



Natalie's Book Recs

December Newsletter

Season's Greetings and Virtual Hugs

Merry Christmas everybody! Or in Texas speak, Merry Christmas y'all!

A few months ago, one of my wonderful sisters-in-law suggested that I start writing monthly recommendations for books. (Thanks Megan!) Not only did this sound like a really fun idea, but it also sounded like a great way to keep in touch.

. . . So, after a little brainstorming, here's my first one! I've read ~200 books this year, and I'm excited to share some of my favorite children and teen fiction with some of my favorite people.

XOXO

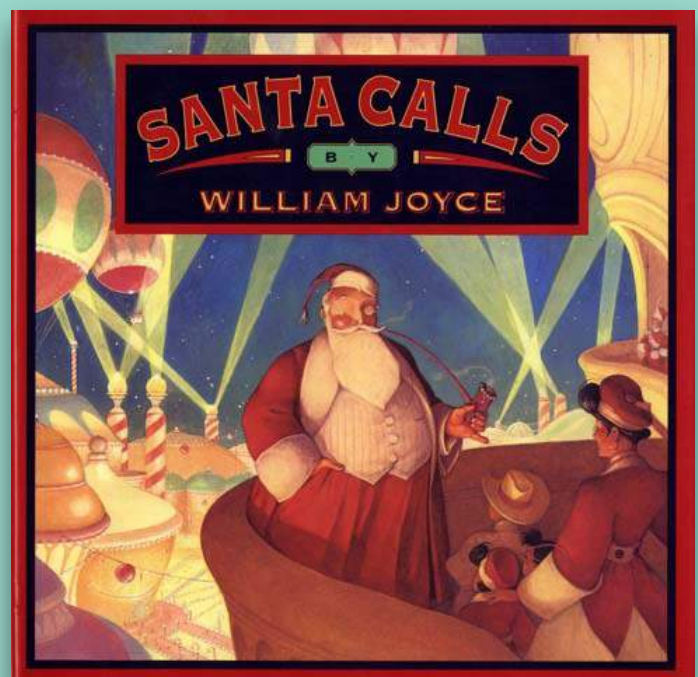
Natalie Tate

P.S. I know that I don't yet have any kiddos of my own, but I've tried to think like kid Natalie would when making book decisions. P.P.S. I'd *love* to hear any suggestions you have for future newsletters.

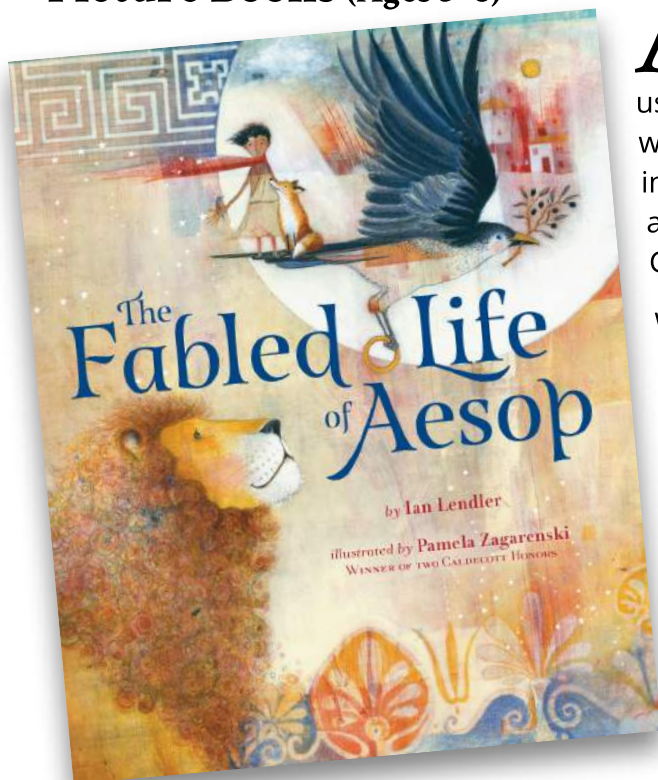
Before you get reading, I should probably tell you a little bit about the layout. I've split this newsletter into three parts:

- **picture books** (for ages 3–8), found on pages 2 and 3,
- **middle grade reads** (for ages 8–12), found on pages 4 and 5, and
- **young adult reads** (for ages 13+), found on pages 6 and 7.

And since this is a December newsletter, I'll also leave you with my favorite picture book for Christmastime. I used to wonder why my mom always cried at the end. Now I cry too.



Picture Books (Ages 3–8)

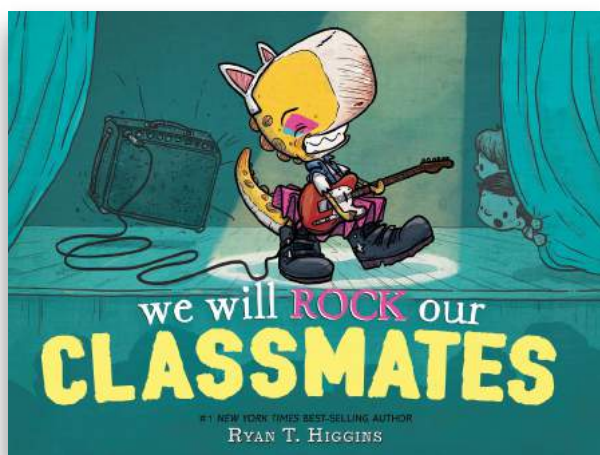
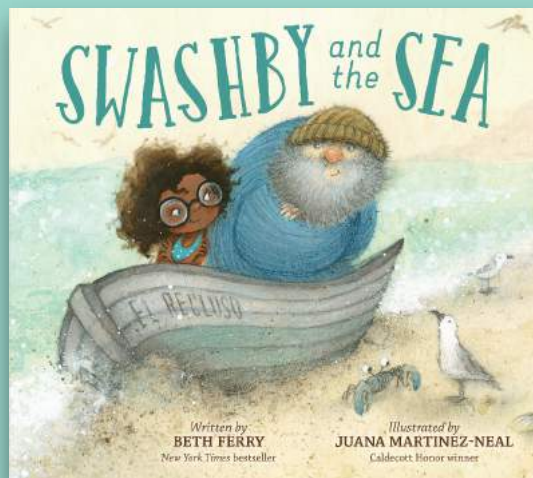


As a slave growing up in ancient Greece, Aesop learns to use his storytelling to communicate truth to others—a skill which ultimately helps him earn his freedom. The book includes many of Aesop's famous fables including *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, *The Lion and the Mouse*, and *The Goose and the Golden Egg*.

What makes *The Fabled Life* my favorite picture book of the year is that, while I'd read many of Aesop's fables growing up, this book is also a biography of Aesop himself, and his story was fascinating to read! Plus, the illustrations are really phenomenal. No wonder Zagarenski has already been a Caldecott Honor winner . . . twice!

Parents should know that this is a *really, really* long picture book—64 pages long, to be exact. Luckily, there are plenty of natural stopping places . . . if you can resist the temptation to turn just one more page! The publisher recommends this book for ages 4 and up, but 6 and up might be a better estimate.

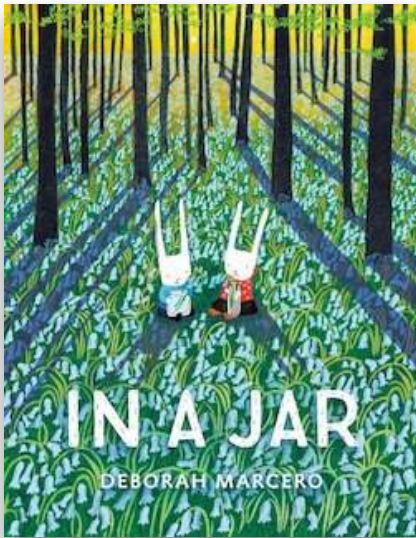
Captain Swashby has always lived alone. *Always*. So when a grandmother and granddaughter duo move in next door, Swashby writes them some slightly inhospitable sand messages, hoping they'll catch his drift and fish for a new home somewhere else. But the ocean knows that underneath all his crabbiness, Swashby is a lonely old sailor who is in need of some friends, so it washes away a few words here and a few letters there to make the messages a little more welcoming to the new neighbors. Funny, warm, and delightful, this book put a smile on my face.



Penelope the T. Rex loves her all-human classroom, but there are some things she doesn't love so much, like *always* being asked to play the T. Rex at recess—like, why can't she play the dentist sometimes? So when the school talent show comes around, Penelope decides to break out of the mold by playing her favorite rock music . . . but will her friends laugh at her when they learn she loves to rock? Zany, with lots of laughs, this book is about having the courage to be true to yourself.

Picture Books

Llewellyn loves to collect the beautiful pieces of nature in his jars: heart-shaped rocks, feathers, and shells. So when he meets another bunny, Evelyn, who likes to collect things in jars too, the bunnies become fast friends. The two begin catching incredible things in their jars: rainbows, the sound of the ocean, the colors of a sunset. But when Evelyn has to move away, Llewellyn isn't sure if he'll be able to keep in touch with his best friend. An original concept, warm colors, and a beautiful friendship make this one a great read.



Born with freakishly long arms, Bernard doesn't realize he's different than the other birds until he's old enough to fly. It's only then that he realizes that birds with freakishly long arms have an unusually hard time getting off the ground. But even though Bernard can't fly, his long arms make him especially good at something—giving hugs! This book is a pleasant mix of bizarre and adorable, and has an original format that lends itself best to reading a physical copy.



This picture book is a great introduction to lyrical prose. It's a love letter to the outside world and the pieces of outside that live inside us, even when we're indoors. Our clothes are from outside, "once puffs of cotton," and we feel a piece of outside in "the warm weight of our cats and the rough fur of our dogs." This book doesn't have much of a plot and it's not for every kid, but if you're looking for calming, peaceful prose, illustrations, and atmosphere, this book is it.

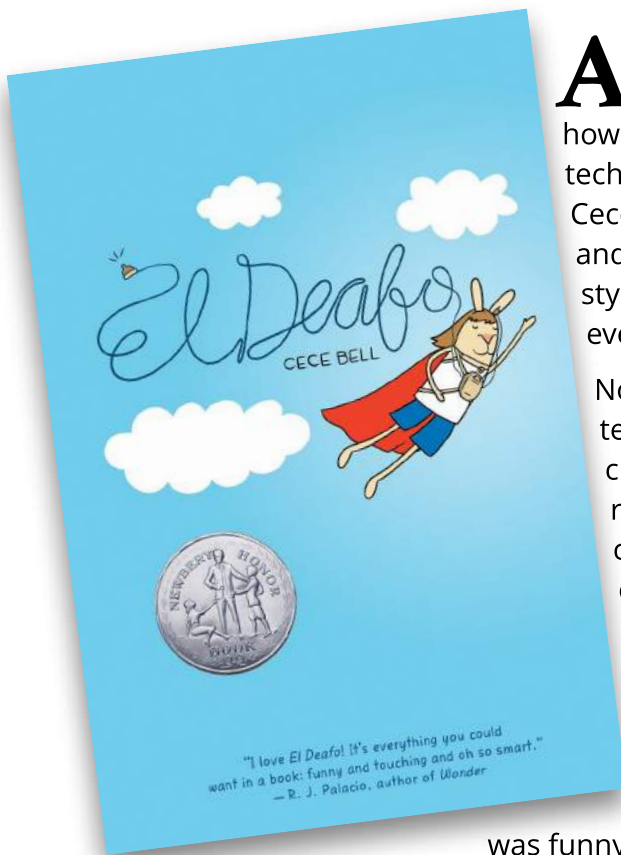


Honorable Mentions

These ones didn't quite hit the top six list for me, but were still solid reads:

- ▶ *The Oldest Student: How Mary Walker Learned to Read* (Rita Hubbard)
- ▶ *Honeybee: The Busy Life of Apis Mellifera* (Candace Fleming)
- ▶ *My Best Friend* (Julie Fogliano)
- ▶ *Overground Railroad* (Lesa Cline-Ransome)
- ▶ *Wild Symphony* (Dan Brown)—I suggest downloading the app that goes with this one. Dan Brown has composed a song for each animal which makes reading the book extra fun. His illustrator has also drawn a secret code into the pages for observant readers to crack!

Middle School Picks (Ages 8–12)

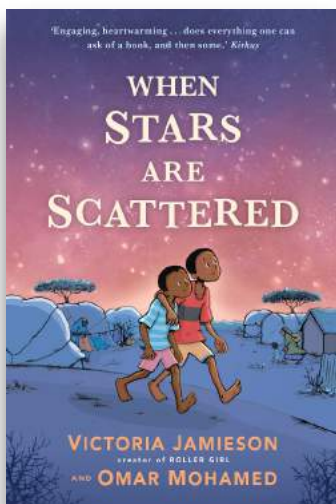
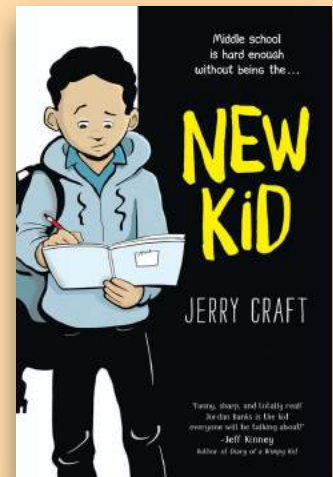


After Cece loses her hearing at four years old, she has to re-learn how to communicate. She uses hearing aids and lip reading techniques and goes to a school for kids just like her . . . until now. Cece doesn't like going to school as the only kid with hearing aids, and her teachers have a hard time accommodating their teaching style to meet her needs. But after Cece gets a new Phonic Ear, everything is fixed! Kind of.

Now Cece is the heroine of the classroom, El Deafo. Since her teacher forgets to turn her hearing aid off when she leaves the classroom, Cece can warn her classmates when the teacher is returning. It's like a new superpower and it makes Cece the center of attention in a good way (finally)! But lots of her classmates don't seem to understand how to interact with Cece, and she often feels left out and alone. Will El Deafo ever find a real friend?

This book is my favorite middle-grade book of the year and possibly *ever*. It changed my mind about graphic novels (which I may have snubbed a little unfairly before reading *El Deafo*). It was funny, it was relatable, and it taught me what it's like to be a deaf person in a hearing world. I can't recommend this autobiography enough.

Jordan loves to draw. He loves to draw so much, in fact, that he proposes that his parents pay for him to go to art school. No such luck. Instead, Jordan's parents send him to a prestigious middle school known for its rigorous academics. Unfortunately, along with squashing Jordan's dreams for art school, his new school lacks diversity. Jordan is one of the few kids of color in his school and must learn how to navigate insensitivity from his peers and teachers and remain true to himself, all while making new friends, navigating new crushes, and keeping up his drawing game. Funny, smart, and informative, this is a book that everyone should read. Its sequel, *Class Act*, was released in October.



Omar lives in Dadaab, a refugee camp in Kenya. In fact, he's spent most of his life in Dadaab after fleeing war-torn Somalia with a kindly neighbor. Every day, he watches for his mother among the new refugees, waits in a long line for his daily water supply, and tries to keep his nonverbal younger brother, Hassan, entertained and out of trouble. Omar knows that there's a school in the giant refugee camp, but decides it's more important to keep his brother safe than go off to school without him.

But when his adopted mother and a caring camp leader make it possible for Omar to go to school, he begins to dream big—so big that he begins to hope to find his name on "The List" and relocate with Hassan to a new home, maybe even in America. Based on the true story of Omar Mohamed, this book is an important and honest look into the lives of refugees.

Middle School Picks

Humanity is in trouble. After warfare has made planet Earth completely uninhabitable, 2,400 people make it to Mars and set up camp. But the food and water supply is dwindling. In desperation, they send out a message to the aliens. Luckily, the giant, mosquito-like Zhuri species receive the message and agree to allow the humans safe refuge on planet Choom. But when the humans arrive, they learn that the Zhuri have changed their minds—humans are too violent. They'll have to find a home somewhere else.

Without any more fuel, though, leaving is out of the question. Lan decides to volunteer to go to Choom to show the Zhuri that humans are nonthreatening, along with pop star sister Ila and Mom and Dad. But can the Mifune family convince the Zhuri to let humans stay on Choom when the entire planet seems set against them?

With so much at stake, it's hard to imagine that this book could be funny, but narrator Lan makes the story into a really entertaining science-fiction adventure with themes that inspire real-life empathy.



Merci is going into sixth grade this year and it's nothing like she expected. When she is asked to be the "sunshine buddy" of the new boy in school, her classmate Edna becomes jealous. Subtle but hurtful bullying ensues. On the home front, Merci's grandfather, Lolo, has begun acting a little strange. One day he'll be completely normal, and the next he'll forget where he is. Merci is confused and more than a little bit worried about Lolo, but the rest of her Cuban American extended family refuses to admit that something is wrong. Can Merci still save this year from disaster?

This book is an incredible 355 pages, much longer than the average middle grade story. It's a slice-of-life contemporary and its plot meanders. But, despite the page count, this book never feels long-winded. Medina has written a wonderful character in Merci—someone funny, kind, and brave that you can't help but cheer on.

Honorable Mentions

This year, I read so many other great middle grade books that there's not enough room to mention them all. Here are just a few more:

- ▶ *The One and Only Ivan* (Katherine Applegate)—Based on the true story of one incredible gorilla
- ▶ *Prairie Lotus* (Linda Sue Park)—A Chinese American *Little House on the Prairie*-esque tale
- ▶ *When You Reach Me* (Rebecca Stead)—Is someone traveling through time to leave Miranda clues?
- ▶ *Because of Mr. Terrupt* (Rob Buyea)—The touching story of a classroom brought together by loss
- ▶ *The Crossover* (Kwame Alexander)—A basketball tale told in verse

Young Adult Picks (Ages 13+)



Aphrodite and Ares meet for a secret tryst in a New York hotel room and, as is typical of the Greek myth, are quickly caught by Aphrodite's jealous husband, Hephaestus. In a plea to convince Hephaestus of the reality of love and to appease his angry heart, Aphrodite tells the story of two pairs of lovers caught in the throes of World War I.

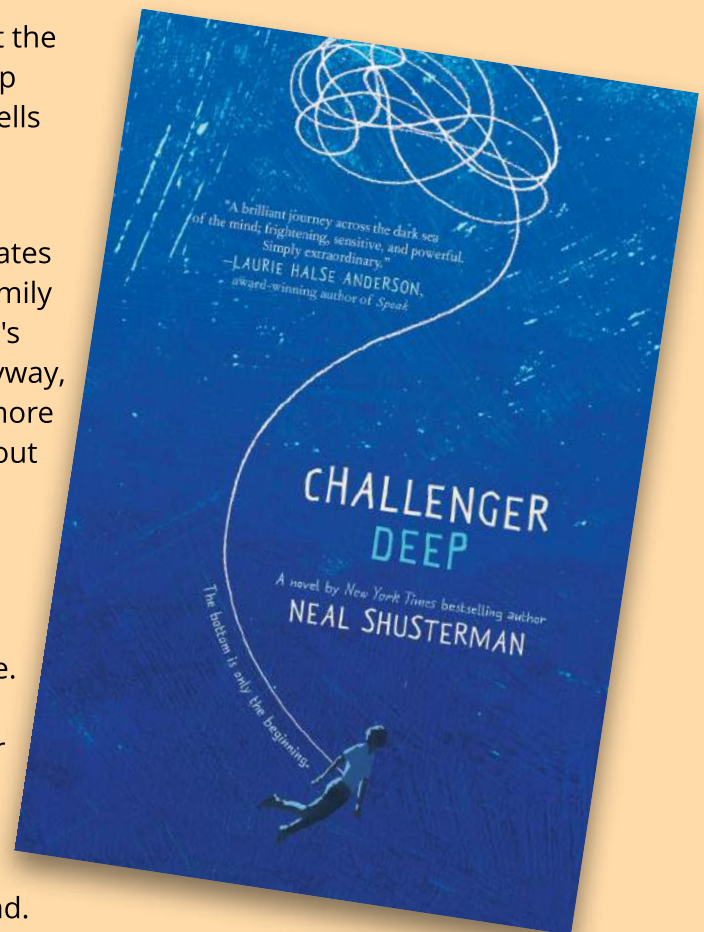
The first pair, Hazel and James, meet in London at a dance just before James is sent to the trenches. The second pair, Aubrey and Colette, meet at a training base in France—Colette a YMCA volunteer and Aubrey a Harlem music man and member of the 15th New York Infantry. Soon, a wide cast of Greek gods and goddesses pitch in to tell their parts in the two stories and to decide once and for all which is the more powerful force: Is it War or is it Love?

I must admit, when I began this book, I was a little skeptical of the Greek myth storytelling frame. It was an . . . interesting (AKA completely weird) thing to do, I thought. But without spoiling the whole book, I will say that this decision only added depth to a truly beautiful set of love stories. This was, unquestionably, my favorite young adult novel this year.

Caden Bosch is an aspiring artist in high school, but at the same time, he's a crew member of *Challenger Deep*, a ship headed toward the Mariana Trench where The Captain tells Caden that he'll dive.

When high school Caden starts acting a little oddly, increasingly paranoid about the intentions of his classmates and unable to concentrate—even on his art—Caden's family begins to suspect that something is wrong. But in Caden's alternate seafaring world, everything is upside down anyway, and mutiny is imminent. As Caden becomes more and more embroiled in his illness both in the mental hospital and out at sea, his two universes begin to converge.

There is lots of mental health fiction written for young adults. Unfortunately, most of it seems to romanticize illness or end with some kind of cure that "fixes" the character permanently. This book makes neither mistake. Although the dual universes of Caden might seem strange at first, they are used to form a deep allegory for his mental illness and its impact on his life. I wasn't surprised when Neal revealed in the end notes that this story is based on the experiences of his own son, the book's illustrator. Deeply moving, this book is a must read.

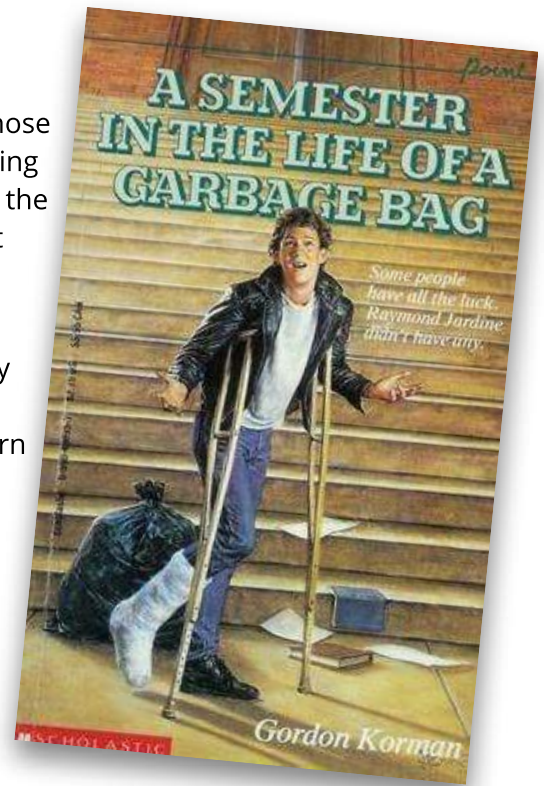


Young Adult Picks

Raymond Jardine has no luck at all. Zip. Zero. Zilch. He's like one of those garbage bags in the commercials, the ones that just keep mercilessly being stretched out. But he's convinced that if he can grab one of six spots for the school's summer trip to an exotic Greek island, his luck will change. That means he's got to get top grades this semester to set himself apart.

But when he's grouped with Sean Delancey, the school's basketball star, for a semester-long poetry analysis paper, Raymond knows that the only way they have any hope of getting an A is by picking an obscure poet that'll knock the socks off their English professor. And when the pair learn that Gunhold, the poet they picked, only wrote one poem and promptly died, they persuade Sean's grandfather to play the part of the deceased poet to save their skins and their grade. Hilarious hi-jinks ensue.

This book is from the 80s (which isn't surprising considering that cover!) and parts of it may feel a little outdated to current teenagers, but I haven't read such a lighthearted, downright funny book for young adults in a long time. I'm so glad I stumbled upon this gem.



Humanity has conquered hunger, disease, war, violence, misery, and even mortality. If it weren't for the tricky business of overpopulation, everyone would live forever. But because Earth's resources are limited, some people have to pass on, to be "gleaned," which also means that some people have to become gleaners. These gleaners are called scythes, chosen from among the best souls of humanity—those who least want the job.

When Rowan and Citra are chosen to be apprentices to Scythe Faraday, both candidates are appalled at the prospect of becoming scythes. Neither could imagine a worse fate—until some of the less savory scythes of the region get wind of Scythe Faraday's nontraditional methods. No one has trained two potential apprentices at the same time before, and breaking from tradition can come at a high cost. If Rowan and Citra fail at their apprenticeship, they might be let go . . . permanently. A heart-pounding thriller that will have readers guessing at every turn, *Scythe* is a thought experiment about immortality without perfection.

Honorable Mentions

Unfortunately, I wasn't very impressed with most of the young adult books that I read this year. Here are a few others I enjoyed:

- ▶ *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* (Jason Reynolds)
- ▶ *Lifting As We Climb: Black Women's Battle for the Ballot Box* (Evette Dionne)
- ▶ *1919 The Year That Changed America* (Martin W. Sandler)
- ▶ *Patron Saints of Nothing* (Randy Ribay)—A Filipino American sets out to uncover his cousin's murder
- ▶ *The Passion of Dolssa* (Julie Berry)—A girl tries to protect her miracle-making friend from the Crusaders