The Witch Boy
by Molly Knox Ostertag; illus. by the author
Intermediate, Middle School    Graphix/Scholastic    216 pp.
e-book ed.  978-1-338-08953-0    $7.99

Boys are shapeshifters and girls are witches—or so everyone keeps telling Aster, who has been studying spells in secret while pressure builds for him to conform to the norms of his magical community. According to legend, the last time a man bucked tradition and used witchcraft, it backfired, and the culprit—Aster’s great-uncle Mikasi—turned monstrous before disappearing. When some of the clan’s adolescent boys go missing in the forest that separates the enchanted community from the “regular” world, Aster and his new non-magic friend Charlotte (called Charlie) learn that Mikasi is behind the disappearances. Together they save the clan and persuade the community to rethink its strict adherence to gender roles. (Aster’s grandmother says of her brother, “I regret what we did to Mikasi every day. It was not his magic that was wrong, but what we denied him.”) This graphic novel’s clear panel outlines, subdued hues, and balanced paneled layouts allow the story and page-turns to progress at a steady pace. Various typefaces highlight different characters’ voices and personalities, and word balloons weave in and out of panels seamlessly, allowing extended moments of exposition to flow atop context presented visually. Close-up perspectives reveal characters’ facial expressions and feelings not explicitly stated in the dialogue, and an invented magical language is represented by symbols within word balloons. (Note that Ostertag’s culturally ambiguous world includes traditions resembling Native American vision quests, making for a fuzzy distinction between fantasy and exoticized reality.) ELISA GALL

Waylon!:
Even More Awesome
by Sara Pennypacker; illus. by Marla Frazee
Intermediate    Disney-Hyperion    204 pp.
10/17    978-1-4847-0513-9    $15.99

Though it could stand alone, the second book about fourth-grader Waylon picks up where Waylon!: One Awesome Thing (rev. 3/16) left off. Waylon and classmate Baxter aren’t friends: Baxter is “the closest thing to a juvenile delinquent [Waylon] had ever encountered.” But the two spend considerable time together scheming to protect Dumpster Eddy, the stray dog they both love but can’t take home due to family allergies and apartment restrictions. The local police station will keep a dog ten days before sending it to a shelter; and so, every eleventh day, the boys “bust” Eddy out and try to keep him safe until he is picked up again to stay at the station for another ten days. While it’s not an ideal solution, this works—for a time. Side storylines involving collaboration at school and at home bring more nuance and meaning to Waylon’s dilemmas. Waylon
still loves science and shares surprising facts whenever he can, which is both amusing and interesting. Waylon’s classmate Clementine, star of Pennypacker’s previous series, makes a few helpful cameos, with her straightforward outlook and creative spirit. Frazee’s illustrations deftly capture the story’s funniest as well as most meaningful moments. JU LiE ROAC H

13 Minutes
by Sarah Pinborough
High School Flatiron 343 pp.
Brits Becca and Natasha were best friends until Natasha dropped Becca for more fashionable companions. Years later, at sixteen, Natasha is found on the banks of a freezing river, officially dead for thirteen minutes before waking with no memory of the incident. The ensuing investigation draws Becca back into Natasha’s alluring orbit. Excerpts from Natasha’s diary depict her confusion, lingering trauma, and growing suspicion of Jenny and Hayley—the two girls who took Becca’s place as Natasha’s closest friends. Newspaper articles, text message exchanges, and interview transcripts add tantalizing and compelling details. A third-person omniscient narrator brings in the perspectives of other characters but largely positions Becca as the reluctant, vulnerable detective. Becca’s internal battle—between embracing an old friend and holding onto her new, hard-earned identity—is well drawn, but her friendship drama seems petty after another teen is killed during a rehearsal of the school production of The Crucible (yes, that’s relevant); it’s a shocking twist, and one that will send readers flipping back to find hidden clues now made plain. A tense, gritty psychological thriller, steeped in sex, drugs, partying, and social media. JESSICA TACKETT MACDONALD

★ Patina [Track]
by Jason Reynolds
Intermediate, Middle School Dlouhy/Atheneum 234 pp.
Back for the second leg of the Track series relay, the Defenders team has passed the baton to title character Patina, nicknamed Patty. First introduced to readers in Ghost (rev. 11/16), Patty has been forced to grow up quickly. After her father dies suddenly, Patty’s role in raising her younger sister Maddy grows larger as their mother gets ill and ultimately becomes a double amputee due to complications from diabetes. While moving in with their godparents, who have adopted them both, has relieved some of the pressure, Patty is not always certain how to relinquish her role as caregiver. She takes it upon herself to braid Maddy’s hair (as opposed to letting their adoptive mother, Momly, do it) because “ain’t no rule book for white people to know how to work with black hair.” Patty pushes Ma in her wheelchair to and from church on Sundays. She does all the work on her group project at school, and angrily counts