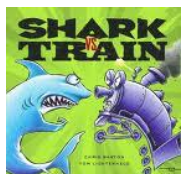


April gives us many reasons to celebrate, among them the return of green grass and flowers. The logo for National Library Week features a plant growing from a watering can, another nod to the gardening theme. Earth Day celebrations on April 22 also highlight the need for ecological awareness. Although some of the titles included in this issue of Book Notes relate to gardening and the environment, all the books represent selections of our favorite fiction and nonfiction volumes that have arrived in recent months. Later in April we'll be taking part of the CCYAB on the road to showcase 120 titles from 2010 at Spotlight on Books in Grand Rapids. Be sure to look for our display if you're attending that conference or stop by our entire collection next time you're in Mankato.

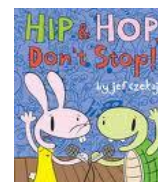
### Picture Books

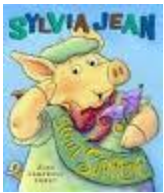
With the whole family busy preparing for the Cinco de Mayo celebration in San Antonio, Elena forgets to close the cage of her parrot Perico. The curious bird is anxious to help in some way and uses his new phrase, "Let me help!" as he travels from one place to another, searching for how he can contribute. No one wants him to make tamales or tissue paper flowers. He can't braid hair or play music in the mariachi number. After many unsuccessful attempts, he finally discovers a way he can join the family's barge as it floats down the river. Alma Flor Ada shares Perico's story in *Let me Help! Quiero Ayudar!*, a bilingual picture book from Children's Book Press. Angela Dominguez's paintings draw readers into the festive celebrations of the Texan city.—KP



It's hard to imagine a more bizarre competition than what can result in *Shark vs. Train* (Little Brown). Chris Barton sets up the premise for the contest by having two boys select their favorite toys from their box and then conduct various challenges. Certain venues, such as the ocean or railroad tracks, clearly favor one over the other. But who will triumph at trick-or-treating, performing in a piano recital, or running a lemonade stand? The situations grow increasingly odd and intense until welcome relief appears in the call to lunch for the two human antagonists. Tom Lichtenheld's illustrations combine the right mix of possibility and wackiness to create a humorous book sure to please young readers.—KP

Jef Czekaj offers an interesting variation on the tortoise and hare rivalry in *Hip & Hop, Don't Stop!* (Hyperion) Hip (a turtle) and Hop (a rabbit) both live in Oldskool County. However, Hip and his friends in Slowjamz Swamp have nothing to do with the inhabitants of Breakbeat Meadow. In fact, the two groups exchange rumors about one another. Both Hip and Hop are great rappers, but each has a flaw. Hip rhymes so slowly that his listeners fall asleep while Hop's listeners have trouble deciphering his rapid speech. When a Rap-off country is announced, Hip and Hop meet each other and decide that they have a lot in common as they prepare for the competition. The contest pits them against one another, with results that bring together county residents in a jubilant dance party. The cartoon illustrations have a primitive quality reminiscent of grade school art and showcase Czekaj's great sense of humor. For even more fun, readers can follow the instructions to read Hip's rhymes (printed in red) as slowly as possible and Hop's green rhymes "fast fast fast."—KP

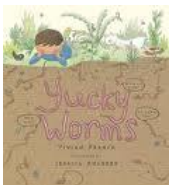




No one is more devoted to her Pig Scout troop than *Sylvia Jean, Scout Supreme* (Dutton). Lisa Campbell Ernst takes readers along as Sylvia Jean attempts to earn her latest merit badge, the Good-Deed Badge. All the other scouts easily come up with ideas about what they can do to achieve their goals. Enthusiastic as always, Sylvia Jean decides she will help her neighbor, Mrs. Van Hooven, an elderly pig who has sprained her ankle and can't walk.

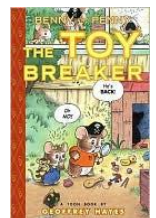
Unfortunately, her first encounter is such a disaster that the doctor calls Sylvia Jean's mother and orders the scout to stay away. "He says she's much too fragile for your kind of help." Determined to help anyway, Sylvia Jean dons a different disguise each day for shorter, calmer visits that really do help Mrs. Van Hooven recover. She can't figure out how so many new people have moved into the neighborhood until she finds a golden Pig Scout Snout pin on her floor. Will Sylvia Jean get the badge when she can't admit she has gone against doctor's orders? Ernst has turned out another winning, humorous picture book with engaging characters.—KP

Before Mr. Tate's class starts planting trees behind Oak Lane School, he encourages them to listen to the mature oak that grows there already. As they identify the various animals that live in its branches or depend on it in other ways, the children learn why *This Tree Counts!* (Albert Whitman) From one owl perching high above the ground to 10 earthworms burrowing in the soil around the tree's roots, the oak tree bustles with life. However, the tree's value extends beyond its role as animal habitat. Not only does it provide shade, but it also takes in dirty air and sends out oxygen. The children come up with a variety of benefits of trees, including many uses for wood they produce. Convinced of the need for additional trees in the field near the school, the class plants 10 more oaks. Alison Formento's story is a great choice to share as part of Earth Day or Arbor Day celebrations. Sarah Snow uses a variety of papers to create collage illustration by hand and digitally.—KP



As spring approaches and we watch patiently for our flowers to grow and bloom, it's good to learn about the small, wiggly creatures helping this process along. *Yucky Worms* by Vivian French not only provides a story of Grandma and grandson spending time together but also educates us on the anatomy and life of worms (Candlewick). As the story unfolds, Grandma discusses with her grandson just how helpful worms are to her garden. He finds out how dangerous a worm's life is, yet how important and appreciated they are by gardeners and plant life. His first reaction to his Grandma's introduction is "Yuck", but by the end of the story worms are his newest friends. What makes this story unique are the facts about the life of worms as well as the charming bubbles of worms talking to each other underground. Readers will gain a new appreciation of the worm community, and teachers will find this book a great resource for introducing soil and plant life. —GT

Benny and Penny return for another adventure. This time they have to figure out how to avoid playing with Cousin Bo, *The Toy Breaker* (TOON Books). While the two mice prepare for a day of following a treasure map to search for loot, they hear Bo's unwelcome voice. As quickly as possible, they hide all their toys to save them from Bo's destruction. Unfortunately, the few items that remain quickly fall victim to Bo's rough play, including Penny's beloved stuffed Monkey, which loses a leg. When Benny and Penny threaten to tell about Bo's antics, he taunts them by asking, "Are you going to tell your mommy?" After he needs help to get out of a tight spot, Bo and his cousins come up with a compromise: play without toys so nothing will get broken. Bo even apologizes for hurting Monkey. Geoffrey Hayes has come up with another humorous graphic novel for beginning readers, many of whom may have had experiences with someone like Bo.—KP



## Fiction



*Split* begins with the provocative sentence, “Now I have to start lying.” (Random House) Jace, the main character in Swati Avasthi’s debut novel, has run away from his abusive father and sought out his older brother—a runaway himself. Avasthi doesn’t shy away from the emotional damage their home life has caused the brothers or the fear that Jace in particular has that he will continue the cycle of spousal and family abuse. The characters are well-drawn, and the plot is fresh without being convoluted. Because there is some graphic description of abuse and the “good” characters (especially Jace) are far from perfect, this book does require a relatively mature reader. I would think carefully before recommending it to someone much younger than Jace’s age of 16. —HE

Will Halpin is a wonderful, unique character: flawed, funny and self-aware. While he may be the unpopular new kid, harboring a crush on the school beauty and wondering if he’ll ever fit in, he’s also overweight and deaf. When the school’s football star (and bully) dies during a class trip, Will and another unpopular kid with the handy ability to finger spell are on the case. Author Josh Berk uses lip-reading and finger spelling effectively to translate Will’s interactions with other characters onto the page. These elements, in turn, help the mystery plot along, as the reader catches bits and pieces of conversations, just like Will does. The resolution of the murder mystery itself is perhaps a little predictable, but the red herrings are fun and the original voice even better. *The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin* is sure to be enjoyed by readers who like sarcastic humor and characters who march to the beat of their own drummers (Random House).—HE

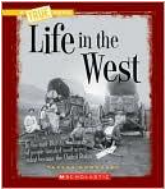


There are two main characters in Alison Lloyd’s historical novel *Year of the Tiger* (Holiday House). Hu comes from a desperately poor peasant family, while Ren is the privileged but neglected son of an army commander. Lloyd has chosen these two extremes and tends to develop the characters’ personalities along conventional class stereotypes: the funny and free-spirited peasant with innate skills but bad luck and the repressed, naïve rich kid. Still, she paints a believable picture of second century China, and there’s something very satisfying about the way the story lines of the two characters bounce off of each other and push each other onward. While in some respects the resolution of the story is rather neat—Ren finds just the documents needed to prove Hu’s innocence, Hu’s sister just happens to get the missing item needed for Ren’s father to believe him—at the same time, there are some nice ambiguities. Hu’s chance at a better life at the end is just that, a chance, and it is not without cost, and the villains basically get away without punishment. So although the story sometimes verges on melodrama, middle school readers will find it fun to read. —HE

*The Thirteenth Princess* by Diane Zahler resembles many other fairy-tales with its royal family, princes, witches, illusions, and magical happenings (HarperCollins). It is told through the eyes of one of the king’s servants, Zita. On her seventh birthday she learned of her true heritage as daughter to the king with twelve princess sisters. As more secrets are revealed to her, the more complicated the story gets surrounding the kingdom. Long ago the king banished all magic from his kingdom, but some strange witch’s curse plagues Zita’s sisters, and they are getting sicker by the day. She won’t let her newly found family be taken away from her. With the help of some interesting characters Zita embarks on a journey to find the truth and discovers friendship, love, and a strength she never knew. Zahler delivers a enchanting fairy-tale which keeps the reader truly engaged throughout its mounting surprises and unexpected climax. —GT

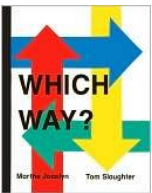


## Non-Fiction



A new collection of books in Scholastics' true book series revolves around our country's westward expansion and the development of the U.S. west of the Appalachian Mountains. *Life in the West* by Teresa Domnauer grabs the reader on its very first page by asking which statement from our country's history is true and which is false. She then leads into the reasons for the dangerous westward movement pioneers undertook. This collection of books will appeal to elementary readers because of its reading ease. Each chapter is laid out with clear titles, bolded terms, and periodic breaks for closer focus on historic people and events. Maps, illustrations, paintings, photographs, and other interesting graphics not only enhance understanding of the text, but also sustain interest in prominent events in history. Statistics, resources, places to visit, and a glossary close out this book and encourage further learning. Other titles related to this topic which go into greater detail include *Westward Expansion* also by Domnauer and *The Oregon Trail* by Mel Friedman. —GT

Even young children can take part in enriching earth's resources, as Linda Glaser explains in *Garbage Helps our Garden Grow* (Lerner). Accompanied by Shelley Rotner's photographs, the first-person narrative explains how a family produces compost for their garden. The process continues year round, as wilted flowers, cantaloupe rinds, jack-o-lanterns, grass clippings, and other items are added to a bin to be transformed. Bacteria break down the organic matter first, but other creatures such as earthworms help the decomposition process. In spring, the children help dig the finished compost into the garden before they plant the next crop. An added bonus of the process? Less garbage in landfills! Glaser points out that adults need to be involved in activities such as using rakes to turn material composting. She provides a section of questions and answers at the end of the book where readers can find out more about how to start and maintain a compost bin.—KP

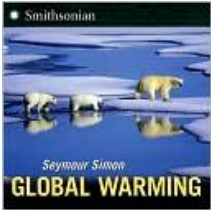


Author Marthe Jocelyn supplies the simple text that accompanies Tom Slaughter's graphic designs in primary colors to explore traffic signs and symbols that tell travelers *Which Way?* (Tundra) Basic shapes against bright backgrounds allow the book to be shared with small groups of children as well as individual listeners. They can identify various modes of transportation such as boat, airplane, taxi, bus as well as a variety of street signs. The trip takes viewers through a tunnel and over a bridge as they use a compass and map. This picture book would be a good choice to read before a trip to challenge children to look for various signs along the way or afterward for a review.—KP

Wangari Maathai won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her work in Kenya in starting the Green Belt Movement, an effort to reverse the deforestation and ecological destruction. Donna Jo Napoli's picture book for older readers, *Mama Miti*, depicts those efforts through personal encounters to solve one family's problem at a time (Simon & Schuster). She advises different women about which trees to plant to provide firewood, timber, animal feed, fruit, and other benefits. In every instance, she links the restoration of nature with the return of peace. Kadir Nelson's stunning illustrations capture the dignity of the people and the beauty of the restored landscape. The major component of the artwork is printed fabric to signify textiles of African cultures. He combines those colors and textures with painted hands and faces of women and children, whose dignity and hope resulted in profound environmental change.—KP



Dramatic photos of disappearing glaciers, dramatic floods, dying coral reefs, and stranded polar bears lend visual impact to Seymour Simon's explanation of *Global Warming* (HarperCollins). He explains the difference between weather and climate, noting that while not all areas of Earth increase in



temperature every season or every year, Earth's climate is changing rapidly. In fact, "nineteen of the twenty hottest years *ever* have happened since 1980." Scientific consensus exists that humans are responsible for a large part of this change. The fact that global warming affects Arctic regions directly is probably not surprising. However, Simon explains how melting ice has the potential to result in disastrous floods in many places. He notes that changing climate already has resulted in powerful storms and severe droughts. In fact, a primary message is the "climate change impacts all of us." He ends the volume with information about what people in some countries are already doing to slow environmental destruction and how individuals everywhere can take steps to use less energy. A basic but effective introduction to a complex topic.—KP

**Book Reviews written by:**

KP—Kathy Piehl, CCYAB Director

GT—Gretchen Turner, CCYAB Graduate Assistant pursuing a master's degree in Library Media Science

HT—Heather Elliot, a second year MFA student in Creative Writing

**Books Reviewed in this issue:**

Ada, Alma Flor. *Quiero Ayudar! Let Me Help!* Children's Book Press, 2010. ISBN 9780892392322. \$16.95.

Barton, Chris. *Shark vs. Train*. Little, Brown, 2010. ISBN 9780316007627. \$16.99.

Czekaj, Jef. *Hip & Hop Don't Stop!* Hyperion, 2010. ISBN 9781423116646. \$16.99.

Ernst, Lisa Campbell. *Sylvia Jean, Scout Supreme*. Penguin, 2010. ISBN 9780525478737. \$16.99.

Formento, Alison. *This Tree Counts*. Whitman, 2010. ISBN 9780807578902. \$16.99.

French, Vivian. *Yucky Worms*. Candlewick, 2010. ISBN 9780763644468. \$16.99.

Hayes, Geoffrey. *Benny and Penny in the Toy Breaker*. Toon Books, 2010. ISBN 9781935179078. \$12.95

Avasthi, Swati. *Split*. Random House, 2010. ISBN 9780375863400. 16.99.

Berk, Josh. *The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin*. Random House, 2010. ISBN 9780375856990. \$16.99.

Lloyd, Alison. *The Year of the Tiger*. Holiday House, 2010. ISBN 9780823422777. \$16.95.

Zahler, Diane. *The Thirteenth Princess*. HarperCollins, 2010. ISBN 9780061824982. \$15.99.

Domnauer, Teresa. *Life in the West*. Scholastic, 2010. ISBN 9780531205839. \$26.00.

Glaser, Linda. *Garbage Helps Our Garden Grow*. Lerner, 2010. ISBN 9780761349112. \$25.26.

Joceylyn, Marthe. *Which Way?* Tundra, 2010. ISBN 9780887769702. \$15.95.

Napoli, Donna Jo. *Mama Miti*. Simon & Schuster, 2010. ISBN 9781416935056. \$16.99.

Simon, Seymour. *Global Warming*. HarperCollins, 2010. ISBN 9780061142505. \$17.99.