important events long before they happen. However, this helps readers to relate to the dread that people living during World War II would have been feeling. The threats of bombings, Nazi party members watching their every move, and the constant stream of terrible news all contribute to the sense of foreboding. However, despite the horrible circumstances, many characters embody human's potential for good.

Leisel is forced to mature quickly when her brother dies and she is suddenly left with a foster family alone. She often wakes up screaming from nightmares, but every time Hans Hubermann, her foster father, is there to comfort her. Leisel would never have found her love of words if it weren't for Hans, who, even though he can barely do it himself, teaches her to read. Leisel also meets a boy, Rudy, while playing soccer with the neighborhood children. They quickly become very close friends and begin getting into mischief together. Through Leisel's simple, but beautiful relationships with Hans and Rudy we can see that even in the midst of tragedy their love provides hope that Leisel will have a place to belong. Later on in the story, the Hubermanns begin hiding Max Vandenberg, a Jew, in their basement. Leisel starts to spend a lot of time around him, eventually forming a strong bond. They both have had hard lives, and through their relationship they find solace. Marcus Zusak shows how relationships can be an anchor through suffering.

Many people enjoy reading *The Book Thief*. This book can help readers see human's potential for good. *The Book Thief* can inspire readers to remain courageous even through difficult times. Through the narrator and character development, Marcus Zusak weaves a beautiful story that will leave readers sad but hopeful.

2nd Place Winner Grade 8
Owen Kiernan
Norfolk Collegiate

A Brief History of Time
by Stephen Hawking

What are we? For hundreds of years, humans have thought that we were the center of the universe when that couldn't be more wrong. For thousands of years humans have longed for one thing: purpose. Over the years, since humans have discovered how small we are, we have been studying and looking as far as we can into the universe. Famed theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking, compiled the most important revolutionary data and wrote it in his novel *A Brief History of Time*. The narration and the interesting topics make this book an extremely educational and entertaining read.

Stephen Hawking is one of the most well known theoretical physicists in the world. His life was riddled with hardship but he pushed through. At 21 he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease that slowly paralyzed him over his life. His illness impacted his life and his research, but it didn't stop him. He went on to create and theorize ideas that were thought to not even be possible. It talks about his story but it is in no way a biography. It is a simple retelling of his years of research and how people have gotten to this point. He speaks of his hardships, adversity and how he conquered it. He cites his work with evidence from Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, and Galileo Galilei. With no equations for $E=mc^2$, this book uses no math or but simple facts and the laws of physics. This book can be the simple doorway to a vast understanding of theoretical physics.

The topics covered in this book are extremely interesting and are what lead to humans main desire: purpose. Purpose is what drives us to do something- anything. The novel shows that we are not alone out there but meeting someone else will be extremely impossible. We can't go fast enough to meet something in years, and the universe is expanding constantly and things are moving away from us also at a constant rate. It's disheartening to know that whatever we do, we will eventually be thrown back down back into a point of no return. Knowing this may be depressing, but it gives knowledge that we can act on for the billions of years we have. We can't find a true equation to "solve" the universe since there are too many unknown variables, but "If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we would know the mind of God"(191).

A Brief History of Time is one of Stephen Hawking's best books. It not only tells the story of his research, but also of his life and hardship. It might be broken down but this work is not for the faint of heart. If you love physics and finding out what makes humans tick, this book is perfect for you, though it is complex, so be warned. Hawking may have passed on, but his research will guide society for years to come.

3rd Place Winner Grade 8
Ciara Clay
Rosemont

The Diary of Anne Frank

The words and experience of one, can greatly impact others around them, even years later. In *The Diary of Anne Frank*, readers get an inside glance into the life of a 13 year old Jewish girl who has been forced into hiding with her family. Over the course of the two years, the author of the diary, Anne Frank, goes through many emotions and ways of thinking, as she navigates life in almost complete isolation from the outside world, all while confiding her thoughts, fears, and feelings into Kitty, her diary and best companion.

Through Anne's words, readers quickly become familiarized with the various members of the 'Secret Annex', and hear about their many quirks and personalities, some of which negatively affect her. Most of the time, she hashes out her feelings and expresses her true opinions to Kitty, as she tries her best not to lash out at others. As Anne works towards becoming the young woman she is expected to be, the child-like and mature sides of her seem to be constantly competing for the top spot, and the juxtaposition between the two creates those internal conflicts that appear throughout the pages, even with the well-known and tragic ending.

The Diary of Anne Frank should be read by anyone who can, and has been treasured by many for decades. Readers will find the simple and yet complex mind of Anne intriguing and sorrowful, and leave them thinking far after reading the last few words. Although it isn't necessarily the most exciting book, it is worth reading, and will have a long lasting effect on the mind and heart. All Anne Frank did was write in her beloved diary, and she unknowingly captured the attention of people all over the world, by creating a beautiful idea of hope and perseverance that continued on for generations.

1st Place Winner Grade 9
Elizabeth Hinton
Maury High School

Iron Widow
by Xiran Jay Zhao

“Welcome to your nightmares!” Zetian screamed this to the world as she broke what they knew in half. *Iron Widow* takes place in a fictional version of China. This book follows Zetian as she tries to survive in a world trying to kill her at every turn. She finds allies in her childhood friend Yizki and Chrysalis pilot Li Shimin. They fight a battle on two fronts, the aliens and the government.

Zetian is angry and has no problem hurting those who hurt her. She kills the pilot who murdered her sister and countless other women. Zetian hopes to destroy the piloting system and make it so no other girl has to die to that system. Li Shimin is as troubled and guilty as he is also loves to read and being outside to watch sunsets. Yizhi knows everything about the aliens they’re fighting and the Chrysalises that pilot. All three of them get closer as the story progresses and their relationship feels natural and right. As Zetian says “the triangle is the strongest shape.”

Iron Widow focuses heavily on the oppression and discrimination of women. Though it mainly focuses on Chinese women the experiences and topics discussed will ring familiar in any culture. Women are often viewed as objects and are discouraged or actively attacked for going against society’s norms. Zetian is viewed as strange and dangerous by the government for not doing what she is told. The higher ups however are just terrified of her. Xiran isn’t trying to start a revolution or telling people to fight each other, but to just look at what women and minorities are facing all over the world. They wrote this book to try and get people to see and understand what some people live through every day.

I loved *Iron Widow*. The characters are fascinating and complicated. None of them are truly good or bad and this makes it so easy to relate to them. While in most aspects the events are not relatable, as humans aren’t fighting aliens in giant robots, the political and social themes will resonate with many readers. The fights are engaging and bring up such suspense on who will win and even survive. Even some of the antagonists you can have sympathy for. *Iron Widow* is an amazing addition to the teen dystopian section of novels.

2nd Place Winner Grade 9
Davis McNulty
Norfolk Academy

Teaching a Stone to Talk
by Annie Dillard

Teaching a Stone to Talk, by Annie Dillard, has a striking premise. The book does not follow a set story with any amount of cohesion, yet the collection of memories found in its pages present one of the most impactful works of American literature to come out of the twentieth century. Anne Dillard's unique way of presenting her encounters is a style unto its own, which presents a vivid sense of wonder in even the most common of circumstances.

Annie Dillard, in this novel, vividly expresses the reverence of nature in almost any circumstances. In describing a mirage on the Puget Sound, she writes, 'The water itself, I say, had grown absurd, sloping this way and that in long parallel ridges like those of a washboard there were no waves; instead the smooth water itself lay seemingly jagged and rucked Appalachians ... The mountains sank back into the water ... as if they had never been' (Dillard 144-145). Dillard explains the unexplainable by using such absurdist descriptions that the reader can easily see the mountains rising out of the waves, then disappearing as the world remembers its cohesion, and assumes the expected position. Annie Dillard also gives immense life to the mundane through her writing style. In a quiet field, she is suddenly hit with silence like a brick wall, and she writes, 'There was only silence. It was the silence of matter caught in the act and embarrassed. There were no cells moving, and yet there were cells. I could see the shape of the land, how it lay holding silence. Its poise and its stillness were unendurable' (Dillard 133). Annie Dillard is able to masterfully describe the feeling of uneasiness that comes with immense quiet. Annie Dillard, therefore, grants the reader a childlike sense of wonder towards the natural phenomena she describes.

Annie Dillard's writing displays a style sorely needed in the modern world. With such a business First and narcissistic culture being seen in the west and all over the globe, not many people are willing to enjoy the minutiae around them. Annie Dillard offers a new perspective that gives gratitude and thought to nature, and is a perspective that could make many people happier in such a depressive culture seen throughout the world. *Teaching a Stone to Talk* not just tells, but shows the reader how to smell the roses, and live a more fulfilling life, by enjoying what the natural world has to offer.

3rd Place Winner Grade 9
Aarush Desai
Norfolk Academy

Linked
by Gordon Korman

Linked, by Gordon Korman, is a wholesome story about a small town coming together to stop hate. Chokecherry is a quiet town where nothing ever happens until someone draws a swastika in the middle school. The middle school begins a tolerance program, teaching the students about the horrors of the Holocaust, where six million Jewish people died. To represent the sheer number of deaths and to show their togetherness, the students decide to build a paper chain – with six million links. In *Linked*, Gordon Korman demonstrates how a community can come together to do the impossible to stand against hate.

A six million paper chain link is a near-impossible task. When the students come together to form a plan of action in the wake of the swastikas, a student suggests the paper chain. The student president loves the idea, affirming, “A paper chain! Interlocking loops of multicolored construction paper – six million of them for the six million Jewish lives snuffed out during the Holocaust. But it’s also a picture of unity, the interconnecting links like a long line of people standing arm in arm against intolerance and hate” (Korman 71). This project is the students’ way of standing up to the swastikas. It also gives them a visualization of the appalling number of Jewish people killed. While working on the paper chain, the students are informed of another swastika burned into a table. Though he thought that this news would demoralize his classmates, a student named Michael is surprised when his peers continue making the chain, stating, “At first, I assume everyone is just going to leave. [...] The swastika in the science room hasn’t stopped us; it’s given us rocket fuel. The worst part of what’s happening to us has always been that we have no way to fight back. Until now. This is how we fight back” (Korman 85-86). Despite the terrible news of another hateful act, the students continue to show unity and resilience in the face of adversity. As their mission to reach six million links continues, the students of Chokecherry get support from other schools across the nation. One school sends links to Chokecherry, writing,

“Dear Chokecherry Middle School,

We can’t tell you what an inspiration your message of tolerance and remembrance has been to us,. Our students have been coming in early every morning for the past three weeks to work on our paper chain to add to yours. Please attached these 1,986 links” (Korman 180).

Communities from all around the country come together to help Chokecherry complete its impossible mission, and they eventually succeed.

In *Linked*, Gordon Korman shows the importance of unity and solidarity in communities, big and small, to face and challenge adversity. Throughout the novel, Korman portrays how individuals from different backgrounds can put aside differences and work together towards a common goal, highlighting the power of collaboration in achieving success. When everyone comes together to achieve a common goal, anything is possible.

4th Place Winner Grade 9

Name

Maury High School

The Godfather

by Mario Puzo

An offer than cannot be refused is reading *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo. *The Godfather* takes place in New York City during the 1940s. *The Godfather* is in the third person omniscient perspective. The novel focuses on the members of the Corleone crime family, specifically Michael Corleone and Vito Corleone, alongside individuals from the four other prominent crime families. The central conflict in *The Godfather* is competition between the five crime families, alongside internal strife within the Corleone family.

Michael Corleone is peculiar because of his initial “chosen alienation from father and family,” which contrasts with the otherwise unquestioning service of the other members of the crime families, providing depth to Michael. However, despite possessing the callous nature of his family, Michael is surprisingly well tempered and yet still described as having the “intelligence of her great father.” This is significant to the novel because it allows for the unique development of Michaels’ character as he further rises to power. Another key figure is Vito Corleone, the Don of the Corleone family, who despite his high standing “received everyone- rich and poor, powerful and humble- with an equal show of love.” Vito Corleone’s relationship with Michael is being his father, as well as serving to pass the mantle of Don, the highest position of leadership in a crime family, to Michael.

Recurring themes in *The Godfather* are how power causes corruption, the importance of family, as well as the American Dream. For example, *The Godfather* demonstrates that to gain power, one must be deceptive. Furthermore, it also displays how with more power, an individual must further abandon who they previously were. Not only that, but ironically the characters who tend to use violence the most in positions of power suffer a similar end. Foreshadowing is a repeating rhetorical technique used in *The Godfather*. For example, oranges are used to signal an ongoing tragedy. This is demonstrated by oranges being present before and during scenes of death and calamity.

One of the reasons *The Godfather* is enjoyable was its subtle portrayal of greater human struggles. For example, the book delves into the questions always asked by man: Where is the line drawn between right and wrong, to choose love or family, and is power always worth it? Furthermore, by making the main character Michael Corleone stand out as remarkably human in sharp contrast with the seemingly near soulless behavior of his compatriots, it allows for the reader to sympathize with the character of Michael. Due to the high risk nature of the criminal underworld Michael finds himself thrust into, as well as the constant tension of ensuring the safety of his father Vito Corleone, *The Godfather* maintains an aura of suspense throughout the novel that keeps it vivid. The book fits into the genre of crime by serving as one of the early foundational works, acting as a gold standard for similar novels to try and achieve.

1st Place Winner Grade 10
Caspian Collette
Maury High School

To Kill a Mockingbird
by Harper Lee

“To Kill a Mockingbird” by Harper Lee is a book that everyone should read before they die. The novel takes place in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama from 1933-1935, during the Great Depression. We experience the book through the eyes of Jean Louise, (nicknamed Scout) Finch. The book consists of couple of different plotlines, Scout and her brother Jem trying to meet the mysterious “Boo” Radley and their father, Atticus, defending a black man accused of raping a white woman. His defending of the man shows high moral standards, becoming famed for it.

The character that is the most important in the book in my opinion, is Atticus Finch. Atticus is a lawyer in Maycomb and the father of Scout and Jem. We see him demonstrate high moral standards throughout the story. In the book, he is assigned to defend Tom Robinson, who is accused of raping a white woman. While most of the townspeople don’t want him to actually defend Robinson, Atticus is set on defending him to the best of his abilities. He famously says in the book, “Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit them but remember it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.” (Lee 103) The reasoning is that mockingbirds don’t do anything but sing for us, and that as such it’s a sin to kill them. This shows Atticus’s morals perhaps the best in the book, at least shows them the best for the ordinary reader. However, for readers with more knowledge, Atticus’s morals are best shown when he defends Tom Robinson. Before the trial, Atticus is at the Maycomb jail, talking to Robinson when an angry mob shows up to try to lynch Tom. “You know what we want” ...”Get aside from the door Mr. Finch.” (Lee 172) Even in the face of danger, Atticus doesn’t back down. Scout and Jem end up defusing the situation. Later the book, Tom Robinson is found guilty even though he’s innocent. He is killed while trying to escape prison. Atticus, ever the gentleman, visit’s his mother to give his condolences. We see Atticus hold his head high throughout the book, no matter what.

When discussing “To Kill a Mockingbird”, it’s important to discuss why the story was written. “To Kill a Mockingbird” was written with many parallels to Harper Lee’s life. She grew up in a small town in Alabama. She had three siblings and she herself, was a tomboy Her father was a lawyer and part of the state legislature and her mother, suffering from mental illness, rarely left the house similar to a character from the book, Arthur Radley. When Lee wrote “To Kill a Mockingbird”, she was also writing about her own life. The book represents growing up and coming of age, Lee’s own experiences.

I personally liked the novel. What appealed to me was how it depicted a historically accurate situation and setting, and for the time, unlikely heroism. During this time I would have expected Tom Robinson to have been lynched due to the mostly racist town but thanks to Atticus, Scout and Jem, Tom stays safe for his trial. Another thing I liked was the story taking place from the eyes of Scout, a child. Someone who doesn’t quite understand what’s going on and as such we see the story from a unique point. You could see as the book progressed, characters, mainly Scout and Jem grow and develop and I felt a connection to them, a connection to Scout and Jem,. Scout was just trying to be a kid, while Jem wanted to grow up and be like Atticus.

The book truly is a good example of a coming of age novel because its plot matches up the genre. Life is good for Scout at the beginning of the novel but as the story progresses we see her learn about the harsh realities in her town. The prejudice, hate, and death. A woman is supposedly raped, Tom Robinson is wrongly convicted and shot to death as he tries to escape prison, Scout and Jem are attacked by a man who tries to kill them. They grow up, not necessary because they decide t, but because of the circumstances of their situation.

“To Kill a Mockingbird” is a fantastic book and I would recommend it to people to read. I would recommend it for the characters and what we get from the book. The book demonstrates the realities of life in a prejudiced society, but also offers a glimmer of hope from wrong.

2nd Place Winner Grade 10
Claire Giglio
Maury High School

Anna Karenina
by Leo Tolstoy

“All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” This infamous quote in *Anna Karenina*, written by Leo Tolstoy in 19th-century Imperial Russia, challenges the societal norms of adultery and fidelity while exploring the topics of jealousy and vanity. Tolstoy created vivid characters, full of life and who battle morality and personal sacrifice, to depict the most memorable personas. The novel provides gut wrenching examples of human nature and takes the audience through a thoroughly complex emotional journey.

Anna Karenina portrays an elegant, intelligent and utterly dazzling woman that is plagued by her guilt of discontent. Her lack of satisfaction in her marriage combined with her feminist spirit motivates her commitment to a newfound freedom that eventually leads to her fall from grace. In search of her happiness and freedom, she finds love. Her seemingly vain runaway fuels her passion for life and for her lover. Although Anna found what she was searching for, she never forgets her devotion to her son. With her forbidden lover, she has a daughter and was never able to love her as much as her son nor was ever touched by her daughter’s angelic qualities. Blatantly stated by a distant family member, “If you look for perfection, you’ll never be content”, Anna’s life led by her frivolous behavior to find happiness is never enough. In pursuit of happiness, Anna is rejected from society to only then become dissatisfied. Her newfound life with her lover seems idyllic. Loved by her lover in a way in which most people yearn to be loved, her lover stares at her “..avoiding any long look at her as one avoids long looks at the sun, but seeing her as one sees the sun, without looking.” Her once perfect romance turned into a storm of doubt and paranoia causing Anna’s frustration and sorrow which, ultimately, leads to her taking her own life.

Anna Karenina depicts Anna Karenina is all of her conflicted emotions and fatal beauty to allow the reader to see her struggles between choosing the moral path versus living her life in the most fulfilling way possible. Anna’s dilemmas create a relatable for the Russian aristocracy and commoners as well as those living in the modern 21st-century. The tragedy of *Anna Karenina* can be viewed as bittersweet; her deep commitment to her own life was so great that she couldn’t bear seeing her life, as she saw it, in shambles. Her fragile difficulties make the reader realize how fiercely human she is, as well as how we all are. The intensely human characteristics of the novel remind the audience how fragile life is. How it can change from one minute to the next and how easily everything can crumble from underneath you but it also shows how beautiful life can be and how everyone’s story is completely and utterly different yet wonderful in its own way.

3rd Place Winner Grade 10
Jacob Burnette
Maury High School

The Maze Runner
by James Dashner

The Maze Runner is a novel written by James Dashner that dives into the mind of our main character Thomas. The book begins when Thomas wakes up with no memory in a grassland called The Glade. He has been mysteriously placed here with a community of other people referred to as “Gladers.” The gladers also have no memories of their lives before the glade and no idea why they are there. The only way out of the glade is through a maze that closes at night, trapping people inside to never be seen again. There is a group of people that travel into the maze during the day called runners, these runners venture deeper into the maze each day, hoping to find the reason why they were placed into this mysterious glade. The main character Thomas is an ambitious, curious individual who is desperately seeking to get out of the glade through the maze to figure out what is going on and why he and the other gladers were all placed in this place with no memory of their past lives. From the moment Thomas mysteriously arrived in the glade, he has had an ambition to find out what happened. His urge to become a runner was a big part of this ambition and his fearless mentality to face the mysterious maze is a big reason why he becomes such a leader in solving the mystery of the maze. This quote from Dashner on page 39 represents this strange urge “Thomas knew he was a smart kid- he somehow felt it in his bones. But nothing about this place made any sense. Except for one thing. He was supposed to be a Runner. Why did he feel that so strongly? And even now, after seeing what lived in the maze.”

In the maze runner, many themes are discussed. The theme of identity and memory is portrayed in this novel as Thomas and the other gladers have lost their memories, leading to them losing their senses of identity. This ultimately leads to a deeper ambition to uncover the mystery and a sense of unknowingness as the reader becomes a part of the story themselves. This journey of mystery and struggle that is this novel leads Thomas to question how memories and experiences can shape a person, and even though Thomas has no memories of what has happened previously in his life, he experiences instinctive feelings of trust and homeliness in this strange place, and he experiences traumatic flashes of his previous life while untangling the mysteries of the glade. Ultimately, the novel suggests that people are defined by their actions, rather than what they have done in the past, as the past aspect is simply not present in this novel.

This sense of mystery and lack of knowledge on the circumstances of the characters is one of the main reasons why I find so much enjoyment in this excellent novel. The aspect of adventure represented by the maze and the journey through this mysterious land also drive the book in my opinion. We also learn more about the characters in the book as the story progresses. I really enjoy watching Thomas develop from a clueless boy who wakes up in a grass field to a fearless leader who won't stop until the mysteries of his past are uncovered. I also love the way that Dashner paints the picture of the maze and the events that occur in this book. Dashner's writing plays such a big role in this book, as he describes the natural surroundings so beautifully and his descriptions of the characters provide insight into the minds of the gladers, causing the reader to experience exactly what the gladers go through as they uncover the secrets that lie within the maze under the fearless leadership of Thomas. In conclusion, I wholeheartedly recommend this novel to anyone seeking a great read full of mystery and adventure as you follow the gladers in this journey through the maze to find out what has happened to them and why they have been placed in this “glade”.

1st Place Winner Grade 11
Elias Agguini
Maury High School

The Sun Also Rises
by Ernest Hemingway

The Sun Also Rises blends post-war Europe in the roaring 20's with the depressed young people who fought in it, pulling a story together without a true plot; in fact I find it is most aptly described as a tragedy. Every character is worse than they started in the novel by the end, with relationships having been destroyed and much left to reflect on.

It is certainly a departure from the novel genre, and really falls flat should you read searching for a plot-driven through line – that is not to say that there is not a through line, however, as each character's nuanced relationships with themselves and each of the others grows (and withers) immensely. Take, for example, Jake's relationship with Robert Cohn: good friends laced with some antisemitism to total outright disdain and xenophobia for a man who was simply surviving; was he really surviving, though? It could be so, or maybe he truly was "behaving poorly". Nonetheless, Hemingway's outright antisemitism and racism shows numerous times throughout the book, using the N-word more than 7 times on a single page, never really being genuine in his compliments and descriptions of the non-white, christian characters.

With all of Hemingway's ethical shortcomings, however, the novel feels truly genuine, partially, of course, because it is based off of his lived experience, but I think the best thing to come from that is the incredible detail that Hemingway employs through implication, from the names of each currency to the descriptions of the bullfights. While I must admit to writing this a few weeks after I have completed the novel, Montoya, the owner of the inn the characters stay at and an avid bullfighting devotee, has a story arc that has completely stuck with me, ultimately resulting in a complete loss of respect for Jacob, posing a profound moral question in whether Jake had done anything wrong in regards to the young bullfighter they meet.

Ultimately, *The Sun Also Rises* captures a moment in time and a feeling in a way that is nearly unrivaled, and while it is a bit of an acquired taste, it is so fascinating to have a window into these characters minds and this time period with all its minutia and implications.

2nd Place Winner Grade 11
Zoe Winters
Maury High School

Running with Scissors
by Augusten Burroughs

Few books are able to completely entrance the reader throughout their entirety. However, Augusten Burroughs in his memoir *Running with Scissors* is beautifully able to hold onto the reader's attention until the very last page. He shares his story of transferring custody from his mentally ill mother to his mother's seemingly unstable psychiatrist and his unique family. In an environment where everything is allowed, Burroughs is able to explore himself and try to find his purpose in an overwhelming and aimless life. This book is a fascinating and entertaining read to anyone with an open mind.

The characters are a huge part of what makes this book so fascinating. As kooky as all of the residents of the Finch household are, each one has its own loveable redeeming quality that forces you to hope for their success in life. No matter what sort of pickle the surely eclectic character finds themselves in, a whole new endearing or concerning aspect of them is revealed to add to their already fascinating attributes. Every well rounded character from the dog food eating Mrs. Finch to the closeted minister's wife has many intriguing aspects that give the reader the feeling of personal connection with each and every one.

The main character, Augusten Burroughs, is truly the star of the show. Part of the charm of this book is being able to travel with Burroughs while he discovers himself during his rebellious teenage years. Going through heartbreak connects the reader to the author's tragic yet captivating call to fame. A real tale of redemption, following Burroughs' underdog story makes for an enthralling read, impossible to put down.

Finally, the quite frankly absurd nature of this book is its most appealing quality. As long as you don't mind crude language and graphic descriptions, its audacious nature is quite endearing. For a work of nonfiction, it truly stretches the reader's imagination. It pushes the question of how some details could possibly be true. A refreshing dose of profanity and sexual innuendos gives the book a progressive, modern feel.

If you're looking for an alluring, entertaining, and heartbreaking read, then no book is more recommended than *Running with Scissors*. Demonstrating a modern take on familial ideals and moral principles, this book provides the perspective that so many Americans need to see in their own lives.

3rd Place Winner Grade 11
Zack McDonough
Norfolk Collegiate

Monster, Volume 1
by Naoki Urasawa

Reading *Monster: Volume 1* is like diving into a thrilling and suspenseful world of crime. The dynamic storytelling and illustration in the manga is carefully executed by Naoki Urasawa. The story follows a brilliant surgeon named Kenzou Tenma who's faced with a difficult decision: Save the life of a dying boy or save the life of the mayor of Frankfurt who's been rushed into the hospital five minutes ago. Which life is more important? Ultimately, he chooses the boy, and as a result, his life takes a very dark turn.

A hallmark of this manga is the artwork. Urasawa's illustrations for all the panels are detailed and emotive. The art style isn't overly cartoony, so the stylization of the characters blended well with the dark themes presented in the manga. Additionally, the panel layouts were dynamic, creating a sense of tension and suspense while reading. Urasawa also employed various techniques in different point-of-view and close-up shots to convey a mood or a character's feelings. The artwork in *Monster: Volume 1* is a significant factor in immersing the reader in the story, allowing for a truly gripping experience.

The plot is well-written and explores the theme of how there's a "monster" within every person. It's a thought-provoking theme because it allows for a reader's personal introspection and ideas about what it takes to be a "monster." Urasawa weaves a captivating narrative that keeps the reader of the edge of their seat from beginning to end. Not only does the manga explore morality, but it also acts as a powerful social commentary on the corruptness of the elite, delving into the prejudices and discrimination that lower-class groups can face. With so many analytical layers Urasawa creates a plot that is meant to be dissected.

Another standout of *Monster: Volume 1* is the complex characters. Each character is multi-dimensional and nuanced, making them relatable and tangible. Tenma is a well-developed character who struggles with guilt and remorse about his decision to save the boy. The internal conflict of Tenma adds depth to his character and makes him a compelling protagonist. The supporting cast is also incredibly well-written, with each character having their own personality, motivations, and secrets that thicken the plot. The character development in this series is truly impressive and highlights the meaningful impact of the story.

Overall, *Monster: Volume 1* is a captivating manga with much to offer. It's a story that latches onto you and keeps you wanting more. The expressive and stylized art of the manga was the leading proponent of immersion in this story. The art prefecture captures a scene's tension and delivers the plot masterfully. The plot also adds to the attraction of this manga as it explores that themes of monstrosity and morality. The themes are perfectly demonstrated through Kenzou Tenma and the whole cast. *Monster: Volume 1* is a must-read for fans of psychological thrillers. It can also expose manga to audiences of other psychological genres.

1st Place Winner Grade 12
Karen Li
Maury High School

Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits
By Laila Lalami

“Fourteen kilometers could separate not just two countries but two universes” (5). In the novel, *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, Laila Lalami illustrates the motivations which propel a group of immigrants to take the risk to emigrate from Morocco to Spain illegally. Her depiction of societal hardships forces non-native readers to appreciate their secure lifestyles, knowing that others are less fortunate.

From a third-person point of view, the narrator presents four main characters: Faten, Halima, Aziz, and Murad. Although the main characters are heading to the same destination, the causes and outcomes for each individual remain distinct. Faten, an Islamic woman, is a religious fundamentalist who encounters a conflict with a liberal educator. Halima, a wife and mother of three children, attempts to escape from an abusive husband. Aziz, a married man, struggles to find work in Morocco to support his wife. His dreams of fortune in Spain motivate him to take the trip, despite deterrence from his family. Murad, a travel guide, is educated but was unable to become permanently employed in Morocco. With increasing numbers of travel guides, he feared that he could no longer compete with them. He decided to leave Morocco in hopes that he would find a high-paying job with his education.

With the help of a captain, these four characters attempt to cross the Strait of Gibraltar and land on the shores of Spain, a place that offers them a fresh start. Using flashbacks and flashforwards, Lalami provides the reasons that persuaded each character to leave Morocco and how this trip reshaped their lives by presenting each character’s perspective through separate chapters. The Strait of Gibraltar is a symbolic boundary that the immigrants hope to overcome because on the other side, Spain is the equivalent of the American Dream. Throughout the novel, the overarching message portrayed is that hope for a better future can overshadow fears of the unknown but simultaneously give immigrants a false sense of success. This insight of how immigrants are constantly struggling with financial and cultural issues is a motivating force for migrants today as they move to more developed countries where they believe offers more opportunities for them.

Starting the novel off with a suspenseful illustration of illegally crossing to Spain with a detailed account of the “coast guards, the ice-cold water, [and] the money [they] had to borrow” easily grabbed the reader’s attention (5). The following description of each immigrant was done with startling reality, allowing readers to not only be exposed to Moroccan culture but also the issues that exist in African society. However, the timeline of the novel is hard to follow as the plot is out of chronological order and difficult to distinguish when a new character is introduced. On top of that, the ending of each character’s life was brief, leaving the reader with questions left unanswered. Overall, *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* is a fascinating novel that looks into the struggles of immigrants within a backdrop of global issues that are relevant today.

2nd Place Winner Grade 12
Anastasia Oliver
Maury High School

Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits
By Laila Lalami

Only one thing would encourage individuals to cram themselves onto an inflatable boat to travel across dangerous waters: hope. As Murad, Aziz, Halima, and Faten attempt to make the journey across the Strait of Gibraltar in order to illegally immigrate from Morocco to Spain, it is evident how far one will go when they believe there is hope for a better life. After all passengers but Aziz are captured by the Spanish civil guard, Halima and Murad must return to Morocco, and Faten is forced to buy her freedom with sexual favors. They were all trying to escape something – unemployment, an abusive relationship, trouble with authority, disapproval – and as the story unfolds, readers get a glimpse at how each character handles their challenges.

As the story goes back to provide insights into the lives of each character before they tried to cross the Strait of Gibraltar, more is revealed about what has led them to make this extremely risky and expensive decision. Aziz struggles with unemployment in Morocco, and finds hope in the fact that many have made the trip from Morocco to Spain and completely reinvented themselves. Faten has been expelled from school and faces issues with police, and sees fleeing to Spain as a way out of these problems. Murad struggles to make money as a tour guide, and is tired of his family's disapproval and constantly being overlooked. Lastly, Halima is stuck in an abusive relationship which she has repeatedly tried to leave. Taking her children and traveling to Spain seem to be her last option to escape the constant violence she faces in her own home.

The story continues on to show each of the characters' lives after their attempted trip. Hope seems to push them to take control of their lives, although it was somewhat misplaced as they believed Spain would be the solution to all of their problems. While some establish themselves in Spain and others remain in Morocco, a key message can be derived from the characters' level of self-fulfillment in their respective countries. The individuals who are successful in establishing themselves in Spain continue to face hardships and lose touch with their past lives and ideals. In contrast, those who stay in Morocco are able to find happiness and satisfaction. This contrast highlights the theme that it is not where you are that matters, but what you make out of your situation. Spain was ultimately not the cure to all of the characters' problems, and those who were able to resolve the conflicts in their lives rather than trying to escape them ended up the most content.

The author's use of four characters provides a variety of reasons why people immigrate and offers a glimpse at issues people face in other countries every day. The use of four characters also allows the author to make the contrast between those that stay in Morocco compared to those who end up in Spain, effectively communicating her central message. The negative aspect of using four characters, however, is that it is harder to develop depth with all four of them, especially with it being such a short book. Additionally, it can be harder for readers to develop a connection to characters so that they can fully grasp the conflicts and emotions they face when the story not only jumps between characters, but also jumps in the timeline. This approach was original, though, and proves an interesting read.

3rd Place Winner Grade 12
Patrick Stiles
Maury High School

Cloud Cuckoo Land
By Anthony Doerr

A girl in 15th century Constantinople; a boy born with cleft-palette and consigned into the Ottoman army, a Korean war veteran holding a play at a local library; an eco-terrorist with a sensory disorder; a girl stuck in a craft hurtling through space towards a new home. Although scattered across continents and centuries, these characters are united by a simple tale, which has fought millennia of age and decay in order to survive on. Although each is living very different lives and facing different challenges, this text aids each person it touches in uniquely meaningful ways.

Cloud Cuckoo Land contains a plethora of meaningful characters, whom regardless of the time period, seem immediately relatable. Anna, a young orphan girl living in Constantinople, yearns to experience life outside of the confines of the city and uses literature to escape from the drudgery of forced labor. Omeir, an outcast due to his cleft lip, is consigned into the Ottoman army, finding himself tasked with the destruction of Constantinople. Zeno, a man born in the mid-1950s after discovering his passion for language, decides to put on a play based on one of the books he has translated. Seymour, born in the 2000s, witnesses the destruction of woodland near his home and becomes radicalized, joining an eco-terrorist group and planning bombings. Separated from this all, a girl named Konstance lives on a spaceship with plans to populate a “new Earth”, and finds herself trapped inside a solitary cell.

These characters, very different in creed and personality, all stumble upon the same tale: Antonius Diogenes’ comedy *Cloud Cuckoo Land*. This book binds the characters together, with its mystery and uniqueness captivating and intriguing all who stumble upon it. Anna finds this book in an abandoned monastery, using it as a sign of hope for life outside of the city’s walls. Zeno begins translation of this novel as a way to connect to a lost loved one who shared his passion for language, while Seymour uses this novel as a way to repent for his misdeeds and to bring people together. Konstance uses this book as motivation to not give up on humanity and pursue fruitful life. Beautifully transcending both situation and time, Doerr’s novel truly is a masterpiece, celebrating the power of literature and the importance of the human experience and its perseverance.

While at first very difficult to keep track of due to the many different storylines to follow, Cloud Cuckoo Land by Anthony Doerr is a must-read, artfully connecting these storylines in a satisfying manner. I also am in awe at the organization and wonderful thought that went into this novel, with the original text of Diogenes’ *Cloud Cuckoo Land* unfurling slowly as the book progressed and each of the storylines fitting together as if pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Truly, no stone was left unturned in this novel and it is a wonderful testament to how literature can profoundly impact and inspire each and every one of us.

