

## July 2021 Staff Picks

**Author: Christina Soontornvat Title: All Thirteen: The Incredible Cave Rescue of the Thai Boys' Soccer Team**

Captivating middle-grade nonfiction of the harrowing real life mission that succeeds against all odds. It reads like a heart-pounding adventure story.

**Author: Ursula Vernon Title: Castle Hangnail**

A tale of witches, minions, and one fantastic castle, just right for fans of Roald Dahl. Quirky and unusual characters, clever writing, just a great fantasy for upper middle grade readers.

**Author: Kristin Cashore Title: Graceling**

Combining genres -- fantasy, mystery, adventure, and romance -- about a girl with extraordinary fighting powers who loved a boy with whom she was insurmountably incompatible. Amazing YA fantasy.

**Author: Robin McKinley Title: The Blue Sword**

Original romantic fantasy with well-developed mythic kingdom and characters. An older YA publication but one that is often re-read with delight.

**Author: Marie Brennan Title: A Natural History of Dragons**

A thrilling fantasy series that combines adventure with the Victorian Age. It reads as a memoir by the main character, Lady Isabella Trent, as she describes her career of dragon expeditions in this fantasy realm.

**Author: Deanna Raybourn Title: A Curious Beginning**

Victorian England mystery series with the utterly unique Veronica Speedwell. The characters are so well written—intelligent, charming, great chemistry—and the historical detective genre feels exciting and fresh.

**Author: Linda Howard Title: To Die For**

This romantic thriller had twists and turns but also well written dialogue that made me laugh aloud.

**Author: Cindy Baldwin Title: Where the Watermelon Grows**

Even though this story is intended for middle schoolers, it has mass appeal for people of all ages. A quick warning: The themes of this novel can be a bit heavy, as they deal with a loved one coping with serious mental illness. This book is a "hidden gem" for me in

that it demonstrates the importance of love, hardship, acceptance, and family! It may not have a traditional "happy ending," but there is hope for a better tomorrow for the characters in this book and it hits home for so many of us who are struggling right now. The quotes in this book are so beautiful, the characters are relatable, and story is heart-wrenching and genuine. Overall, a brilliant debut novel!

**Author: Deborah Levy Title: Hot Milk**

This is a novel for readers who like psychological, character-driven novels. Levy does a great job of making Sophie, who is at war with herself, accessible and likable. Though she is 25, Sophie remains child-like and dependent upon her mother. While her mother is ill and looking for a cure in Spain, a friend suggests that the illness is psychosomatic. And that Sophie is trapped in these destructive fantasies. When the irrepressible Ingrid crosses her path, things begin to shift for Sophie.

**Author: Caitlin Mullen Title: Please See Us**

Two women, one of whom is just sixteen, form an unlikely bond as they try to understand why numerous women have disappeared in Atlantic City. Ava is a teenager with psychic abilities which allow her to see visions. She teams up with an aspiring art gallery owner to solve the missing cases. Mullen's plot provides lots of tension and surprises. More than one character is concealing something pertinent or is somehow deluding himself or herself. Trigger Warning: Mullen describes Julie's psychological trauma and inclination to self-harm extremely well. Readers are given a direct window into her soul.

**Author: Agatha Christie Title: And Then There Were None**

Even if you've read this classic novel of mystery and suspense before, by re-reading it you will find new facets and nuances to admire. This one of Christie's darkest and most intricate mystery. Ten people come to an island for different purposes but find themselves fighting for their lives. Among them is a murderer who wants his or her own type of justice. After each death, the adversary meticulously removes a porcelain figure from the dining room table.

A gramophone recording relates that each of these guests have committed an unpardonable sin and have been as of yet beyond the reaches of law. One of them has invited them all here, produced the recording, and eliminating them but who could it be?

**Author: M.O. Walsh Title: The Big Door Prize**

In a novel that's sweetness served up with a side of realism, Walsh explores a small town's inhabitants desire to live the best version of themselves. When a simply plywood cubicle with the word DNAMIX shows up at Johnson's grocery store, it causes the good people of Deerfield to behave in outlandish ways. The machine, which does a quick DNA scan, determines if an individual has lived up to his or her potential. Ordinary townspeople suddenly decide they are meant to be puppeteers, Olympic champions, magicians, or members of royalty. Most of the characters are humorous and endearing. Mixed in with the humor, however, is an unfolding mystery: What happened to the mayor's son, Toby? Did he die from a DUI accident or was it something even more sinister?

**Author: Kate Forsyth Title: Bitter Greens**

An enchanting read. Forsyth mixes characters based on historical people with fable. In the novel, readers meet Charlotte-Rose de La Force after she has been banished from Louis XIV's court and sent to a nunnery. The real life Charlotte-Rose de La Force wrote the Rapunzel or "Persinette" story which was adapted by the brothers Grimm. Most readers are familiar with the Rapunzel story but Forsyth revitalizes it. Like a master tapestry weaver, Forsyth weaves the stories of three women who all face terrible choices and are forced to choose between their happiness or safety.

**Between Two Kingdoms: A Memoir of a Life Interrupted by Suleika Jaouad**

In the summer after graduating from college, Suleika Jaouad was preparing to enter "the real world". She had fallen in love and moved to Paris to pursue her dream of becoming a war correspondent. The real world she found, however, would take her into a very different kind of conflict zone. A trip to the doctor and, a few weeks shy of her twenty-third birthday, she received her diagnosis: leukemia, with a 35 percent chance of survival. Just like that, the life she had imagined for herself had gone up in flames. By the time Jaouad flew home to New York, she had lost her job, her apartment, and her independence. She would spend much of the next four years in a hospital bed, fighting for her life and chronicling the saga in a column for The New York Times.

When Jaouad finally walked out of the cancer ward—after three and a half years of chemo, a clinical trial, and a bone marrow transplant—she was, according to the doctors, cured. But as she would soon learn, a cure is not where the work of healing ends; it's where it begins. She had spent the past 1,500 days in desperate pursuit of one goal—to survive. And now that she'd done so, she realized that she had no idea how to live. How would she reenter the world and live again? How could she reclaim what had been lost? Jaouad embarked—with her new best friend, Oscar, a scruffy terrier mutt—on a 100-day, 15,000-mile road trip across the country. What she learned on this trip is that the divide between sick and well is porous, that the vast majority of us will travel back and forth between these realms throughout our lives. *Between Two Kingdoms* is a profound chronicle of survivorship and a fierce, tender, and inspiring exploration of what it means to begin again.

**Author: Paula Hawkins Title: Into the Water**

What looks like an accidental drowning might actually be a suicide. Told in alternating voices, this suspense-saturated drama is Hawkins' second novel. Nel isn't very well liked in her small community. Even her sister bears a grudge against her. The community resents that she's writing a book about the witchcraft trials and other historical events that took place in Beckford.

Nel chooses include the more recent drownings in her book. This infuriates Louise, the mother of a girl who recently committed suicide in the pool.

Soon after Katie's death, Nel also drowns in the drowning pool. Some family members think she has killed herself but others suspect something more sinister. Among the suspects, there is a jealous sister, a handsome male teacher, a dangerous ex-boyfriend, an outraged mother, and a cantankerous cop. Nel's teenaged daughter is also in danger, leaving readers to wonder if she will suffer the same fate as her mother and all the other "troublesome" women.

**Author: Madeline Miller    Title: Circe**

A retelling of ancient Greek lore gives exhilarating voice to the witch Circe. Known by most for her role in *The Odyssey*, this novel brings her into the leading role. I really enjoyed learning more about her background and reading how the author expands on her story outside of the typical few sentences you get in a Greek Mythology dictionary entry.

**Author: Emma Donoghue    Title: Astray**

The impressive short stories in *Astray* are based on actual historical events. Donoghue, who wrote *The Room*, is able to get into the minds of countless people from a wide variety of historical periods. The impressive short stories in *Astray* are based on actual historical events. The dramatic dialogues gives readers a keyhole glimpse to history. *Astray* is a powerhouse of a short story collection that is divided into three parts: Departures, In-Transit, Arrivals and Aftermaths.

**Author: Katherine Arden    Title: The Bear and the Nightingale**

This epic story that reads like a fairytale at times is the story of a Boyar, Pyotr, his sons, Sasha and Kolya and his strange daughter Vasilisa. Before his wife died, she told him that Vasilisa would be most like her mother who had the “gift.” Vasilisa was born with the ability to see the creatures that populate Russian fairytales. Others are terrified of her abilities and label the old village ways “demonic.” Their fears only multiply the existing dangers. An old rivalry between two supernatural forces is renewed as the terrible Bear of the fairytales is released from his bindings.

**Author: Jason Gurley    Title: Eleanor**

Eleanor is a brave fourteen-year-old girl who wants to change her family’s tragic trajectory. She discovers the power to heroically change her present and her past by entering people’s dreamscapes. She encounters a witch, a frosty environment, dinosaurs, and the plane responsible for her cousins’ deaths. This book is a ghost story unlike any other with searing images.

**Author: Rebecca Rasmussen    Title: Evergreen**

This is a heart-breaking story with many warm and humorous moments. Eveline, joins her German husband, Emil, in a hardscrabble existence in Evergreen. Unbeknownst to her, Emil doesn’t own the cabin they relocate to. When his father becomes sick, Emil goes to Germany, leaving Eveline and Hux on their own. When a land surveyor comes through the Evergreen area, he cruelly takes advantage of her. She later makes a fateful choice that will affect her young son, Hux, and her husband who is still abroad.

**Author: Anthony Doerr    Title: The Shell Collector**

A rich collection of stories by Anthony Doerr, winner of the Pulitzer Prize. These are all stories of outcasts who become powerful and furious, glorious in their gifts. Characters have strange obsessions with shells, magic, hunting, or fishing. Often Doerr writes about disabled characters who can understand the world more deeply than everyone else.

**Author: Terri Cheney Title: The Dark Side of Innocence**

Few books are written about mental illness and even fewer are written as well as this one. Cheney, who has also written *Manic* about her adult experience with bipolar disorder, writes eloquently about her childhood and adolescent battle with the disorder.

Terri Lynn was popular but is deeply unhappy. She contends almost every day with something she calls “the Black Beast.” Under his direction, she alternates between being a people-pleasing overachiever and a teen who drinks, runs away from home, and wrecks her beloved car. She also writes till her fingers cramp, makes out with boys, and cuts herself with knives and pins. She doesn’t know it at the time but later she learns that “the Black Beast” is bipolar disorder

**Author: Peter Swanson Title: Eight Perfect Murders**

I loved the nods to older actual mystery novels and their creative plots. The surprise twist in the middle around the narrator kept me on edge waiting for the outcome. It was a page-turner to see where the narrator was taking us next. I am glad for the final chapters with revelations and closure to the various leads throughout.