



The NCTE 2016 Notable Verse Novel List

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The NCTE Excellence in Poetry for Children Award Committee disseminates two lists of recommended books each year, the Notable Poetry List and the Notable Verse Novel List. For those interested in the 2016 Notable Poetry List, we have included the 19 outstanding collections in the sidebar. This article focuses on the much debated but still popular verse novel.

Whether the verse novel is a new genre, a hybrid that crosses or blurs the boundaries between genre (Ward, Young, & Day, 2012), or a new format of storytelling (Sundberg, 2011), it usually has several typical features (Alexander, 2005):

- Use of non-rhyming free verse;
- Brief sections from less than one page to 2-3 pages;
- Titled sections indicating a speaker, content, or a core theme; and
- Sections crafted around a single perspective/voice or at times, multiple voices.

Sundberg (2011) adds several other features including strong use of white space, creative use of line breaks, and at times, creative punctuation, e.g., no caps or punctuation. These features are not always consistent or present, however. At times, authors use free verse and/or different poetic formats. Nikki Grimes used both free verse and haiku in *Words with Wings* (2013) selected to the 2014 Notable Verse Novel List while Chris Crowe uses haiku only in *Death Coming up the Hill* (2014) included in the 2015 Notable Verse Novel List. All the 2016 Notable Verse Novels are written in free verse only. Lastly, as Alexander (2005, p. 270) notes there is the question of "... distinguishing between a novel told in verse and a series of poems linked in a narrative sequence." In the deliberations for the 2016 Notable Verse Novel List, the NCTE Excellence in Poetry for Children Award Committee had a lively discussion about several books considering whether they were verse novels for younger children or a collection of poems that told a story. In the end, the Committee placed Engle's *Orang-*

utanka: A Story in Poems and Wardlaw's *Won Ton and Chopstick: A Cat and Dog Tale Told in Haiku* on the 2016 Notable Poetry List as shown in the sidebar.

Verse novels may be so popular today because they reflect the current digital/electronic revolution. Alexander argues that, "A new order has arrived in which the visual and aural imaginations are both active, with the future promising richer methods of eye and ear communication as the likely outcome of more affordable technologies, and with books reflecting these shifts" (Alexander, 2005, p. 270). She goes on to add, "Free verse accentuates the oral dimension. The writer is able to craft the verse as though orchestrating it for reading aloud. She can shape the rhythm, position the line-break so as to add emphasis, vary the pace through the line-length, or borrow and exploit poetic devices such as repetition, caesura and enjambment" (p. 271-271).

The following seven notable verse novels reflect a bit less diversity than the 2014 and 2015 Notable Verse Novel Lists. All the verse novels on the 2016 list are told through free verse with no other poetic formats used, and only one verse novel, *Blue Birds*, is told through more than one narrator. Still, each is an excellent example of this very popular storytelling format. A brief review of each book is provided as well as suggestions for curricular connections and additional books that could be paired with each verse novel.

The 2016 Notable Verse Novel List

Crowder, M. (2015). *Audacity*. New York: Philomel.

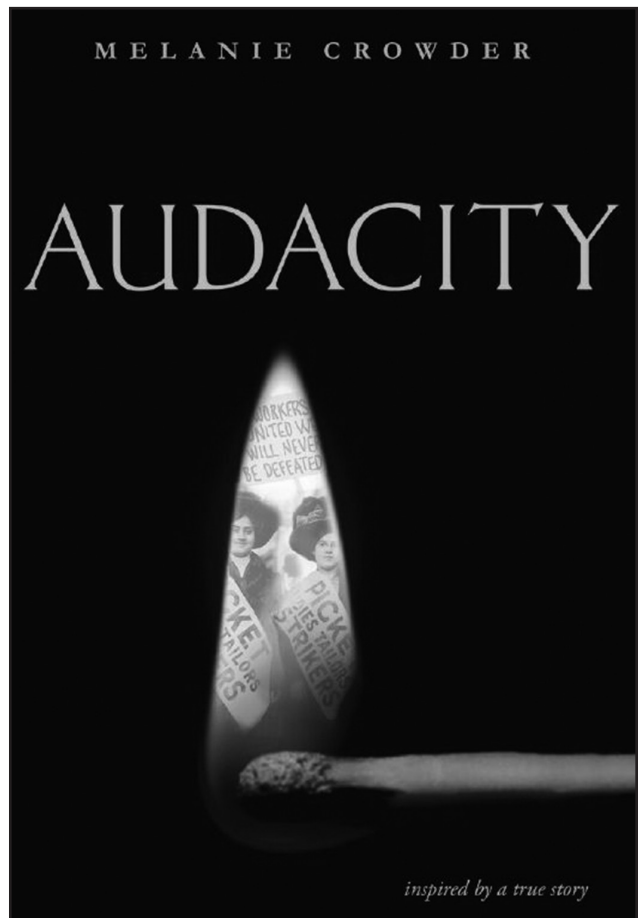
Book Review

Based on the true story of activist Clara Lemlich, this novel in verse focuses on the young leader's thoughts and actions as she fought for worker's rights in factories in the early 1900s in New York City. This accessible book is designed with plenty of whitespace, features strong characterization, and utilizes imagery to engage readers. Lemlich is portrayed as a brave leader and unionizer but the story also offers glimpses into her internal struggles and doubts as she negotiates the in-

tersections of gender, religion, culture, age, and class in her life. As an immigrant from Russia, a Jew, and a young girl, she could have been easily deterred. Instead, she persevered and believed in herself as described in the book: "Inside I am anything/ but fresh off the boat./ I have been ready for this/ possibility/ all my life." The book is organized chronologically capturing the different phases of Lemlich's life and thoroughly contextualizing both the history and the hero. Back matter includes historical notes, a glossary, and an interview with Lemlich's living relatives.

Curricular Connections

Audacity would easily fit with any unit of study on immigration, activism, or the history of women's rights. Students could compare the book portrayals of Lemlich through a character study and use research skills to search for primary sources. They might want to find out what jobs women were allowed to have throughout history. Comparing sources and information across books is ideal for developing critical think-



ing skills. Capstone Press even offers a graphic novel treatment of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in their “Disasters in History” series. Current events could be incorporated into a discussion of *Audacity* as readers consider today’s politics with regard to unions, worker’s rights, and immigration. Readers can also consider Lemlich’s life by making comparisons to their own. Have students explore identity through family trees or conducting oral histories with relatives to understand their personal connections to the immigrant experience in the United States.

Possible Books to Pair With *Audacity*

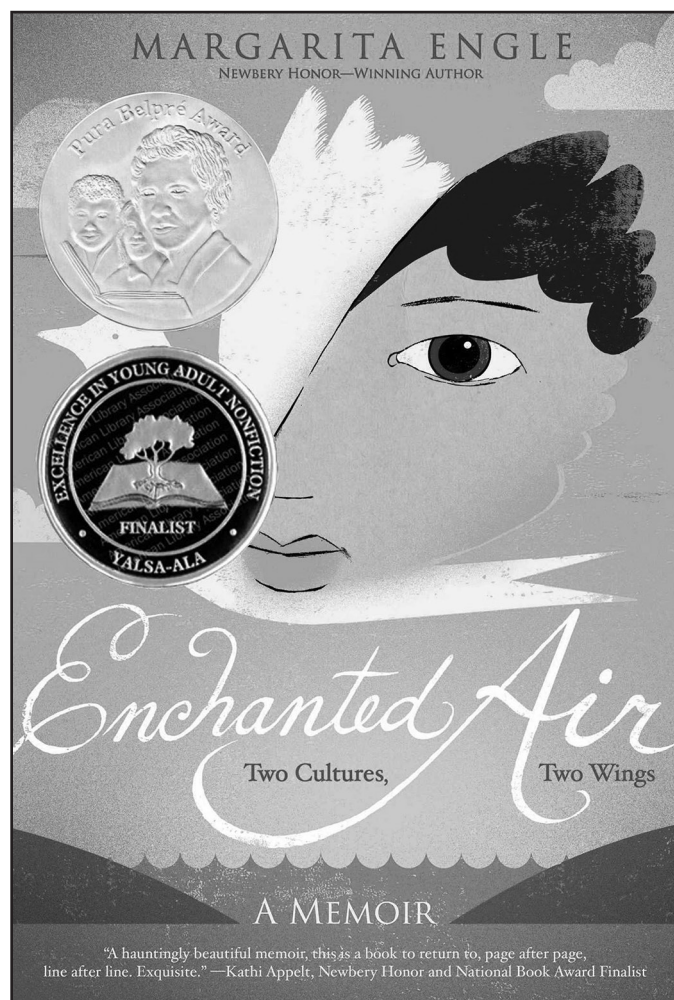
- *Brave Girl* (Markel, 2013) offers a picture book interpretation of Lemlich’s work with a focus on the Shirtwaist Makers’ strike of 1909.
- Marrin’s *Flesh and Blood So Cheap* (2011) chronicles the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in a more comprehensive informational format.
- *Counting on Grace* (Winthrop, 2006) tells another story of worker’s rights and a young activist during the same time period but in a textile mill in Vermont. This historical fiction piece offers further context on the history presented in *Audacity*.

Engle, M. (2015). *Enchanted air: Two cultures, two wings: A memoir*. New York: Atheneum.

Book Review

Engle offers a memoir in spare and sensitive free verse documenting the first fourteen years of her life, spanning 1951-1965, as a child of an American father and Cuban mother. As she alternates living with her beloved Abuelita and extended family in the “magical” Cuban countryside and her immediate family in Los Angeles, she tries to find her balance between two countries, two languages and two cultures. However, as the political relationships between Cuba and the US deteriorate in the late 1950s and early 60s and Engle enters her teen years, this bi-cultural balance becomes more challenging for her. When travel and trade between the US and Cuba is restricted as a

result of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Bay of Pigs invasion, Engle must figure out how to negotiate her feelings during this tumultuous time. The poems will resonate with those approaching or in the teen years with subjects such as coming to terms with family members, moving to a new house, finding new friends in a new school, experiencing first kisses, rebelling against parents, and discovering a love of books and libraries, to name a few. However, Engle also paints an accurate historical picture of what it was like to live through the Cold War paranoia in the US with poems that address the fear of nuclear war, bomb shelters, practice drills in school, and trying to make sense of the political crisis. By 1965, unable to visit Cuba any longer, Engle and her family travel to Europe for six months. It is on this trip that Engle seems to reconcile her feelings about bi-cultural families and politics during a stay in Spain; one of the last poems in the book, “My Second Wing” begins: “Poetry feels like one



wing/ of my mind's ability to travel/ away from
gloom./ Now, Spain has reminded me/ that oth-
er journeys/ are magical too./ I can love/ many
countries,/ not just two.”

Curricular Connections

Enchanted Air is an excellent model for writing or telling a memory from childhood using a free verse format.

- Discuss why an author would use free verse to write about memories.
- Using one of the poems as a model, discuss what emotions the author evokes through the careful word choices, line breaks, and poem length.
- Verse novels are an interesting trend in writing but there are not many verse memoirs. Discuss how verse novels and verse memoirs are similar/dissimilar.

Possible Books to Pair With *Enchanted Air*

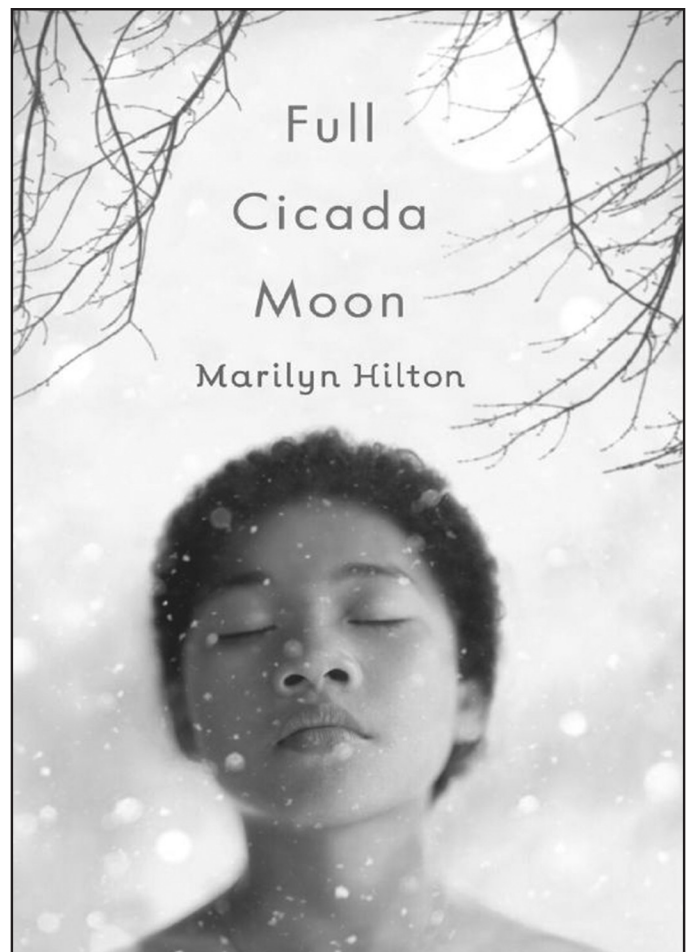
Two other “verse memoirs” about finding your place in the world and coming of age in political times are good companions for *Enchanted Air*. Each of these books explores coming of age and political issues during mid-century US history from three women’s childhood memories compellingly written in free verse.

- Jacqueline Woodson’s *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014) addresses what it was like for her to grow up as an African American during the 1960s and 1970s.
- In *How I Discovered Poetry* (2014), Marilyn Nelson documents her life from ages 4-14 in 1950s America by connecting national events to her daily life experiences in a US military family.

Hilton, Marilyn. (2015). *Full cicada moon*. New York, NY: Dial.

Book Review

Marilyn Hilton weaves together many stories in this lyrical verse novel. It begins as Mimi and her mother leave California, their friends, and their Japanese and Japanese-American family to join her professor-father in Vermont where he is launching his academic career. As they travel by



train, Mimi completes forms for her new school but is perplexed when she finds herself not represented on the paper. “I check off Black,/ cross out Oriental,/ and write Japanese with a check mark/” (p. 3). Her new white peers are equally perplexed but instead of asking her name, her classmates ask “[W]hat are you?” (p. 35). Mimi defines herself, “I am/ half my Japanese mother,/ half my Black father,/ and all me/” (p. 57). Through Mimi’s eyes we experience the Apollo 11 mission and Neil Armstrong’s moonwalk. She dreams of becoming an astronaut—something her classmates find amusing. Mimi wants to take shop rather than home economics. After she is suspended for trying to attend the shop class, her classmates organize a protest hoping to allow students to take classes that were previously separated by gender.

Curricular Connections

Full Cicada Moon is a wonderful companion to other verse novels with strong, culturally di-

verse female protagonists who struggle as they deal with prejudice and try to connect to two (or more) cultures. Such books invite discussion about how the authors can use spare free verse to develop rich characters, and how the characters deal with the racism they face. The book could also be included when discussing how persistence leads to reaching goals or achieving dreams. According to Marilyn Hilton, Mimi would say that the book is “for anyone who has big dreams but is short on courage” (p. 383).

Possible Books to Pair With *Full Cicada Moon*

- In Crossan’s (2013) *The Weight of Water*, twelve-year-old Kasienka emigrates from Poland to England to help search for her missing father. She struggles to learn English and is mercilessly teased both for her broken English and for being so different from the other girls at school.
- *Inside Out and Back Again* (Lai, 2011) shares the story of Hà who would rather return to war torn Saigon than live in Alabama where she struggles to learn a new language and culture. If those struggles are not enough, she must also learn to deal with bullies who taunt her about her name, appearance, and religion.
- Woodson tells her own story about living briefly in Ohio, growing up in South Carolina, and moving to New York in *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014). Her evocative poetry shares the struggles she encountered as an African American female, and her journey to become a reader and writer.

Holt, K.A. (2015). *House arrest*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle.

Book Review

Dad has left, and Mom often works overtime trying to survive on little money. There is lots of fear and a revolving door of nurses. Timothy has stolen a wallet to help pay for his little brother Levi’s expensive medicine. As part of his house arrest, Timothy’s probation officer, James, requires him to keep a journal. This book is his journal, an honest and sometimes funny explo-

ration of Timothy’s complex and growing relationships with his mother and father, with James, with psychologist Mrs. B., and other adults and friends. Exploring issues of poverty and charity, bravery and betrayal, and deep love of a sibling, these entries open readers’ eyes to the layers of uncertainty and fear experienced by one boy trying to do good when it is unclear how to do good. Timothy writes, “There are a lot of things I know/ that I shouldn’t know/ about why things are the way they are./” And while this may be true, his hope and dedication inspire. While initially hesitant to keep this mandated journal, it is through writing that Timothy comes to discover more about the people he knows, finding surprises along the way and finding value in his own words. He is changed, and so are we.

Curricular Connections

House Arrest would make an excellent read aloud, opening up conversations about how one can never know what happens behind others’ doors. Such conversations always deepen a classroom com-



munity, as students silently reflect on their own quiet struggles. While children may be accustomed to judging people and decisions as “right” or “wrong,” this book honestly suggests that some situations are not clearly so black or white, again paving the way for conversations about how to make decisions when answers are unclear. What is right? What is good? How can we know? Too, Timothy’s widening perspective and understandings about himself and the people in his world changes as he writes. For students who keep writer’s notebooks or journals, written reflections and discussions of how they come to understandings and grow as people through writing would bring one message of this book even closer to home.

Possible Books to Pair With *House Arrest*

- In the verse novel *Love That Dog* (Crech, 2001), reluctant poet Jack discovers his voice and talent as he writes poems for school.
- The picture book poetry story, *Oh, Brother!* (Grimes, 2007), is written in the voice of Xavier, a boy who comes to realize that family situations are sometimes more layered and more hopeful than they seem.
- In the novel *Mick Harte Was Here* (Park, 1996), sister Phoebe faces life after the death of her once-hilarious brother. Heartbreaking and funny all at once, this novel travels over territory of guilt, family pain, and great love.

Jensen, C. (2015). *Skyscraping*. New York: Philomel.

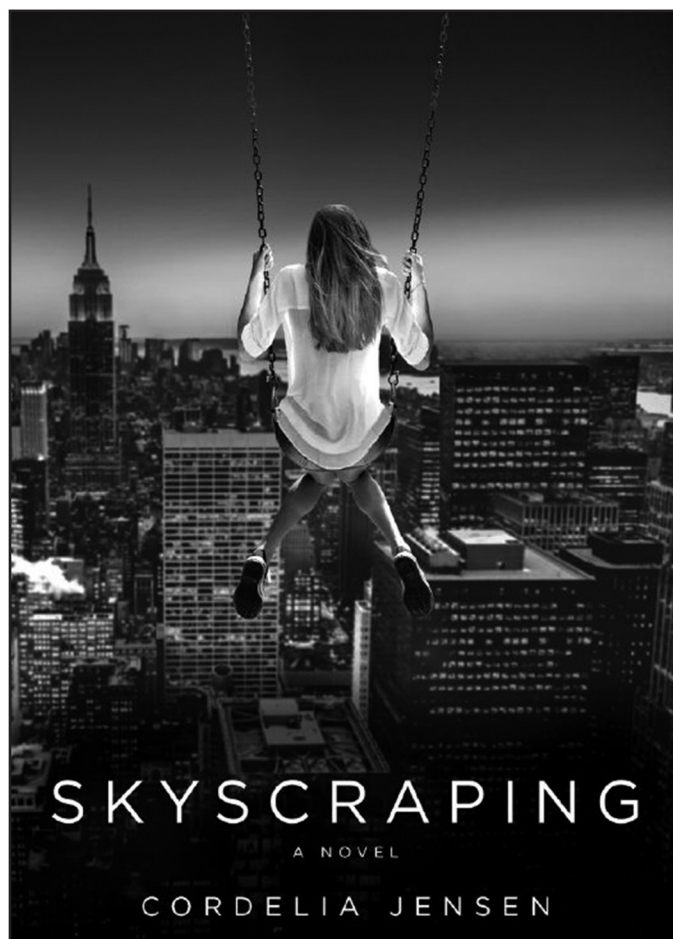
Book Review

In this coming of age verse novel set in 1993, Mira is excited to begin her senior year in high school. She is yearbook editor and has plans to apply to attend Columbia University where her father teaches. She has a close relationship with her father and younger sister, but interactions with her mother are strained because she chose to “walk out” on her family for a year. Suddenly all of Mira’s beliefs and plans must be reexamined when she comes home to find her father and his male lover. Soon after, she discovers that her mother is aware of

this relationship and that her parents have had an open marriage. Mira feels betrayed by her parents’ dishonesty, and she struggles to come to terms with this newfound knowledge and ideas about what constitutes a family. In the midst of Mira’s emotional personal journey, she is also confronted with the painful reality that her father has AIDS. Mira’s first response is to distance herself from her father in spite of his growing health challenges. Her actions at home and at school eventually cost her the yearbook editorship as well as putting her academic future in jeopardy. Readers will be touched by this honest examination of what Mira learns about herself and family and how she learns to deal with life’s changes and losses.

Curricular Connections

This coming-of-age story offers connections to many themes and topics including peer and family relationships, high school and transition to college, homosexuality, HIV/AIDS, and death and grief. Students can explore the process of research-

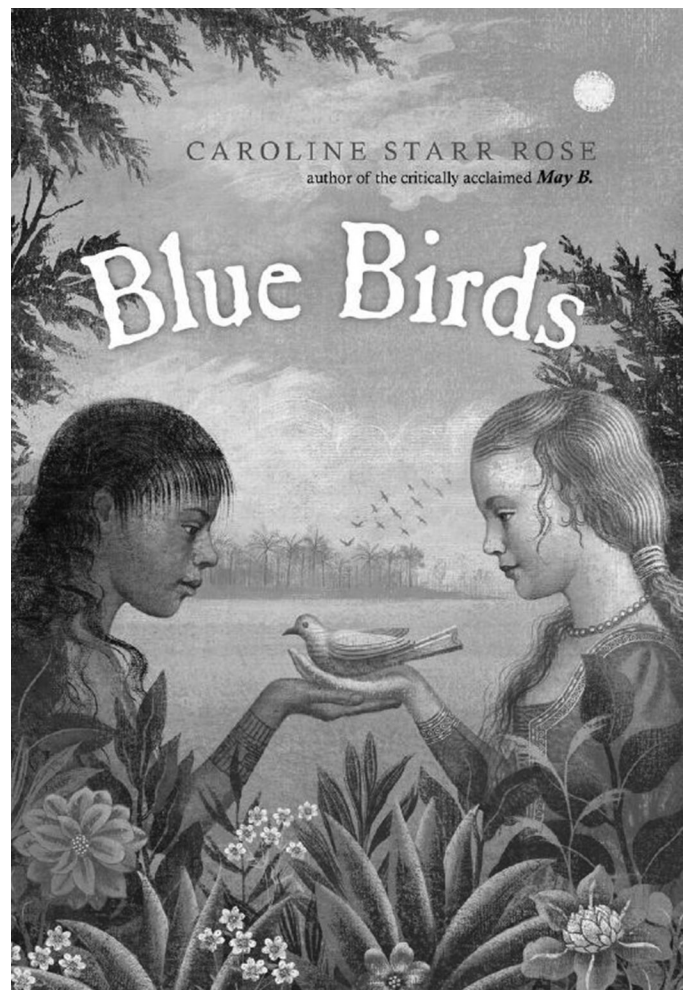


ing different colleges as well as visiting and applying for college. They might also interview school counselors about the college application process, financial aid, etc. As the novel begins, Mira is the yearbook editor, so students could also interview classmates who are working on the yearbook as well as researching the process of compiling a yearbook. In addition, students can conduct research to compare/contrast what was known about HIV/AIDS in the 1990s when this story takes place and current information and treatment of this disease. Finally, teachers/librarians can collect thematically related text sets that reflect different family configurations, death of family and loved ones, and the grieving process, so that students can extend their reading and understanding.

Possible Books to Pair With *Skyscraping*

- In *Jimi and Me* (Adoff, 2005), Keith, an eighth-grader, must not only deal with his father's death but also with his secret life. Unknown to his son and wife, Keith's father was involved with another woman and he had a son. Two other books that deal with death of a family member and family secrets are *Broken Soup* (Valentine, 2009) and *The Happiness of Kati* (Vejjajiva, 2009).
- In *Out of This Place* (Cameron, 2013), three high school students explore peer relationships and family difficulties as they transition from school to life outside the classroom.
- In diary format, *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* (Quintero, 2014), tells the coming of age story of Gabi Hernandez, a high school senior who is applying to colleges. Entries describe both Gabi's family members including her father who is a meth addict and an overly religious aunt as well as an assortment of friends, some with their own decisions to make—one is pregnant and another is homosexual and wants to tell his parents.

Rose, C.S. (2015). *Blue birds*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.



Book Review

After a long journey from England, twelve-year-old Alis and her family have arrived on the island of Roanoke in what is known to them as the New World. They are the settlers who expected to be taken to Virginia to help start the city of Raleigh, and who instead became known as the Lost Colony of Roanoke.

This beautiful and wild land is filled with open spaces and blue skies, but it is empty of the friends Alis left behind in London. Alis is unaware at first that she is watched. Kimi, a Roanoke girl, is wary and untrusting of these pale strangers who have killed her people with weapons and disease. The poems for each of the girls are written in different fonts and with distinctive voices. When the girls meet for the first time, Kimi surprises Alis while she's picking flowers. In her haste to run away, Alis drops the carved wooden bird given to her by her Uncle Samuel, whom they were to meet when they landed. Birds become symbols of

hope and peace throughout the book.

When the girls properly meet and begin to interact, the poems are written in their two voices on the same page. The girls forge a connection and develop a friendship although they do not share a language, and in spite of the fact that the adults in their two worlds are becoming more and more antagonistic toward each other.

Curricular Connections

Blue Birds would enrich a study of early American history. Because it presents the points of view of both an English and a Roanoke girl, it provides the perfect opportunity to gather evidence to compare and contrast these two viewpoints on the settlement of Roanoke. The detailed author's note at the end of the book provides a concise outline of what is known by historians about the Lost Colony of Roanoke.

Possible Books to Pair With *Blue Birds*

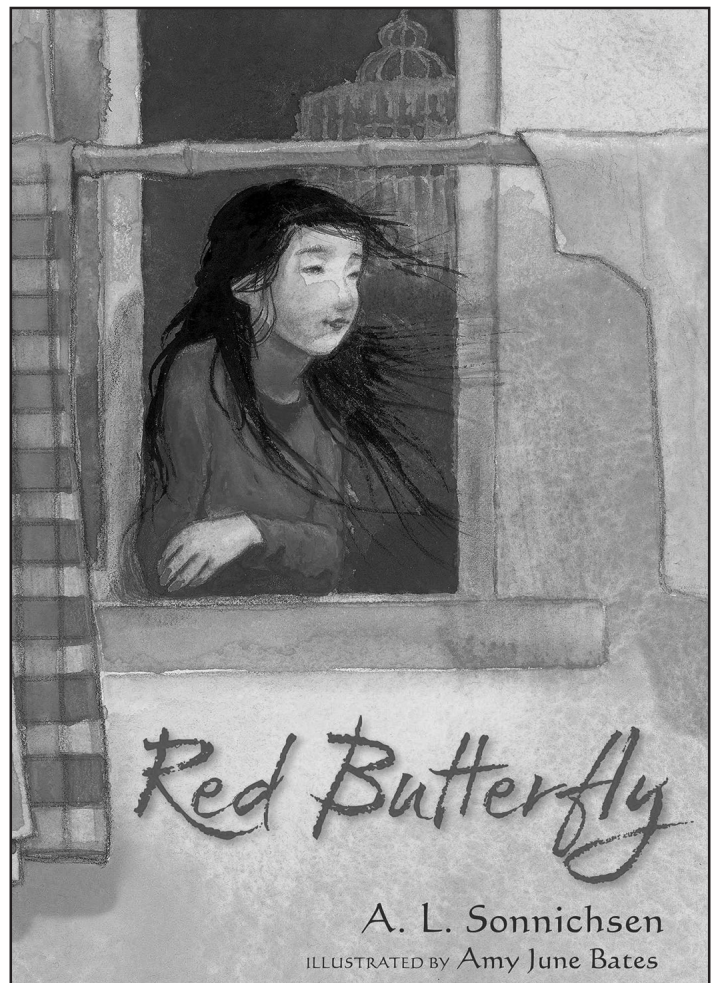
- The verse novel *Salt* (Frost, 2013) is set at the time of the War of 1812, but is similar to *Blue Birds* with a twelve-year-old American boy and a Miami Indian boy who are friends in spite of the conflicts between their families.
- *Roanoke: The Lost Colony—An Unsolved Mystery from History* (Stempel & Yolen, 2003) invites readers to examine all of the clues historians have used to try to solve the mystery of the Lost Colony.
- *Morning Girl* (Dorris, 1999) tells the imagined story of a Taino girl living in pre-Columbian America. This book gives readers a detailed description of what the life of the indigenous people could have been like before Columbus landed on their island and changed their world forever.

Sonnichsen, A.L. (2015). *Red butterfly*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Book Review

Eleven-year-old Kara, is “a girl/ caught/ between two worlds.” In the first of three chapters, readers learn about Kara’s childhood. “No one knows

I am different,/ that I have an American mother,/ that even though I look Chinese,/ I’m American on the inside.” When the authorities discover that Kara has no identity papers and was never officially adopted, the life she has known quickly dissolves. Kara is sent to a Chinese orphanage to await a new adoptive family and her American mama, who raised her from birth, is sent back to Montana. It is Toby, the physical therapist in the orphanage, who helps Kara adjust to her new environment and prepare for the future. Kara comments, “Toby always/ gives me truth./ It’s like medicine-/ hard to swallow,/ but good for me.” In the final chapter, Kara is living in Florida, adjusting to her four new siblings, and they to her, all the while terribly missing her first American mama. In the end, a letter from China arrives with wisdom from Toby, “Don’t fret if the adjustment to your new life/ has been tough./ Remember,/ it takes a while for a butterfly’s wings/ to dry.../” and soon, Kara will fly again.



Curricular Connections

Set in China and detailing the one-child birth policy that was introduced there in 1980, readers of the *Red Butterfly* might want to explore other titles dealing with the adoption of Chinese children, in particular, girls, like Kara, who were abandoned by their birth mothers because they were born girls and/or because they were born with some type of abnormality. *Red Butterfly* is also a title to include in a larger text set focused more broadly on cultural identity.

Possible Books to Pair With *Red Butterfly*

- The novel, *Half a World Away* (Kadohata, 2015), is also about an eleven-year-old adoptee, who happens to be a boy, and who is traveling to Kazakhstan with his family to adopt a baby. Once they arrive at the orphanage, the baby they were to adopt is no longer available. While his parents make alternative plans, Jaden becomes attached to a three-year-old boy, who is not yet talking. This is a story of hope and promise.
- The picture book, *Goyangi Means Cat*, (McDonnell, 2011) presents the challenges of speaking Korean and being adopted by an American family. As Soo Min works to learn English, she derives pleasure playing with the family cat, Goyangi. It is only when the lost cat returns home that Soo Min speaks her first English word, which of course is, “Goyangi home!”
- Learning about one’s cultural identity is not always as easy as it seems. For Kara, in *Red Butterfly*, she was born Chinese, though raised in China by an American mother. For Maya, in *Ticket to India* (Senzai, 2015), a simple trip to India with her grandmother and sister turns into a great adventure as she uncovers family secrets from the time of the Great Partition in 1947, which led to the creation of Pakistan.
- As Saigon falls, Hà and her family are forced to board a ship to leave the city. *Inside Out and Back Again* (Lai, 2013), also a

novel in verse, chronicles Hà’s new life in Alabama and the challenges she and her family face as they must leave the markets and papaya trees of Vietnam that they know so well to immigrate to the United States.

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Sidebar

2016 Notable Poetry List

- Bennett, L.B. (Ed.). (2015). *Lullaby and kisses sweet: Poems to love with your baby*. New York: Abrams Appleseed.
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