



Fresh Fiction New Voices

from
Spring 2012



WHERE STRONG VOICES
BECOME BESTSELLERS!

Front cover, top: Illustration from *Oddfellow's Orphanage* © 2012 by Emily Winfield Martin; second row left: Illustration from *May B.* © 2012 by Christopher Silas Neal; second row center top: photo from *The Gathering Storm* © 2012 by Michael Frost; second row center middle: photo from *Someone Else's Life* © 2012 by Dimitri Caceaune; second row center bottom: Illustration from *Child of the Mountains* © 2012 by Richard Tuschman; second row right: photo from *The Whole Story of Half a Girl* © 2012 by Jupiter Images; and bottom: photo from *Cross My Heart* © 2012 by Agata Fitas

Fresh Fiction from New Voices



Random House Children's Books is dedicated to cultivating and nurturing new talent. With proven editorial acumen, rich sales and marketing resources, publicity savvy, and production and design excellence, the Random House Children's Books team has worked together with its authors to give readers proven first-time successes such as *New York Times* bestsellers *Eragon* by Christopher Paolini and *A Great and Terrible Beauty* by Libba Bray, as well as *The Emerald Atlas* by John Stephens and the Printz Award winner *How I Live Now* by Meg Rosoff.

The future of the book industry lies with new literary voices. For that reason, we are committed to growing alongside our authors by implementing unique publishing and marketing programs that enhance our lists and deliver continued success stories to you: the bookseller, the teacher, the librarian. We know that it is the love of children's literature we share with you that helps get these new voices into readers' hands and, for this, we thank you.



Fresh Fiction from New Voices



New for Spring 2012!



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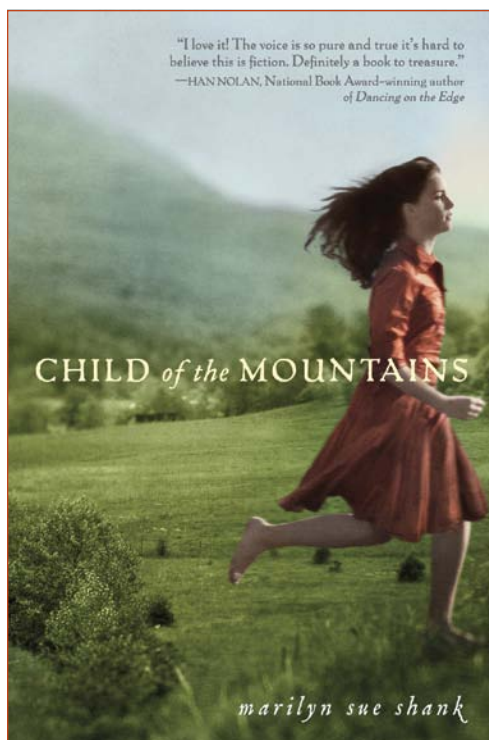


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Child of the Mountains

Written by Marilyn Sue Shank

Edited by Françoise Bui

ISBN: 978-0-385-74079-1

\$16.99/\$18.99 Can.

Middle-Grade Fiction

On sale: 4/10/2012



Delacorte
Press

from the editor



As I started to read *Child of the Mountains*, Lydia Hawkins's voice immediately grabbed me. Lydia, a proud West Virginian, speaks in Appalachian dialect and from the opening sentences of her first-person narrative—"My mama's in jail. It ain't right."—it's clear that Lydia's life is in upheaval.

Broken-hearted because her beloved Gran and her younger brother, BJ, have both died, and because her mother has been unjustly imprisoned, Lydia tries hard to fit in with the relatives who've taken her in. Not easy, but as Lydia recollects all that she's lost—Gran's no-nonsense attitude and nuggets of wisdom, BJ's unbridled curiosity and mischievousness, and Mama's quiet fortitude as they tried to help BJ cope with cystic fibrosis—it's clear where she gets her inner strength, even if she thinks she has none.

Marilyn Sue Shank is a child of the very mountains she writes about. She knows well that the people of Appalachia may be poor in terms of money, but are rich in family and friends. Spending time with Lydia and her kinfolk in 1950s West Virginia is pure pleasure.

—Françoise Bui

from **CHILD** *of the* **MOUNTAINS**

Wednesday, October 28, 1953, West Virginia

My mama's in jail. It ain't right. Leastwise I don't think so. Them folks that put her there just don't understand our family. My mama's the best mama in the whole wide world. Everbody used to say so afore the awful stuff happened. Even Uncle William. And he don't say much nice about nobody.

I got to get her out. But how? Even when they's wrong, once grown-ups make up their minds about something, a kid like me don't stand much of a chance of changing it. Poor Mama. I know she hates being caged up like a rabbit, and it's all my fault.

The bad stuff commenced like this: My brother, BJ, was borned awful sick, but we didn't know it at first. When Mama birthed me, Gran said I didn't cause Mama no

trouble at all. Daddy was at work, so Gran hollered to a neighbor across the road that I was a-coming soon. The neighbor went to fetch old Doc Smythson.

**But things sure turned out
different with BJ. Gramps and
Daddy lived in Heaven by then.**

When Doc Smythson comed, Gran told him she could manage things just fine, but he said he

would be awful obliged iffen she let him help because it was his doctoring duty. So Gran figured it would be okay. But Gran told me that she really done most of the work, after Mama, of course. Gran midwifed most of the women around these parts. She fixed Mama blue cohosh tea to sip and tickled her nose with a feather.

Gran said, "When your Mama sneezed, you whizzed out of her like a pellet from a shotgun. All Doc Smythson had to do was hold out his hands to catch you." Gran shook her head. "Ain't like you have to go to some fancy school to learn how to do that!"

But things sure turned out different with BJ. Gramps and Daddy lived in Heaven by then.

When BJ was about to come, Mama started bleeding real bad, and she screamed

like a hound dog a-howling at the moon. Nothing Gran mixed from her herb bottles helped none. Gran sent me running to the neighbors' house to have them find Doc Smythson.

Doc took one look at Mama and told Gran he had to fetch her to the hospital in Charleston straight away. So Gran wrapped Mama up in blankets, and Doc carried her like a sack of taters to his jeep.

When Mama finally comed back, she brought my new baby brother with her. She named him Benjamin for my grandpa on Daddy's side and James for my gramps on Mama's side. But he looked just too little to be Benjamin James. I wanted to call him Ben Jim, but Gran said, "Mercy, pumpkin, that sounds more like the name of a tonic than a fitting name for a boy. I can hear it on the radio now. 'Ben Jim heals your soul and heart, mends your body and makes you smart, keeps you strong and cures the farts.'"

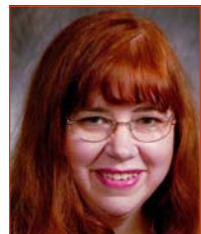
So we took to calling him BJ instead.

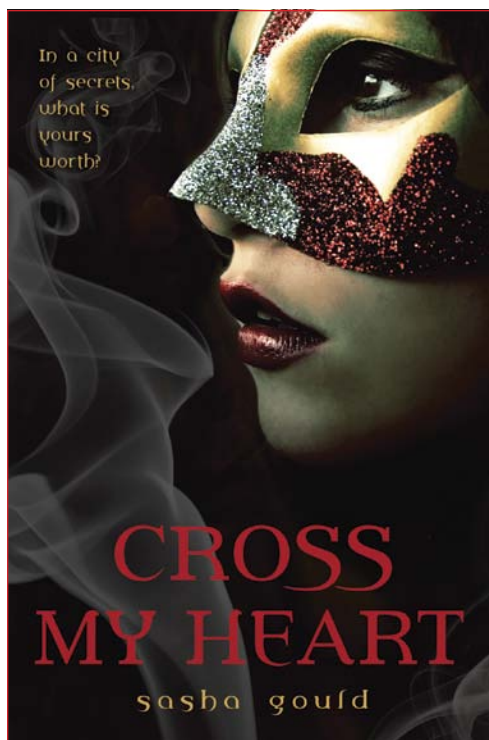
One day while Mama slept, Gran let me hold BJ. He didn't weigh much more than a mess of green beans. I looked down at his big eyes, and he looked up at me. "Lookey there," Gran said. "He's a-smiling at you."

I smiled back at him. "I will always take good care of you, BJ," I promised. "Always and forever."

I tried real hard to keep that promise, but I couldn't. Gran always reminded us when something bad happened that the rain falls on the just and the unjust. The rain that Gran talked about sure poured down mighty hard on our family.

Marilyn Sue Shank, a proud West Virginian, earned her Ph.D. in special education from the University of Kansas.





Cross My Heart

Written by Sasha Gould

Edited by Rebecca A. Short

ISBN: 978-0-385-74150-7

\$17.99/\$19.99 Can.

Young Adult Fiction

On sale: 3/13/2012



Delacorte
Press

from the editor



The moment I began *Cross My Heart*, I was transfixed. Mesmerized by Sasha Gould's intense, immediate writing. I went on to discover an alluring, fast-paced romantic mystery set in the deadly glamorous Venice of 1585.

Laura della Scala, the 16-year-old daughter of a Venetian nobleman, comes home after years of seclusion in a convent to find that her older sister, Beatrice, has been drowned. Laura must now join the upper echelons of Venetian society while furtively, desperately, searching for Beatrice's killer. Along the way, Laura becomes involved in the Segreta, an enigmatic society of women that offers help in exchange for secrets, and meets a handsome young man with a hidden past. Whom should Laura trust? How can she know what is true? Answers are not easily determined. But, as you enter the rich and thrilling world of *Cross My Heart*, you will find that only one question matters:

In a city of secrets, what is yours worth?

—Rebecca A. Short

from **CROSS my HEART**

I walk towards the covered walkway. All is silent, dark and still. An unnatural breeze whips my cape, something flaps past, and I crouch to the ground with my hood pulled around my head. Just a bird—a disturbed gull, perhaps—but it makes me pant like an animal.

“Pull yourself together,” I whisper to myself. That’s what the Abbess would say if she saw me cowering and shaking like this.

A giant doorway made of cracked wood is set into the monastery’s walls. It’s studded with dull metal bolts, each as round and large as a man’s fist. Seaweed creeps up the hem of the building, green and slippery fronds feeling their way out of the deep.

The door opens. Too late to leave. A man in a brown hooded robe emerges, his face obscured. He beckons silently with a curled finger.

“I’m Laura,” I say to him, and he nods as if this is something he already knows.

“What do you want from me?”

I say. “Who are you?”

I follow him down a narrow corridor lined with sconces spaced far apart. Between them, in the darkest places, I can hardly see my feet. The shadow of my companion’s cowl stretches and retracts as we come in proximity to the torches. We turn several corners. A right, another right, then a left. We climb a stone spiral staircase. I worry that I won’t be able to find my way back.

“Excuse me,” I say. “Where are we going?”

He doesn’t reply.

At the top of the stairs we emerge into a cavernous hall. Heat and light almost sting my face. I’m blinded and dazzled. As my eyes adjust, I see gold on the walls, and frescoes of deep blue and ferocious red. The man has already slipped away.

A cluster of figures, perhaps fifteen women, stand beside one of the four fires that blaze in the hearths taller than they are. Each wears a long robe and has a mask on

from **CROSS my HEART**

continued

her face, and I can somehow sense they are all women. I feel my skin tightening, and despite the warmth of the room, I shiver. What is this place?

The figures glide forward and form a circle around me. Their masks cast flickering, grotesque shadows. Some have long, hooked beaks, like birds of prey. Gauze butterfly wings drift softly from others. Their jewels and lace feather frame eyes that pierce me like a hunter's arrows. The air is filled with a dizzying scent of spice and wood smoke. But there's something else too—something more powerful and pungent than any of that.

My heart gallops. This is a trap, I think.

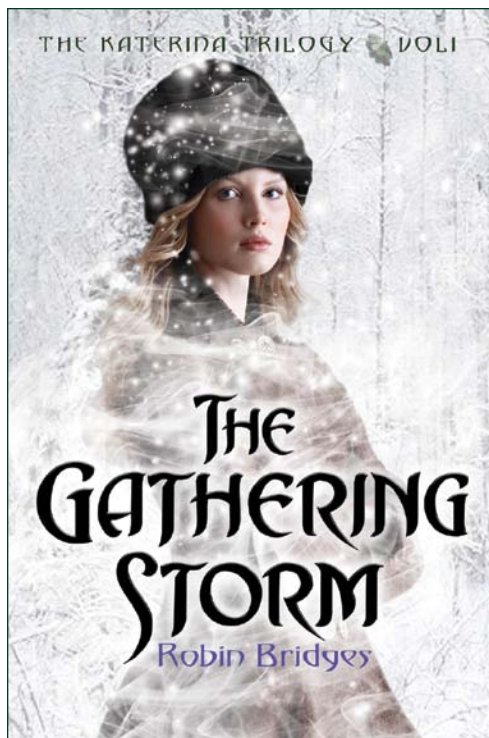
One of the figures reaches towards me and I shrink away, my eyes flicking round for a way out. The woman laughs from behind her feathery mask. The whole group moves closer, tightening the ring.

"What do you want from me?" I say. "Who are you?"

A tall woman steps forward. The hair within her hood is streaked with grey. Her mask is shaped like the face of a white owl, covered in white jewels and with a silver beak. She removes it, and Allegreza's eyes glitter in the firelight.

"Welcome, Laura," she says, "to the Segreta."

Sasha Gould lived in Venice until she was nine years old. She later studied fashion in London. Her favorite things are opera, ballet, and romantic movies. She now lives in the Lake District of England with her cat, Tosca, and writes about Venice, the beautiful and mysterious city she knows and loves.



**The Katerina Trilogy,
Vol. I:
The Gathering Storm**

Written by Robin Bridges

Edited by Françoise Bui

ISBN: 978-0-385-74022-7

\$17.99/\$19.99 Can.

Young Adult Fiction

On sale: 1/10/2012



Delacorte
Press

from **the editor**



When I think of Russia, a myriad of images leap to mind—including sweeping images from the great love story *Dr. Zhivago*, both the novel by Boris Pasternak and the unforgettable film adaptation, starring Omar Sharif and Julie Christie. When I first read *The Gathering Storm*, set in an earlier period, when Russia was still ruled by a tsar, I hoped to be swept away by an equally grand story—and I was.

Robin Bridges has crafted a lush tale, where she spotlights the nobility in all its opulence. What modern-day girl wouldn't want to attend a glittering ball bedecked in Fabergé jewels and a Worth gown? But Robin has also invested her heroine, Katerina Alexandrovna, Duchess of Oldenburg, with the ability to raise the dead. Yes, Katiya is a necromancer! This is very much in keeping with the old Russian legends, in which tsars possess magical powers. So get ready to lose yourself in this page-turning fantasy. I know I did.

—Françoise Bui

from **THE GATHERING STORM**

It was not long before the Empress had finished dining and risen from her table, signaling a return to the dancing. Militza grabbed my arm and hissed in my ear, “Walk with me, Katerina Alexandrovna. You must see the beautiful fountain in the winter garden. It’s just at the other end of this hallway.”

An icy chill slid down my spine. I was terrified that someone would discover what I’d done. Especially one of the Montenegrin princesses.

The garden was in a large two-story glass room full of heavily scented flowers and lush greenery. In the center, an enormous multitiered fountain babbled soothingly.

“Can you keep a secret, my dear?” Militza asked as her cold hands clutched mine.

She had me trapped in her web.

“I’ve been known to keep them before,” I replied.

“What do you want from me?”

“I believe there is an evil presence here at the ball tonight.”

I whispered.

My heart pounded. “Evil?”

“Yes. Evil. Nothing else could have disrupted Elena’s spell,” Militza said, watching my face very closely.

“A spell!” I gasped at her recklessness. Why would she admit to such a thing? “Elena could be exiled for witchcraft!” I added.

“Not if the Romanovs do not find out. And I know you will not tell them.”

“Why should I protect her?”

“Because your magic is far more terrible than ours. The tsar holds my father in high esteem. And you would not want the tsar to discover your nasty little secret.”

My mouth went dry and my palms began sweating inside my white kidskin gloves. “You must be making fun of me,” I said, trying to be as lighthearted as possible. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Come now.” Militza narrowed her eyes. Several people in that dining room

could sense that something deliciously wicked had just happened. Especially the Empress.” She paused and seemed almost gleeful at the look of horror on my face. “You are fortunate there are so many witches and other . . . creatures present tonight. It will take weeks for the tsar’s men to discover it was you, an innocent-looking viper.”

I was speechless. The Montenegrin princess could see the fear in my eyes.

Militza smiled. “Necromancy is the most vile, the blackest of the black arts, Duchess. Certainly you cannot think the tsarina could allow one such as you to remain under her roof?”

She had me trapped in her web. “What do you want from me?” I whispered.

She put her arm through mine, leading me back to the ballroom. “I want you to meet the rest of my family. My mother would put your talents to good use. Come home with us for Christmas holidays.”

I tried to pull away from her. “But my parents—”

“Will be very shocked and disgusted if they discover what their clever daughter has been doing. Unless they already know? Do your parents know how to raise the dead as well?”

“Of course not!” I felt the panic rising in my body. “And they know nothing of my problem.”

“Problem?” Militza laughed. “In my family, it would be considered the greatest gift. You’ll see.”

As soon as we returned to the ballroom, Militza joined her fiancé for a waltz. I retreated back to the pretty winter garden. I had no desire to dance anymore. I just wanted the night to be over.

By day, **Robin Bridges** is a mild-mannered writer of fantasy and paranormal fiction for young adults. By night, she is a pediatric nurse. Robin lives on the Gulf Coast.



Photo © Erin Glisson



May B.

Written by Caroline Starr Rose

Edited by Lee Wade

ISBN: 978-1-58246-393-3

\$15.99/\$17.99 Can.

Middle-Grade Fiction

On sale: 1/10/2012

schwartz & wade books

from the editor

When Anne Schwartz, Emily Seife (our assistant editor at the time), and I first read this gorgeous novel-in-verse, we were struck by the extraordinary voice of Caroline Starr Rose and the riveting story of a 12-year-old girl alone on the prairie fighting to survive. We were impressed that this was Caroline's first novel, and we knew right away that we wanted to work with her.

May B. is a historically accurate novel that gives readers a new heroine to love. Young May Betterly was supposed to be helping out on a neighbor's homestead, but a terrible turn of events leaves her stranded, alone, in the Kansas prairie. Her family doesn't know she's been deserted, there are no neighbors for miles, and she has no idea how to get home. May uses her wits to survive, but winter brings a blizzard and she's running low on food. . . .

Using short poems, spare pages, and a quick pace, Caroline Starr Rose has written a stark and gripping adventure story that will draw in even the most reluctant readers.

—Lee Wade

from *May B.*

13

I see the homestead first:
an awkward lump of earth,
a lazy curl of smoke above.
Beyond the soddy,
a barn carved into a hill.
Pa doesn't need to point but does.
"It's not as nice as what we've got.
Did most of his work alone.
Still plenty of time for improvements."

Pa cut our strips of sod.
He and Ma stacked them,
layer by layer,
grass side down,
using only a bit of precious wood to
frame
our windows and door.

This soddy's small,
the earthen walls misshapen,
just one papered window.

I clutch my pillowcase.

Mr. Oblinger spies us,
waves,
steps inside his home.

Later,
when we're closer,
I catch the flaming red of Mrs.
Oblinger's dress.

She stands in the doorway for a time,
facing us.

It's only when we approach
that she shuts herself inside.

14

I stay in the wagon,
watching Pa and Mr. Oblinger
inspect the garden,
point toward empty prairie.
Without hearing,
I know the talk
of plow
of wheat
of rain
and promise.

Hand passes to hand,
and Pa tucks money
inside his shirt pocket.

It's then he motions toward me.
I can't pretend not to see.

Pa gives my shoulders a gentle squeeze.
"This here's Mavis."
"May," I say.
"Glad to have you with us, May."
Mr. Oblinger shakes Pa's hand.
"You sure you don't want to stay?"
"No, thank you," Pa says.
"We need provisions from town."

from

May B.

• *continued*

I'll sleep there tonight."

Pa pulls me close,
the crisp money crackles
against my cheek.
My first wage.

"Till Christmas," he says.
"Do your best."

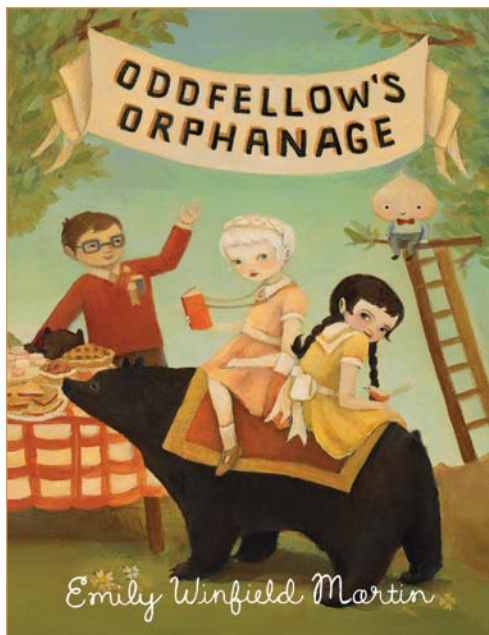
I nod.

But I know
my best isn't always good enough.

Caroline Starr Rose spent her childhood in the deserts of Saudi Arabia and New Mexico. She graduated from the University of New Mexico and went on to teach both social studies and English in New Mexico, Florida, Virginia, and Louisiana. Visit her at CarolineStarrRose.com.



Photo © Crystal Sanderson



Oddfellow's Orphanage

Written by Emily Winfield Martin

Edited by Mallory Loehr

ISBN: 978-0-375-86995-2

\$14.99/\$16.99 Can.

Middle-Grade Fiction

On sale: 1/24/2012



from the editor



I am a huge Etsy fan, and several years ago I found and fell in love with Emily's portraits of strange children. What I loved was the hint of edginess overlying the undeniable charm and sweetness of them. Delving further, I discovered that each portrait had a paragraph about the character, written in a style that had it's own quirky personality. From there I bounced over to Emily's website, finding the grouping of Oddfellow's orphans as well as Emily's blog, showcasing more of her individual writing style. The moment Emily and I started talking,

I knew she was meant to write and illustrate a book for children. She had story ideas and knew her characters' temperaments like an attentive parent. She also was passionate about old books and all the details of bookmaking down to the color of inks and the weight of paper. Emily and I talked about picture books, but the orphans wanted a longer story. Inspired by classics like *Winnie the Pooh* and *Mrs. Piggle Wiggle*, yet undeniably unique, *Oddfellow's Orphanage* is filled with illustrations and little stories that together tell a larger tale of family and friendship. It is a beautiful book to hold, to look at, and to read.

—Mallory Loehr

from

ODDFELLOW'S ORPHANAGE



The little girl peered out of the carriage and saw two bears lumbering quickly ahead, pulling the carriage through patches of twisting trees and over hills dotted with early blooms. The bears slowed to a loping walk as an enormous house appeared.

The enormous house was made of brick and was surrounded by a garden of monsters. The little girl grabbed Professor Stella's shoulder and shook her awake.

"What is it?" the professor asked sleepily, squinting as her eyes adjusted to the light.

The girl waved wildly at the monsters going by outside the carriage.

Professor Stella laughed. "Oh! They're not real, don't worry. They are made of bushes and trees."

The girl looked carefully out the window. She saw that each monster was, in fact, a plant trimmed to look like a creature. There was everything from a sea serpent rising out of the grass to a towering mermaid.

The carriage came to a sudden stop in front of the steps to the great house. The bears let out small roars to announce their return. These awoke the headmaster. He stretched his arms and said drowsily, "Home again, home again, jiggety-jig."

The door to the orphanage swung open. Hank came out as the professor stepped from the carriage. "Welcome back, Professor Stella," he said.

"Thank you, Hank," replied the professor as she held out her hand for the white-haired girl.

**Hank smiled. "Welcome to
Oddfellow's Orphanage, Delia."**

The girl took the professor's hand and jumped lightly onto the cobblestone drive.

"And welcome to you . . ." Hank paused, looking down at the small girl, who was

shyly fidgeting with her white braids.

She didn't speak, but fished a yellow pencil and a scrap of paper from her pocket. She wrote on the paper and held it up.

Hank smiled. "Welcome to Oddfellow's Orphanage, Delia."



Emily Winfield Martin draws, paints, and stitches to create imaginary worlds and characters. Her store, The Black Apple, has been featured in national publications and on TV shows, including the *New York Times* and *The Martha Stewart Show*. Emily lives in Portland, Oregon and at EmilyWinfieldMartin.com.



Photo © Josiah Shoup



Someone Else's Life

Written by Kate Dale

Edited by Michelle Poploff

ISBN: 978-0-385-74065-4

\$17.99/NCR

Young Adult Fiction

On sale: 2/14/2012



Delacorte
Press

from the editor



Reading this novel will make you think about what might have happened if you were switched at birth and living someone else's life.

Katie Dale has written a high-concept story featuring two compelling teenage narrators and their concurrent stories. One girl must reveal a devastating truth and the other has to make a life changing decision, not just about her own life, but her baby's—someone else's life.

Suspense and startling twists meet mystery and moral dilemma in this gripping novel of revenge and lies, first love and forgiving. Secrets from the past unravel and the desire to know the truth intensifies. But each girl must decide if the truth really is the most important thing or are some secrets best kept secret?

I hope you will join me in welcoming debut author Katie Dale who makes us wonder what would happen if our whole life was a lie.

—Michelle Poploff

from someone else's life

“I’ve come to a decision,” I say. Calmly, rationally. “I need to know.” I take a deep breath. “I need to know if I’ve got Huntington’s.”

There it is. Out in the open.

The color in Sarah’s cheeks melts away, leaving her pale and serious. “Rosie . . .”

“I’ve made up my mind.” I say, swallowing hard. “I can’t live like this, not knowing. I need to know if I’m going to get it too, if I’m going to . . .” The words stick in my throat. “I need to know the truth.”

“Rosie.” Sarah swallows, steps closer. “You have to think about this, take some time . . .”

“I have.” I round on her. “Don’t you think I have?”

**“Look, I know that with your
mum gone everything’s strange
and scary—”**

“Look, I know that with your mum gone everything’s strange and scary—”

“You don’t know anything!” I scream at her, my legs trembling. I’ve never shouted at Sarah, never yelled, never . . . but suddenly all the feelings that have been bot-

tled up for too long gush out in one big mess. “You don’t know.” I shake my head. “You don’t— you can’t . . .” I look away.

Sarah sighs. “All I’m saying is that it’s too soon to be making choices like this, to take the test—”

“Too soon? When do you want me to find out? When I’ve got kids too? I’m not a child anymore, Sarah— I’m nearly eighteen!”

“I know, Rosie, but this is a life-changing decision we’re talking about here. There’s no cure, and once you know, you can’t go back . . .”

“I can’t go back anyway!” I choke on the words. “And no, actually. It’s not a life-changing decision because nothing actually changes, does it? It’s already decided

from **someone else's life**

continued

whether I live or die—I'd just quite like to know which it's going to be, okay?"

Sarah looks beaten, hopeless.

"What kind of a life can I have otherwise?" I ask quietly. "Not knowing? Not knowing if one day I'll end up like—"

"You won't."

"Sarah, it's hereditary." I sigh. "It hangs on the toss of a coin."

"No." She takes my shoulders gently, her eyes so sad. "Rosie, sweetheart, you don't have Huntington's. You don't need the test."

"I'm not asking your permission, Sarah." I tell her quietly. "I've got an appointment at the clinic on Wednesday, and—"

"No." She says. "You don't understand." She takes a deep breath. "Rosie, you don't have the disease."

"Sarah," I say gently, as if to a child. "There's a fifty percent chance that I do— it's a genetic fact."

"That's what I mean." Sarah says slowly, not looking at me. "There is no chance."

"I—" I blink. "I don't understand . . ."

"Rosie . . ." She sighs, rubs her hand over her brow. "Oh, God!"

I don't move. Don't dare breathe.

"Rosie, you don't have the disease—you can't possibly, because—" Desperate pause. Swallow. Breath. "Because Trudie wasn't your mother."

Katie Dale studied English Literature at Sheffield University, spending a year at UNC–Chapel Hill, followed by drama school, a national Shakespeare tour, and eight months backpacking through Southeast Asia. She lives in England.



Photo © Faye Thomas



The Whole Story of Half a Girl

Written by Veera Hiranandani

Edited by Françoise Bui

ISBN: 978-0-385-74128-6

\$16.99/\$18.99 Can.

Middle-Grade Fiction

On sale: 1/10/2012



Delacorte
Press

from the editor



I instantly connected to *The Whole Story of Half a Girl* because it reflects the lives of so many children today. The protagonist, Sonia Nadhamuni, is of mixed heritage (half-Indian and half-Jewish), which stirs up questions about her cultural identity. She's also trying to make new friends after having switched schools, but fitting in means navigating a sea of popular girls, some of them welcoming, others not. And on the home front, she's dealing with the depression of her out-of-work father. For Sonia, it's a time of all-around change. A time when she observes that everyone—young and old—is a complex, fragile being, herself included. Nothing is black or white. It's these shades of gray that give this wonderful coming-of-age novel nuance and depth.

I especially love Sonia's interactions with her dad, love witnessing how their relationship shifts and evolves. This is truly a beautifully cadenced portrayal of a daughter-father dynamic.

I hope you'll be as moved by this debut novel as I was.

—Françoise Bui

from *the whole story of half a girl*

Dinner is quiet. Mom makes vegetable lasagna, which I normally love, but tonight I can barely taste it. Natasha squirms in her seat and eats with her hands until Dad reaches out, brushes her hands away from her mouth, and points to her fork. I concentrate on my food, shoveling in forkful after forkful.

"Mom," I suddenly say, "can I buy lunch at school from now on?"

"Why?" she asks.

"Because everybody does."

She looks at me and chews.

"That's not a great reason," she says.

"Forget it," I say and try to look really sad.

"I made a new friend today!" Natasha declares.

"That's great, sweetie," Mom says. "What's her name?"

"Jared."

"Oh, a boy," she says.

"Yeah, and he likes more colors than I do."

I slouch and roll my eyes. Now Natasha's off talking about all her strange art stuff that Mom finds so fascinating. For the rest of dinner I know they'll be talking about all the colors of the universe. Natasha loves to paint and draw and she's obsessed with colors, weird ones like fuchsia and lime green. She actually makes some pretty cool pictures, but I'm not in the mood for Miss Artist and her new color-loving friend.

"Please let me buy lunch tomorrow," I try again. "I won't buy any candy. My lunches smell."

"Did someone tell you that?" asks Mom.

"No, they just do. I can smell my tuna from the next room."

"Well, what would you buy?" she says putting her fork down and leaning back in

**Dad drops his fork on the plate
with an angry clang. We all
jump.**

her chair.

“Chicken nuggets,” I say.

“That’s it?”

“And an apple.”

“You need more than that.”

“Pretzels?”

Mom starts eating again and chews slowly on a green pepper from the salad.

“You know it’s okay to eat differently from other people if you like what you’re eating.”

Dad drops his fork on the plate with an angry clang. We all jump.

“Just let her buy the darn lunch,” he says.

Mom glares at him. He keeps his eyes down, picks up his plate, and brings it to the sink. When he’s gone, Mom looks at both of us. The corners of her lips twitch up into a faint, embarrassed smile.

“What’s wrong with Dad?” Natasha asks.

“He’s just having a bad day,” Mom says, her lips straight, her voice low.

That night I can’t sleep. I creep downstairs long after Mom kisses us both good-night and stand outside my parents’ bedroom. I don’t hear the TV, but the light is on. I inch closer to the door, trying not to make a sound. The floorboard creaks. I hold my breath and freeze. After a minute I crane my head to look in the bedroom. I see my Dad sitting on the far end of the bed, his back toward me, his face in his hands. Mom’s sitting next to him, rubbing his back. They’re both quiet. Dad probably just misses his job.

The next morning there’s a note by my bowl of Cheerios with a five-dollar bill.

Enjoy lunch. Love, Mom

Veera Hiranandani received her MFA in fiction writing from Sarah Lawrence College. Besides being a writer, she is also a Montessori teacher. Veera lives in New York.

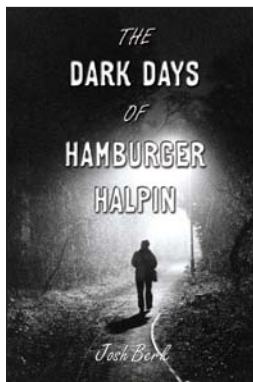


Photo © Anila Hiranandani

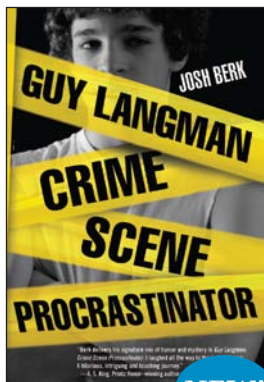
IT'S A SECOND!

Find out what former “It’s a First” novelists have been up to.

JOSH BERK



“It’s a First”

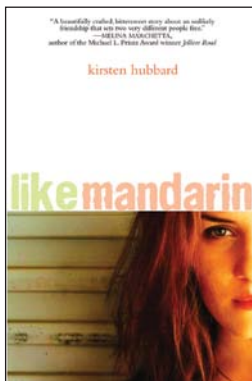


NEW!

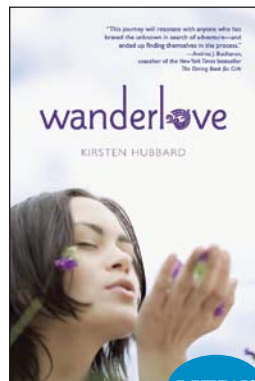
Guy Langman can't be bothered with much. But when his friend wants Guy to join the forensics club with him, Guy thinks why not. But when they find a real dead body on the simulated crime, they are going to need all their newfound forensics skills to solve the mystery.

KIRSTEN HUBBARD

In a quest for independence, Bria signs up for a tour of Central America. When Bria meets Rowan, she seizes the chance to ditch her group and join him off the beaten path. But Bria realizes she can't run forever. At some point, you have to look back.



“It’s a First”



NEW!

TOM LEVEEN



“It’s a First”



For aspiring artist Amanda Walsh, also known as Zero, the summer before college was supposed to be fun. But when her scholarship money doesn't materialize, her prospects start looking as bleak and surreal as a painting by her idol Salvador Dali. Can Zero show that she's so much more than a name?

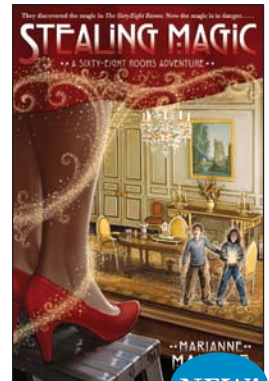
NEW!

MARIANNE MALONE

Ruthie and Jack thought that their adventures in the Thorne Rooms were over . . . until miniatures from the rooms start to disappear. Can they unlock the magic and figure out who's behind the robbery before it's too late?



“It’s a First”



NEW!

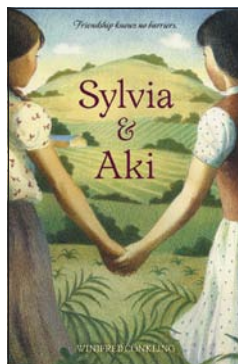
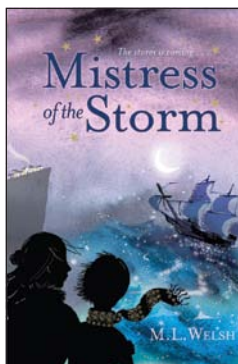
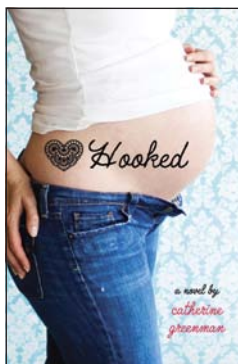
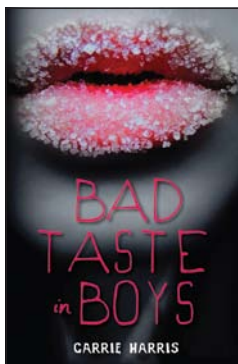
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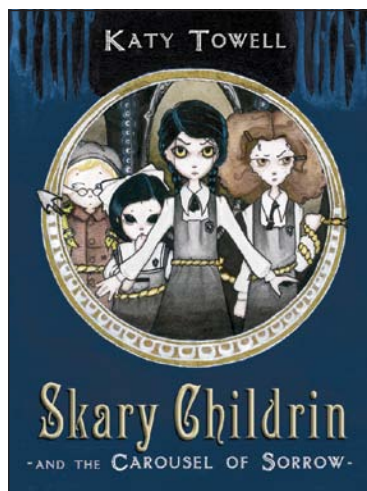
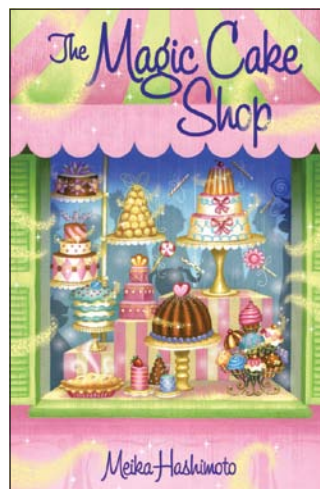
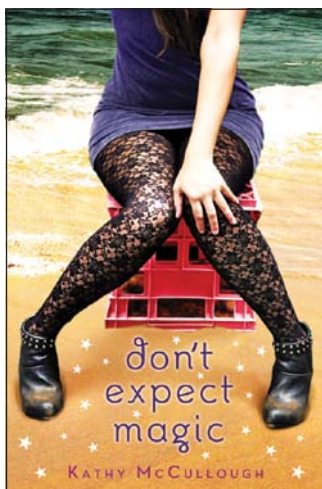
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