

TOP SHELF FICTION

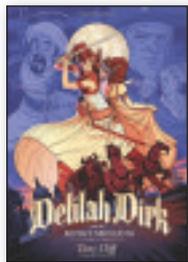
FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL READERS 2016

Middle school is a time filled with friendships, challenges, and adventures. The 2016 Top Shelf nominations reflect all the complexities of middle school.

The Annapolis, Maryland, selection committee had the pleasure of reading a wide variety of genres and equally varied topics. While it is never easy to make the final selection, we (and our teen reviewers) thoroughly enjoyed the challenge of nominating the following top choices. To purchase the entire Top Shelf would cost about \$360. Without a doubt, there is something for everyone on the shelf!

ADVENTURES

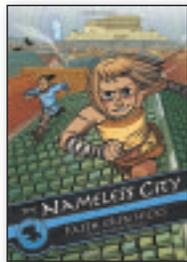
Cliff, Tony. **Delilah Dirk and the King's Shilling**. First Second/Macmillan, 2016. 268p. \$17.99. 978-1-62672-155-5. VOYA April 2016. **G**



This sequel to **Delilah Dirk and the Turkish Lieutenant** (Macmillan, 2013/VOYA August 2013) is filled with swashbuckling fun. Delilah Dirk is a delightful protagonist accompanied by the trustworthy Selim. England, espionage, and Redcoats fill the pages of this action-packed adventure. A traitorous British soldier

threatens Delilah's reputation, and she is determined to set things right. She and Selim head back to England and the adventures begin. This graphic novel builds on historical events and intricately weaves in frustration, tension, and humor. The character and plot development add depth to an already good story. Readers of all genres will find this a fun read.

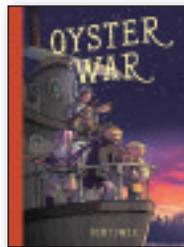
Hicks, Faith Erin. **The Nameless City**. First Second/Macmillan, 2016. 240p. \$14.99. 978-1-62672-156-2. VOYA April 2016.



Currently called Dandao, the city has been conquered so many times that its natives simply call it the Nameless City. Two of its inhabitants—Kaidu and Rat—are unlikely friends. He is a cadet with potential at training school; she is a street-smart orphan who's struggling to survive. Kai's father, whom he barely knows,

is a respected officer in the Dao army, putting Kai and Rat in entirely different social classes. Rat can fly high above the city from rooftop to rooftop, and Kai wants her to show him how. Later, Rat learns of the nefarious plot to kill the general, and she is thrown into the river. Can Kai save her and warn the palace about the assassins in time? This historical fiction graphic novel is set in an ancient Middle Eastern/Asian city, and focuses on issues of war, occupation, and class. We recommended it for readers twelve to sixteen.

Towle, Ben. **Oyster War**. Oni Press, 2015. 168p. \$29.99. 978-1-62010-262-6. **G**



An historical and fanciful story based on oyster wars during the mid-1800s to mid-1900s on the Chesapeake Bay, this tale takes place in a town called Blood Haven where oysters are the economy. Commander Davidson Bulloch and his crew must fight against pirates and their infamous leader, Traacher Fink, and his magic. Pirates, battles,

and shape-shifting water creatures fill the oversized pages of this beautifully illustrated, action-packed read. This graphic novel could be a fun addition to a history class or just a fun read for those who enjoy action, history, and fantasy all rolled into one.

Vance, Alexander. **Behind the Canvas**. Feiwel & Friends, 2016. 336p. \$16.99. 978-1-25002-970-6. VOYA February 2016.



Imagine that behind every painting you've ever seen, there is a living magical world. Claudia is not your typical middle schooler—she loves art, sometimes even talking to majestic masterpieces. When she notices a boy appear in a famous work of art, and then again in one of her own paintings, she is flabbergasted. She learns that his name is Pim, and that he's been trapped in the world behind the canvas for centuries (enchanted by a nasty

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witch). She befriends Pim, knowing she must try to free him from the spell. With a special magical goop, she enters the wild and dangerous art world. Will she be able to find Pim and save him? More importantly, can she trust what he says? Readers will enjoy this fascinating fantasy with numerous references to real works of art with footnotes explaining more about the artists. Recommend to readers ages eleven and up.

"A fascinating story of a girl who discovers the magic of friendship and the joys of the artistic world, this story is full of beauty, friendship, and perseverance in the worst of times. Any reader will enjoy this book, and any art lover will love the different views of the best artworks in the world."—Hellen M., grade 8

Walters, Eric. **Regenesis**. Penguin Random House, 2015. 324p. \$9.99 Trade pb. 978-0-385-68309-8.



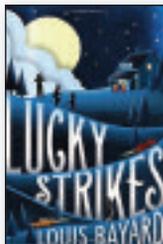
What if an asteroid hit the earth? Where would you go? Fortunately, for Billy Phillips and one hundred highly gifted children, with the help of Dr. Joshua Fitchett, there is hope on a space station. The plan is that they will be able to survive years in space until the Earth is safe again. The characters and conflicts make this a dangerous adventure. This story is well

researched, which adds a level of realism to the situation. Survival is the key to this adventure in space. Readers interested in science fiction, relationships, and adventure will enjoy this sequel to **End of Days** (Doubleday Canada, 2011).

CHALLENGES

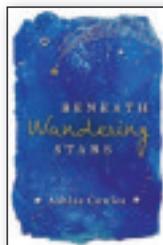
Bayard, Louis. **Lucky Strikes**. Henry Holt/Macmillan, 2016. 320p. \$16.99. 978-1-62779-390-2. VOYA August 2016.

Fans of plucky female protagonists who are at their best when the odds are against them will enjoy seeing underdog Amelia Hoyle navigate her way with the unfortunate cards she has been dealt. With her mama dead and her papa not in the picture, Melia, as big sister, is now in charge of her two younger siblings and the family gas station in a



small mountain town marked by empty warehouses and closed quarries. There is also the looming threat of Harley Blevins, local business owner of Standard Oil, as he aggressively extends his monopoly of gas stations along the highway. While Blevins thinks the Hoyle gas station will fold easily, he is mistaken, as Melia strikes a deal with a man who is homeless to pose as her father. If she can keep the gas station afloat with this ruse, will this be enough to keep her family together? Written from Melia's point of view, readers will delight in her sass, audacity, and ingenuity. Suggest to upper-middle grade readers and beyond.

Cowles, Ashlee. **Beneath Wandering Stars**. Merit Press, 2016. 272p. \$17.99. 978-1-4405-9582-0. VOYA August 2016.



Gabriela Santiago, a high school junior, finds out her brother is critically wounded in Afghanistan. She made a vow to her brother that if anything should happen to him, she would walk the Camino de Santiago in Spain as a holy pilgrimage in his name. With her military family stationed in Germany, a trip to Spain is not out of the question; however, the vow stipulates that

she must be with her brother's obnoxious best friend, which is unwelcome. Gabi decides to make the pilgrimage with Seth anyway, which not only changes how she sees him, but also how she sees herself and her place in the world. Cowles's own experiences as part of a military family add nuance to the reader's understanding of the burdens young soldiers carry home from the war. Gabi's story affirms how military families must both thrive and endure in the unique circumstances in which they live, a way of life that many of today's teens face.

Kilbourne, Christina. **Detached**. Dundurn Press, 2016. 208p. \$12.99. 978-1-459-73431-9. VOYA October 2016.

Anna feels as though she does not belong in this world—she feels like her life is in a downward spiral serving no purpose, as she aimlessly drifts through each day secluding herself from friends and family. Anna searches for a reason as to why she feels this way: perhaps it is the depression that came after her grandparents were tragically killed, or maybe



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

1. Select your finest fiction published between October 2016 and September 2017. You are limited to five titles from each imprint.
2. Send five copies of each nominated title to our selection committee chair at 16211 Oxford Ct., Bowie, MD 20715. CLEARLY mark the package and each book with "Top Shelf Entry."
3. Be sure the committee receives your books as early as possible, but no later than July 31, 2017.
4. Winning selections will be featured in the next edition of Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers, an annotated booklist, in the February 2018 issue of VOYA.
5. Refer procedural inquiries to VOYA Editor-in-Chief RoseMary Ludt by e-mail to rhonnold@voyamagazine.com.

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

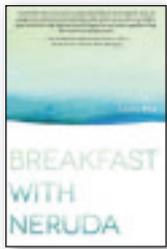
SELECTION CRITERIA APPLIED FOR TOP SHELF FICTION 2016

- Themes and subject matter are of particular interest to readers aged eleven through thirteen or in grades six through eight.
- Titles have special appeal to this age group both as outstanding companions to middle school curriculum and as free reading choices.
- Fiction books published between October 2015 and September 2016 were eligible.
- The final list reflects the geographic, ethnic, racial, intellectual, and economic diversity of North American middle school readers.
- The final list reflects top quality in books for middle school readers—"best" books that stand out among the rest, that take old plots and make them new and original, and that have something different to say and say it well.
- The list is limited to thirty titles or fewer.

she has always been this way deep down inside. Each chapter alternates between the perspectives of Anna, her mother, and her best friend, Aliya, letting readers know that Anna's thoughts of depression and her suicide attempts affect not only one person, but those people who love that person as well.

Usually, audiences find stories about depression and suicide related to high school bullying and the result of being an outcast. Anna's story fits neither of these, which makes it unique. Although society often wants to point a finger of blame at someone or something, there are times when there is no reason behind feelings of detachment and depression. Anna's narrative helps readers understand that it is okay to ask for help. Anna's mother's and Aliya's narratives help make sense of mental illness from an outsider's perspective. Suggest to upper-middle grade readers and above.

Moe, Laura. **Breakfast with Neruda**. Merit Press, 2016. 252p. \$17.99. 978-1-44059-219-5. VOYA June 2016.



Michael is forced to live out of his car because his mom's a hoarder and the house is unlivable. He lost both his girlfriend *and* his best friend when he discovered they were seeing each other behind his back. Who can blame him for attempting to blow up his friend's car? Unfortunately, he was caught, and the administrators believed he was targeting the

school. So, Michael's serving summer school detention. He's not alone though. He befriends Shelley but is worried that Shelley won't understand how crazy his mom is, or that it's worse for his little sister who is living on their back porch because the piles of garbage inside the house have forced her out. If Shelley finds out, what if she doesn't want him around? This is a real look into the devastating effects hoarding and family dysfunction can have in this refreshingly realistic fiction novel. Suggested for upper middle grade readers.

Nicholson, Lorna Schultz. **Born with Erika and Gianni**. Clockwise Press, 2016. 182p. \$12.95 Trade pb. 978-0-993-93517-6.

Erika and Gianni's story will capture readers' attention right from the start, as they are quickly thrown into the minds of a high school-age girl with Down syndrome and her "Best Buddy," Gianni, a boy who is afraid to come out to his friends and family about being gay. Through the Best Buddies program, these two students become friends.



Each chapter alternates between Erika's and Gianni's perspective which gives readers insight as to how each character sees a similar event differently depending upon their own personal situation. Their stories teach lessons about bullying and acceptance, insecurities and confidence, and the importance of true friendship. The difficulties that Erika and Gianni face are similar to those many middle and high school students face. Seeing how these characters deal with the issues will shed a hopeful and positive light on how to resolve tough situations.

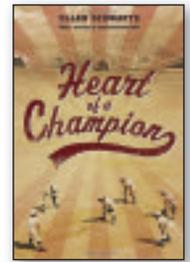
Peterson, Shelley. **Jockey Girl**. Dundurn, 2016. 318p. \$12.99 Trade pb. 978-1-4597-3434-0.



Evie's mother is dead and her father is often cruel. If it wasn't for Kazaam, a racehorse with whom she has a special bond, she wouldn't have much to live for. On her sixteenth birthday, she receives a birthday card from her great-aunt Mary who suggests that her mother is alive. Evie soon runs away with Kazaam to find Great-Aunt Mary and discover if her mother is alive. Mary is the loving family member Evie

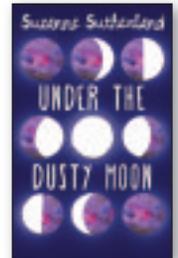
needs. They set off together to track down her homeless mother and restore Kazaam's reputation, so he can race in the Queen's Plate. Readers will appreciate Evie's complex family and enjoy the energy surrounding horse racing and Evie's enthusiasm.

Schwartz, Ellen. **Heart of a Champion**. Tundra, 2016. 258p. \$16.99. 978-1-77049-880-8.



Ten-year-old Kenny (Kenji) has a suspected heart condition which keeps him from playing at school and with his talented brother on the baseball field. Kenny dreams of the day he too can try out for the Asahi. Against his mother's wishes, Kenny starts to build upon that dream, secretly beginning his baseball training. When the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor, everything changes. Schools are closed, businesses are shut down, and the Japanese community is broken apart. The Canadian government separates Kenny's family, sending his father to labor camps while Kenny, his brother, and mother are sent to internment camps. Through all this, when Kenny discovers a field, he sees the potential to lift the spirits of the internment community. Kenny is a well-developed character with whom readers will find it easy to relate. **Heart of a Champion** is a wonderful book to read while studying WWII and a great introduction to the plight of the Japanese in North America at that time.

Sutherland, Suzanne. **Under the Dusty Moon**. Dundurn, 2016. 272p. \$14.99 Trade pb. 978-145973-202-5.



Being the daughter of Micky Wayne isn't easy for Vic Maher. Vic loves her mom, but doesn't love her alter ego, Micky Wayne. Once people find out who her mom is, Vic gets lost in the shadow of her once-famous rock star mother. When her mom heads to Japan to try to revitalize her career, Vic is sent to stay with her distant grandmother for the summer. A summer without Micky Wayne leads to discovering love, repairing her relationship with her grandmother, and eventually finding herself. But what happens when Micky Wayne returns? Will everything change?

"The perfect combination of humor, romance, friendship, family, and finding your true self."—Hellen M., grade 8

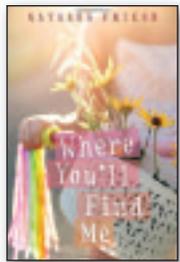
FRIENDSHIPS

Fitzgerald, Sarah Moore. **The Apple Tart of Hope**. Holiday House, 2014. 154p. \$16.95. 978-0-8234-3561-6.



"My ability was being able to smell things in the air, heavy things full of longing. Those smells were my sign that it was time to get baking." Fourteen-year-old Oscar Dunleavy bakes apple tarts, delicious layers of warm pastry that enclose perfectly sliced apples and doses of hope. Oscar goes missing one day and is presumed dead. Meg, his best friend who has moved, comes back from across the world to attend his funeral and learns that his bike was found at sea, past the pier. While everyone assumes it was a suicide, Meg refuses to believe this and seeks answers. What follows is an interesting two-voice narrative between Meg and Oscar, in which both reflect on how they arrive at this point and highlight the doubts, insecurities, and worries that characterize teenagers today. Readers will enjoy the back-and-forth, interwoven narratives and see that friendship with a dash of hope is quite resilient in times of despair. Suggest to upper-middle grade readers and above.

Friend, Natasha. **Where You'll Find Me.** Farrar Straus Giroux, 2016. 272p. \$16.99. 978-0-37430-230-6. VOYA February 2016.



In this heartbreaking realistic fiction novel, Anna learns about the pain of losing your best friend, mother (to a mental health hospital), and father (to a new, much younger stepmother) all at once. When Dani decides she doesn't want to be best friends with Anna anymore, Anna accepts it at first. But as her

life becomes more chaotic (she must go live with her father, stepmother, and new baby half-sister), she begins to miss having a friend to talk to about her so-called "life crisis." Without Dani, Anna feels utterly alone. She now sits with new, weird friends at lunch, but they can't understand what she's going through. Anna's mother isn't even in her life right now, not since Anna found her passed out in her bed after taking a bottle of pills. Through new friends and unexpected allies, she learns she *can* overcome this difficult point in her life. The book deals with some heavy issues (divorce, suicide and depression, love/acceptance, and relationships) in a light, relatable way, and readers will empathize with Anna.

Glosser, Dean. **Dessert First.** Merit Press, 2016. 304p. \$17.99 978-1-4405-9454-0. VOYA December.



Kat's twelve-year-old brother "Beep" is dying from leukemia. Kat is fighting with her sister, losing friends, dealing with slipping grades, and being terrified for Beep. She is most worried that the bone marrow transplant won't work on Beep. To stay strong, she connects with an online friend, Hunter, who is also fighting cancer, and relies on good friend, Evan, whom she knows wants to be more than just friends. **Dessert First** is about coping, forgiveness, and learning to trust. Fans of realistic fiction, like John Green's **The Fault in Our Stars** (Penguin, 2012/VOYA April 2012) will love this one.

Recommend for upper-middle grade readers and above.

Nelson, Colleen. **Finding Hope.** Dundurn Press, 2016. 232p. \$12.99 Trade pb. 978-1-459-73245-2.



This narrative is more than a story about teen drug abuse. It details the lives of Hope Randall and her older brother, Eric, whose parents kick him out of the house when he takes advantage of their second chances and continues to use meth. Alternating chapters provide the perspectives of both characters, each dealing with various conflicts including cliques of cruel girls and the

reasons Eric started using drugs in the first place. Readers will find that, despite these challenges, the bond between a brother and sister is a hard one to break.

Drug abuse, homelessness, sexual assault, loss, and bullying are heavy subjects for one novel, but are unfortunately relevant to what middle and high school audiences face. Other themes of sibling friendship, unconditional love, and using writing as a coping mechanism are predominant throughout the novel. The plot is fast-paced and full of tension, which will keep readers engaged throughout the story to the end. Recommend to upper-middle grade readers and above.

Ribay, Randy. **An Infinite Number of Parallel Universes.** Merit Press, 2015. 240p. \$17.99. 978-1-4405-8814-3.



Every week since sixth grade, four friends have met to play Dungeons and Dragons. It is an escape into a fantasy world where they

TOP OF TOP SHELF

Bayard, Louis. **Lucky Strikes.**

Fans of plucky female protagonists who are at their best when the odds are against them will enjoy seeing underdog Amelia Hoyle navigate her way with the unfortunate cards she has been dealt.



Glosser, Dean. **Dessert First.**

Kat's younger brother is dying; Kat is fighting with her sister, losing friends, earning bad grades, and being terrified for her brother. To cope, she turns to the Internet and friends. Fans of **The Fault in Our Stars** will love this.



Moe, Laura. **Breakfast with Neruda.**

Michael is forced to live out of his car because his mom's a hoarder and the house is unlivable. Michael's serving summer school detention. He befriends Shelley but worries that if she finds out how crazy his mom is, she won't want him around. The devastating effects hoarding and family dysfunction can have are revealed in this refreshingly realistic fiction novel.



Nicholson, Lorna Schultz. **Born with Erika and Gianni.**

A high school girl with Down syndrome and her Best Buddy, who is afraid to come out, become friends and learn to deal with bullying and insecurities while learning about friendship and acceptance.



Towle, Ben. **Oyster War.**

An historical story about a town where oysters are the staple of the economy. Fighting pirates and magic fill the pages of this graphic novel.



Wittlinger, Ellen. **Local Girl Swept Away.**

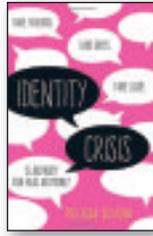
A mystery about a best friend's death at sea, this is Jackie's story about learning to live without her best friend and finding out about the mysterious disappearance which just might come back to haunt her.



can avoid their day-to-day problems and worries. Now they are going to be seniors and they are finding that it is not as easy as it once was to avoid reality. Archie's parents are getting a divorce and he is moving to live with his dad. Mari's adopted mother is really sick and wants her to consider meeting her biological mother. Dante is gay and dealing with telling his friends and family. Sam's longtime girlfriend has broken up with him and

is moving to Seattle. The friends go on a cross-country road trip where they learn to face their problems and discover the importance of friendship.

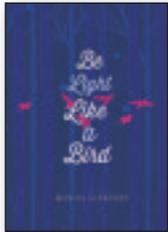
Schorr, Melissa. **Identity Crisis**. Merit Press, 2016. 240p. \$17.99 978-1-4405-9013-9. VOYA April 2016.



Annalise is dealing with the backlash of a group of mean girls. They take to the Internet and disguise themselves as a super-fan of Annalise's favorite rock band, Brass Knuckles. Soon, Annalise and the disguised fan, Declan, become fast friends. She shares intimate details about her troubles with the mean girls and one of them, Noelle, soon discovers the truth about the ring leader's lies about her relationship status. Annalise makes plans to meet Declan and shortly after discovers the truth about what has been going on. The tables turn, and she sets them up hoping for revenge of her own. Readers interested in drama, love triangles, bullying, and revenge will eat this one up. Suggest to upper-middle grade readers and older.

"This story was absolutely amazing! I love how the author switches points of view with each chapter. It is so great that I really hope the author writes a part two. This is now one of my favorite books!" -Kaylee M., grade 8

Schroder, Monika. **Be Light Like a Bird**. Capstone, 2016. 240p. \$14.95. 978-1-62370-749-1. VOYA October 2016.



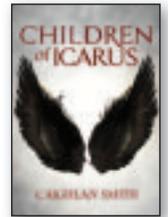
Wren's father dies in a freak flying accident and her distraught mother can't stop moving them from place to place. Wren just wants to deal with the grief and move on, but her mother can't seem to overcome her anger. Wren needs to make friends and get back to bird-watching (the hobby Wren and her father shared). When

she discovers her new town has a beautiful pond teeming with nature, she decides to make her mother stay here at any cost. Things are going ok-ish at school (her new friend Theo has her back), but there is one girl, Carrie, whose father owns a landfill and wants to cover beautiful Pete's Pond with trash. Wren knows she needs to stand up for what she believes in. This

book gives readers hope in a greater good and talks about issues like death, grief/forgiveness, and public action. Recommend to readers ages eleven to fourteen.

"This book made me tear up, laugh, smile, and at some points, gasp. This book fits people who love sensitive topics and heart-warming events." -Maria R., grade 8

Smith, Caighlan. **Children of Icarus**. Switch/Capstone, 2016. 312p. \$16.95. 978-1-63079-057-8. VOYA August 2016.



Every year children are chosen to complete the labyrinth. Those who are chosen are special and many wonderful things await them there. Those who make it to the end of the labyrinth will enter the glorious land of the angels, called Allysia, and become angels themselves. But not everything is as it seems—the labyrinth holds many secrets and dangers, and once they enter the labyrinth they can't return home. The deeper they venture into the labyrinth, the darker and more treacherous it becomes. Friends become enemies and enemies become friends. Will anyone be able to make it out alive?

Wittlinger, Ellen. **Local Girl Swept Away**. Merit Press, 2016. 270p. \$17.99. 978-1-4405-8900-3. VOYA August 2016.



3Q 4P J S

How do you recover from losing your best friend? Being best friends with Lorna has been the highlight of Jackie's life. She lives in Lorna's shadow and is happy there. Lorna is wild, impulsive, and charismatic, making Jackie's mundane life seem much more exciting. Everything changes one stormy day, when Lorna is swept off to sea while walking on the breakwater during a storm. Despite search-and-rescue efforts, Lorna is never found and declared legally dead. Jackie must learn to live without her best friend and figure out who she is without her. Jackie turns to photography and Finn, her long-time crush and Lorna's former boyfriend, to cope with her grief and loneliness. Just when she thinks she can move on with her life and possibly have a relationship with Finn, questions about Lorna's mysterious disappearance come back to haunt her. ■

MEET THE COMMITTEE

Jackie Jarrell is a literacy coach at Lindale Middle School in Linthicum Heights, Maryland. She enjoys finding ways to support content area literacy practices. For eleven years, she has worked as a national board certified language arts teacher to inspire students to see texts as mirrors and windows into their reality and the world. She is relishing the joys and wonders that life with a toddler brings each day. Her other loves are YA science fiction and fantasy books and movies, video games, 90s hip hop, the *Hamilton* soundtrack, and exploring California.

Deirdre Lunn is a certified school library media specialist at Corkran Middle School in Glen Burnie, Maryland. She has the most important job in the world—bringing the pleasure of reading to young, impressionable minds. When not teaching information literacy and technology skills, she is relaxing at home with her husband and dog, Bea Arthur. She also enjoys fine dining, traveling, hiking, the works of John Irving, rugby, brie, and chocolate.

Andrea Sporre is the school library media specialist at Glen Burnie High School and was a middle school teacher for ten years before moving into the library. When she is not busy reading to her baby, she loves young adult fiction, all things Baltimore (Go O's!), listening to garage rock, and trying out new foods.

DeAnna Stalnaker is a school librarian in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, at Chesapeake Bay Middle School. She spends most of her time watching her boy/girl twins on the sports field, reading, and (when she is feeling motivated) running. She loves that she gets paid to talk about books and encourage middle schoolers to love reading.

Lauren Straub, formerly a middle school teacher, currently teaches ninth and tenth grade English and coaches volleyball at Northeast High School in Anne Arundel County, Maryland. Her latest obsession over post-apocalyptic fiction has *almost* made her consider becoming a Doomsday Prepper. Besides teaching, reading, and finishing her administration certification, she spends time with her new best friend—a black Labrador retriever puppy named Manny.

Lona Trulove, committee chair, is a former middle school teacher and literacy coach. She is currently a county resource teacher for middle school language arts. She is working on her dissertation proposal in hopes of analyzing Black Eyed Susan winners over the past years. When not studying or writing for her doctoral program, she enjoys reading, fishing, knitting, and spending time with her grandchildren.