

BOOK REVIEW

Summer Y.A. Escapes from Sarah Dessen, Andrew McCarthy and More

Children's Books

By CATHERINE HONG JULY 12, 2017

THE GO-BETWEEN

By Veronica Chambers

197 pp. Delacorte Press. \$16.99.

(Ages 12 and up)

Smart and zany, “The Go-Between” is the Y.A. book we could all use right now, set in a milieu rarely seen in pop culture: that of privileged Mexicans who don’t have to sneak across the border — they have private jets. Camilla del Valle, the 16-year-old daughter of a telenovela star, never gives her ethnicity a second thought until her family relocates from Mexico City to Beverly Hills. At her boho private school, the other kids assume she’s poor and on scholarship — which she does nothing to clear up, at first for fun and then because she doesn’t know how. The result is plenty of comedy (she pretends to take the bus but secretly calls Ubers) but also cleareyed observations about race, class, identity and assimilation.

Chambers (the Amigas series, “Plus”), who has co-authored memoirs by the chefs Eric Ripert and Marcus Samuelsson, even works in a captivating side plot about Cammi’s developing passion for cooking, sparked by the school’s hip African-American chef. The novel’s characters may help readers see the complexities behind labels like “white” and “Latina,” in a refreshingly un-preachy way. “Sure, they were a little racist,” Camilla says about her Los Angeles friends.

“But maybe we all are.”

THE LEAF READER

By Emily Arsenault

230 pp. Soho Teen. \$18.99.

(Ages 14 and up)

An occult thriller about tea-leaf reading may sound campy, but fear not — this first Y.A. novel by Arsenault (“In Search of the Rose Notes”) is nothing like the movie “Ouija.” Marnie, a high school junior, is self-conscious about her “bag lady” status. Her mother is AWOL, her brother just got out of rehab and her grandmother is a hoarder. When Marnie finds an old book about tasseomancy, she starts playing with fortunetelling. “I’d always liked the idea that your brain — or maybe the universe — could be trying to tell you secrets with little signs or symbols,” she says. At first Marnie doesn’t even believe her own readings. But her prophecies are on target, leading a star athlete, Matt, to ask for a reading. He’s been getting emails from a female classmate who went missing months ago.

There’s a lot going on in this very skillfully constructed novel: the mystery behind the missing girl, the back story of Marnie’s family, the fraught dynamic between Matt and Marnie (does he really like her or is he just using her?), the punishing class divisions of a small town. Arsenault never pushes the supernatural angle too hard, letting Marnie, and the reader, skate on the suspenseful edge of skepticism and belief.

MIDNIGHT AT THE ELECTRIC

By Jodi Lynn Anderson

272 pp. Harper Teen. \$17.99.

(Ages 14 and up)

You could say that human history features two types of people: those who stay and those who leave. Anderson’s (“Tiger Lily”) moody, mesmerizing novel, an unusual hybrid of science fiction and historical fiction, is devoted to the restless souls who want to get the heck out. It’s 2065 and the Earth is dying because of climate change. Adri, a 16-year-old orphan, is training to join a team heading to Mars. Smart and resourceful, she’s unable to relate to others. Sent to the Kansas home of a relative, she finds a journal and letters that tell the stories of Catherine, a

teenager who lived there in 1934, and Lenore, a young woman in war-ravaged 1919 England determined to escape to the States.

It's hard to forget Catherine's parched Dust Bowl farm, where even the morning toast and eggs are coated with grit, and fans of futuristic fiction will be drawn to Anderson's vision of flooded cities, space travel and inventions like the KitchenLite, used to print edible eggs and bacon. As the connection between the three women is satisfyingly revealed Adri, drawn to the long-dead strangers, begins to understand the human instincts to love, connect and leave something behind. Mars, she realizes, "would have a history one day too, and she would be a part of it."

JUST FLY AWAY

By Andrew McCarthy

260 pp. Algonquin. \$17.95.

(Ages 12 and up)

Women who came of age watching John Hughes movies hold a special place in their hearts for McCarthy, a.k.a. the sensitive dreamboat Blane in "Pretty in Pink." Now a well-regarded travel writer, TV director and occasional actor, he has published his first novel — and it's fantastic, even if you're too young to have given a hoot about those twinkly eyes of his. Lucy Willows, who's 15, learns she has an 8-year-old half brother living right in her New Jersey town, the result of a brief affair her father had. Outraged by her father's betrayal and furious at her mother's seeming complacency, she hops a train, landing unannounced at the Maine home of her grandfather, a man she's met exactly once before.

The story's unexpected turns will keep readers rapt, and Lucy's voice — reserved, blunt, sarcastic — feels as bone true as that of any Y.A. character in recent memory. McCarthy has real insight into the way adolescents withdraw emotionally, wrapping themselves in protective cocoons of silence. He captures that fleeting moment when a teenager knows she's doing something stupid but can't help herself. "The worse I felt, the more difficult it was to respond to him," she says of her boyfriend, a decent guy she cuts off without explanation. It's a debut as stark and striking as the Maine landscape.

WANT

By Cindy Pon

327 pp. Simon Pulse. \$18.99.

(Ages 14 and up)

Yep — it's another Y.A. novel set in a brutal future where society has been divided into haves and have-nots. And bingo! It's up to a gutsy young have-not to take on the system. But before you dismiss Pon's book as yet another "Divergent" wannabe, stop and smell the pork buns. The novel's setting is a futuristic Taipei, vividly conjured: Markets sell live snakes for medicine, music blares in Mandarin, Taiwanese and English and characters chow down on steamed dumplings, rice porridge, eggplants in oyster sauce and stir-fried long beans "slathered in garlic and scallions." This is a dystopian thriller with flavor.

Taipei's society is split into the wealthy *you* and the underclass *mei*. The *you* wear special suits and helmets that protect them from the city's pollution and viruses; the *mei* are destined to die by age 40. Our protagonist, the orphaned Jason Zhou, is part of a group determined to destroy Jin Corp, the pollution-generating company that manufactures the suits. Posing as privileged, Jason infiltrates *you* society, only to fall for Daiyu, daughter of Mr. Jin himself. While there's not a lot of nuance in this world of moral certainties, Pon does a bang-up job packing in skyscraper-scaling, flying (on airborne mo-peds), hand-to-hand combat and high-tech espionage. The world she's created is positively chilling. "Seeing each other face-to-face like this felt odd," Jason thinks, on first meeting Daiyu. "We'd become a society that barely showed our faces to strangers anymore."

ONCE AND FOR ALL

By Sarah Dessen

357 pp. Viking. \$19.99.

(Ages 12 and up)

The world of high-end wedding planning might seem like a stretch for a Y.A. novel. Then again, from the view of a teenager, what is a wedding but the ultimate party, complete with open bars, conga lines and a chance to meet a cute stranger? Dessen has been turning out Y.A. best sellers since the '90s, and her storytelling has a breezy, Hollywood-style polish. Louna Barrett is the 17-year-old daughter of a society wedding planner. She's cynical about romance, prone to world-weary quips

about delusional brides — partly because she’s grown up in the wedding biz, partly because a year earlier a mysterious trauma left her with “a hard little rock of a heart.” Then she meets Ambrose, a girl magnet whose “lazy, rich boy smile” rubs her the wrong way.

We know they’ll end up sparring, flirting and falling for each other, but the plot is buoyed by crackly dialogue and the comical series of over-the-top weddings the two help produce, which serve as foils to their own budding relationship. The story is bogged down by overwrought melodrama during flashbacks to our heroine’s major tragedy, but still, it’s a satisfyingly escapist rom-com that knows what it needs to deliver. “Attention from a cute boy,” Louna muses. “You could power the world with it.”

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