Older Readers

Balcony on the Moon: Coming of Age in Palestine.
By Ibtsam Barakat.

In this sequel to Tasting the Sky (2007), a memoir and winner of the Arab American Book Award, Barakat moves beyond her early school years during the Six-Day War and its uprooting aftermath. She focuses on the years 1971-81, when she—a feisty protofeminist—and her family shifted about in the occupied West Bank, trying to find a place that felt safe and like home. This family of seven is financially strapped—Barakat’s father is a truck driver afflicted with narcolepsy, a potentially deadly combination—and readers will be astounded at how often they relocate. The through line is Barakat’s overwhelming hunger for education, a passion that she eventually shares with her mother, whom she tutors so that they might tackle high school in tandem. The beauty of the writing is its clear-eyed matter-of-factness. Barakat doesn’t plead for sympathy (political or emotional); she just recalls, in concrete detail, this particular world as she experienced it as a young woman, and the result is as inspiring as it is engaging.

—Sandy MacDonald

How to Build a Museum: Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture.
By Tonya Bolden.

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, opening on September 24, 2016, represents the fulfillment of a dream that took hold 100 years ago among a group of black Civil War veterans. After introducing the new museum’s director, this handsome book outlines the project’s history, the institution’s goals, and the design and building of a suitable home near the Washington Monument. The museum’s staff faced the challenge of assembling a large collection of suitable objects “from scratch.” Many items were donated, while others were purchased. Beautifully designed, the book’s intriguing color photos shine from the bright pages. These illustrations include photos showing the museum’s construction and many spotlighting noteworthy photographs, documents, and artifacts, such as a black soldier’s powder horn from the American Revolution, a railway passenger car from the Jim Crow era, a biplane flown by Tuskegee Airmen, the ensemble worn by Marian Anderson at her Lincoln Memorial performance, and an Obama campaign bandanna. A well-organized and informative book introducing this significant new historical center. —Carolyn Phelan

By Russell Freedman.

How could an undeclared war with a tiny nation across the world become, according to former State Department official George Ball, “probably the greatest single error made by America in its history”? Leave it to Newbery medalist Freedman and his absorbing, concise style to explain it. He begins with a brief presentation of Vietnam’s long road to revolution, starting with a Chinese invasion in the first century BCE and continuing with French colonization. The main focus, however, is on North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh: his rise, his ties to the Communist party, and his bid for Vietnam’s independence. The text then shifts to U.S. involvement in the region and how President Kennedy and subsequent presidents became caught in the cross fire of opposing opinions on Vietnam, which became the first line of defense against Communist expansion. Freedman effectively conveys how a presupposed “easy” American victory in Vietnam was anything but, contrasting the grisly guerrilla warfare with the antiwar protests and divisive sentiments back in the U.S. Numerous vintage photos, many now iconic, add an even greater emotional impact to Freedman’s account. The text concludes with a thought-provoking and hopeful chapter on the reconciliation between the once embattled enemies.

Freedman makes one of history’s greatest messes easy to follow in this slim, but stellar, offering. —Angela Leeper

High-Demand Backstory: Freedman’s books are almost exclusively award winners, making this a must for all history shelves.

By Kathryn J. Atwood.

These brief accounts of women who rose to the challenges posed by Japan’s expansionist aggression culminating in WWII abound with facts and dates. Details duly mustered, this follow-up to Atwood’s Women Heroes of World War II (2011) is part helpful informational text, part enthralling narrative. Each of these 15 profiles could constitute a cliff-hanger screenplay, and several have indeed generated films—some disowned by their modest subjects as romanticized. To a woman, these health workers, journalists, and ingenious spies tended to downplay their heroism, exhibiting a phenomenal selflessness. Malayan nurse Sybil Kathigasu, for instance, risked her life—and that of her family—to tend to wounded guerrillas in secret. Her decision to do so all but ensured prison and torture, but she held fast to a bigger picture: “If we die to win the freedom that others may enjoy, there is comfort in that.” The fervor of the women whose stories are on display here seems to have arisen not so much from partisanship as from a shared bent: a deep, essential humanitarianism. Here the drama, much of it horrifying, plays out so effectively on the page—it leaps out like vivid 3-D—that readers of any age will come away both shaken and inspired.

—Sandy MacDonald

Middle Readers

The Holocaust: The Origins, Events, and Remarkable Tales of Survival.
By Philip Steele.

This comprehensive primer on the Holocaust is age-appropriate and frank. The opening pages offer plenty of explanation for the series of events leading up to the Holocaust, including generations of anti-Semitism in Europe and Germany’s humiliation in WWII. A matter-of-fact description of both the cultural traditions and religious beliefs of Judaism help highlight the Jewish experience, but other targeted groups, such as homosexuals and the infirm, are also explored. The propaganda that fueled many prejudices is a major theme, and Steele revisits the nature of discrimination at several important junctures. The book succeeds in providing an unflinching look into the inner workings of a concentration camp and attempts at escape, without including some of the most graphic and haunting images that may be unsuitable for younger readers. In fact, the focus on the impact of the Holocaust on the young will especially resonate with preadolescent audiences, making this a fitting resource for a first exposure to the topic.

—Erin Anderson

Irena’s Children: A True Story of Courage.
By Tilar J. Mazzeo and Mary Cronk Farrell. Illus. by Shana Torok.

Farrell adapts Mazzeo’s adult book for Continued on p.48
young readers, recounting the inspiring true story of Polish social worker Irena Sendler, who risked her life to save 2,500 Jewish children in the Warsaw ghetto from the Nazis during WWII. Between 1939 through 1945, ghetto inhabitants increasingly died of disease and starvation and were deported to extermination camps. In the midst of these horrific living conditions, Sendler and a small group of mostly female Jewish friends falsified Jewish children's paperwork, giving them Catholic identities, and ingeniously smuggled them out of the ghetto under overcoats, in coffins and toolboxes, and through underground sewers and tunnels. Known as "the female Oskar Schindler," Sendler was arrested and interrogated by the Nazis but never broke under torture. She was short in stature but had immense courage and didn't consider herself a hero: "What I did was not an extraordinary thing." The children Sendler saved and the readers of this moving biography would undoubtedly disagree. Final photos and endnotes not seen. —Sharon Rawlins

Jason and the Argonauts.


398.20938. Gr. 3-5.

The author of The Hero and the Minotaur: The Fantastic Adventures of Theseus (2005) returns to Greek mythology to retell the story of Jason, who sets sail on the Argo with a crew of legendary heroes. After enduring hardships and overcoming near-impossible challenges, they complete the quest and Jason returns home to take his rightful place on the throne of Iolcus. Byrd lays out these adventures in a straightforward manner, trusting the inherent drama of this timeless legend to captivate readers. The episodic story uses a series of two-page spreads to present the narrative, illustrations, and small sidebars highlighting gods, heroes, monsters, and other story elements. Apart from the portrayal of Jason on the jacket, the broad, large-scale illustrations usually show scenes from a bit of a distance. Humans appear to be vulnerable characters in landscapes and seascapes full of perils, from the Harpies to the bronze giant, from Circe and the Sirens to Scylla and Charybdis. The endpaper maps and title-page illustration are particularly fine. This handsome book offers a colorfully illustrated retelling of Jason's adventures. —Carolyn Plelan

Pocket Change: Pitching In for a Better World.

By Michelle Mulder.


Hailing tackled a variety of topics in environmental sustainability, Mulder turns to economic sustainability in this latest entry in the Footprints series. She begins by describing early humans, who carried everything they owned, and early economics involving bartering and currency. The author further relates that with the rise of the Industrial Revolution came a rise in income—and in more stuff. While some have too much, others, including millions of children, live and work in poverty and unsafe conditions. Mulder presents alternative ways that people around the world are making ends meet, such as through small-scale loans, using libraries of resources and toys, and trading time or services with others in need. She also shows how kids are pitching in, including growing neighborhood food and volunteering with Habitat for Humanity, to help those less fortunate. Numerous color photos throughout depict these young activists in action. A final section offers more ways that children can become involved to decrease spending and increase global awareness of economic concerns. An important and accessible book for growing communities. —Angela Leger

Young

Best in Snow.

By April Pulley Sayre.


A companion volume to Raindrops Roll (2015), this exceptionally handsome picture book offers a close-up look at snow. Crisp, concise phrases point out what happens before, during, and after a snowstorm, leading children from one idea to the next (freeze, cloud, snow, wind, sun, drips, slush) and ending with a sentence that echoes the beginning phrases. In the middle section, accompanying four large photos on two double-page spreads, these words relate to sunlight after a snowfall: "Air warms. / Snow softens. / It drips, / drip, / drip, / drips. / Snowmelt! / forms / icicle / tips." Elements of the text are sometimes slanted, curved, or arranged in ways that underscore their meanings. While the lyrical narrative alone could be read in a minute, the variety, intricacy, and beauty of the photos give viewers many reasons to pause and look closely at each striking image. Sayre has a well-deserved reputation for exceptional nature photography and dependable science writing for young children. The appended "Secrets of Snow" section presents additional information related to observations made within the book. Combining eye-catching photos and a spare, poetic text, Sayre's latest informational picture book is uncommonly rewarding for one-on-one sharing and highly recommended for school and primary-grade units on snow. —Carolyn Plelan

Dog on Board: The True Story of Eclipse, the Bus-Riding Dog.

By Dorothy Hinshaw Patent and Jeffrey Young.


This photo-filled picture book spotlights real-life Seattle dog Eclipse, who, in 2015, gained attention for riding the bus by herself. Told from Eclipse's point of view, the story relates how she and her adult owner regularly took the bus to the dog park, but on one occasion, they became separated and she boarded alone. Fortunately, she remembered the right stop and got off, her owner followed, and they reunited. Soon, she began riding independently, eventually getting her own bus pass. Thanks to a local news story, Eclipse gained further friends and fame, and here she describes other excursions, like visiting local businesses, and ponders future adventures. The lively text in a large, easy-to-read font pairs well with the many color photos depicting Eclipse on the bus and in the park, which highlight her friendly, social nature. Young, Eclipse's owner, offers some further info about her four-legged friend, including the fact that she's a service dog, in an appended note. Eclipse's story is perfect for the picture book set, and doggie lovers will get right on board. —Shelle Rosenfeld

Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.

By Jarvaka Steptoe. Illus. by the author.


Beautifully evoking his subject's exuberant, colorful, and playful art style in joyful paintings on scraps of found wood, Steptoe introduces young readers to Basquiat's childhood and early career. Born in Brooklyn, Basquiat loved art early, and with the encouragement of his similarly artistic mother, he actively pursued his dream of being a famous artist, finding creative inspiration not only at museums but also in the color and rhythm of the city around him. Basquiat's signature style—"loppy, ugly, and sometimes weird, but somehow still beautiful"—should appeal in particular to kids who find joy in free-form scribbles, and that same spirit animates Steptoe's collage illustrations. Thickly laid paints and exploded perspectives in bright hues depict scenes from Basquiat's life and highlight some of his iconic imagery, like golden cartoon crowns, eyeballs, and vehicles scattered everywhere. There's no mention of his problems with addiction or untimely death; rather, the book closes with him achieving his dream, crowned overhead and surrounded by clipped headlines about his work. A lively, engaging introduction to a one-of-a-kind artist perfect for art-loving kids. —Sarah Hunter