

1-1-2011

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Ward, B. A., & Young, T. A. (2011). Reading Graphically: Comics and Graphic Novels for Readers from Kindergarten through High School. *Reading Horizons*, 50 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol50/iss4/6

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Reading Graphically: Comics and Graphic Novels for Readers from Kindergarten through High School

Barbara A. Ward, Ph.D. & Terrell A. Young, Ed.D.

Hidden passions, comic books and graphic novels were once read in secret, smuggled under desks or masked behind textbooks. In the past, their fans were typically adolescent males who would descend on the local comic shops on a weekly or monthly basis to sort through the latest offerings and ponder the fate of their favorite superheroes – but no more. Times have changed in the comics industry. While males still dominate the readership, and superheroes such as the Hulk, Spider-Man, the X-Men, and Teen Titans still attract readers, comics have moved into the mainstream with many publishers adding comics and graphic novels to their catalogue offerings as they seek to appeal to female teen readers as well as those in the primary and middle grades. Today’s savvy teachers recognize that these visually appealing reading materials are not only excellent choices to hook reluctant readers, but they also may prove useful in reviving the flagging interests of once avid readers. These reading materials require different reading skills, necessitating readers to move across panels and pay attention to illustrations as well as text.

Teachers often feel confused by the use of the different terms associated with these forms of visual literacy; for instance, some are unable to distinguish between comic books and graphic novels. There are some differences between the two, but the lines continue to blur as more graphic novels fill bookstore shelves. Typically, comic books have been characterized by their size and their format as they are usually 28 pages in length and look similar to a magazine, only stapled, and they feature text and graphics that are enclosed in panels. The term “comic book” describes “any format that uses a combination of frames, words, and pictures to convey meaning and to tell a story. While all graphic novels are comics, not all comic books are graphic novels,” (McTaggart, 2008, p. 31). In general, once a comic book has passed the 50-page mark and is bound in soft or hard cover rather than being stapled, it is considered a graphic novel. However, it can still also be considered a comic book.

Although comic books have been read for decades, the term “graphic novel” is itself a fairly recent coinage, first used with Art Spiegelman’s masterful

examination of the Holocaust in *Maus* (1987) and *Maus II* (1992). The fact that *Maus II* received the 1992 Pulitzer Prize for Special Awards & Citations – Letters helped legitimize comics and graphic novels. And many industry insiders claim the comic world was never the same once the possible topics for graphic novels were expanded. Primarily because of *Maus's* unique characteristics, graphic novels came to be associated with publications that were organized in a comic book format in a soft-covered book.

Because their storylines are generally action-oriented, graphic novels and comics are particularly effective in keeping student interest high. According to McTaggart (2008), “Even a comic’s ‘slow’ times keep the kid’s interest because the action is visual” as “a student reads the words, sees the action, comprehends the meaning, and is motivated to read more” (p. 29). Young readers are attracted to the timeliness of comic books as their monthly publication allows their creators to react more swiftly to social and cultural changes than is possible for films or trade books. Thus, readers often feel as though what they are reading is cutting edge, making them cognizant of popular culture. McTaggart (2008) offers as an example the swiftness with which comics were able to address the destruction of New York City’s Twin Towers while books on the topic took much longer to be published. Fans of graphic novels and comics maintain that there is an immediacy about these genres that most trade books cannot deliver.

Whatever they are called, comic books or graphic novels, these visual treats for the eyes entice kids to read. Many literacy experts (Carter, 2007; Frey & Fisher, 2008; Monin, 2009; Stafford, 2010) extol their value in making reading a pleasurable activity rather than work. McTaggart (2008) maintains that reading graphic novels “promotes better reading skills, improves comprehension, and complements many areas of the curriculum” (p. 33). In addition,

The reduced amount of text and attention-grabbing graphics help ELL and struggling readers infer, predict, and reflect on what they read. Their skills improve as they read more, improved skills lead to greater comprehension, and enhanced comprehension creates a desire to read more. (McTaggart, 2008, p. 33)

No less an expert than read-aloud expert Jim Trelease touts the value of visual literacy when working with struggling readers. “I would go so far as to say if you have a child who is struggling with reading, connect him or her with comics” (Trelease, 2006, p. 99). Trelease (2006) acknowledges that inexperienced readers often need to be taught how to read a comic book or “how a comic ‘works’: the

sequence of the panels, how to tell when a character is thinking and when he is speaking; the meaning of stars, question marks and exclamation points” (p. 99). But the time spent in honing the skills needed to comprehend comic books and graphic novels reaps benefits for readers who develop critical literacy skills along with a keener sense of observation and enhanced prediction skills while literally learning to read between the lines.

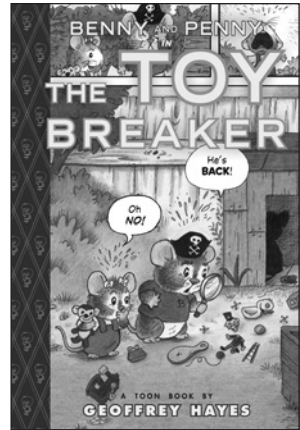
Below are some of the latest graphic novels that caught our eyes and kept us reading.

Grades K-2

Hayes, Geoffrey. (2010). *Benny and Penny in the Toy Breaker*.

Toon Books. 32 pages, \$12.95, ISBN 978-19351-7907-8.

As soon as they hear that their Cousin Bo is coming, Benny and Penny hide all of their toys because he often breaks them. Benny and Penny try to avoid playing with Bo, but things come to a climax when Bo tugs too hard on Penny’s monkey and a leg is ripped off. Eventually, all is forgiven as the young mice resolve their differences and play a game that cannot be ruined and Cousin Bo redeems himself by creating a get well card for Penny’s beloved monkey.

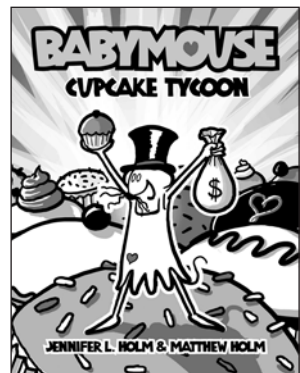


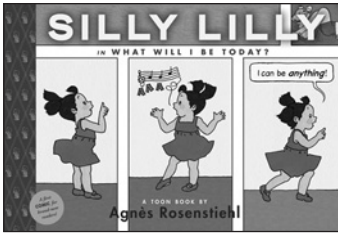
Holm, Jennifer L., & Holm, Matthew. (2010).

Babymouse #13: Cupcake Tycoon.

Random House. 96 pages, \$6.99, ISBN 978-03758-6573-2.

With the pink palette that typifies this graphic novel series and makes it appealing to young female readers, Babymouse takes on school fundraising and dreams of becoming the tycoon of all cupcake sales. Her heart may not be in the right place – she just wants to win the grand prize, no matter what she must do – but her mistakes leave readers laughing at her personality, her antics, and the clever writing that accompanies everything Babymouse does.

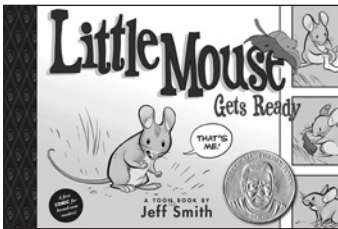




Rosentstiehl, Agnes. (2010). *Silly Lilly in What Will I Be Today?*

Toon Books. 32 pages, \$12.95,
ISBN 978-19351-7908-5.

Young readers join Silly Lilly as she tries out a new job for each day of the week. Silly Lilly playfully considers the traditional jobs such as cook, musician, and teacher before eventually taking on such roles as city planner and even vampire.

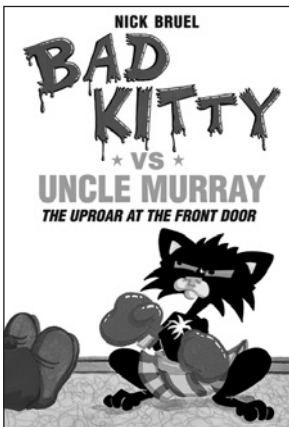


Smith, Jeff. (2009). *Little Mouse Gets Ready.*

Toon Books. 32 pages, \$12.95,
ISBN 978-19351-7901-6.

Readers will enjoy watching Little Mouse get dressed so he can go to the barn with his mother and siblings. He meticulously puts on each item of clothing and is surprised after he finishes the last of the snaps and buttons. Children will giggle when his mother reminds him that mice do not wear clothes.

Grades 3-4



Bruel, Nick. (2010). *Bad Kitty vs Uncle Murray.*

Roaring Brook. 160 pages, \$13.99, ISBN 978-15964-3596-4.

Children will laugh out loud while reading this outrageous graphic novel. Uncle Murray tends Kitty and Puppy while their owners are away and hilarity ensues. Kitty is always poised for the attack while Uncle Murray shares a plethora of cat facts. In the end, Uncle Murray considers pet-sitting fish rather than the pesky felines with whom he is stuck.

Davis, Eleanor. (2009). *The Secret Science Alliance and the Copycat Crook*. Bloomsbury. 160 pages, \$18.99, ISBN 978-15999-0142-8.

Geeky Julian Calendar tries to hide his affinity for gadgets and science when he moves to a new school, but his scientific predilection doesn't remain secret for very long. Before too long, two unlikely classmates join him in their shared geekiness and passion for cool inventions. Much to Julian's surprise, despite their outward coolness, they too are science geeks and have a lab where they concoct all sorts of gadgets. Inviting Julian to join them, they use several of those nifty gadgets to thwart the efforts of a corrupt scientist who steals their top-secret notebook filled with field notes and ideas for inventions.

Venable, Colleen A. F. (2010). *And Then There Were Gnomes*.

Illustrated by Stephanie Yue. Graphic Universe. 48 pages, \$6.95, ISBN 978-07613-4599-2.

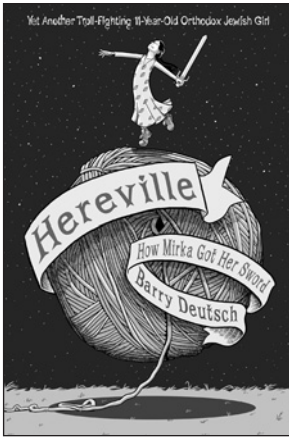
In the second book in the Guinea Pig Pet Shop Private Eye series, Hamisher the hamster once again seeks the help of Sasspants the reluctant private investigator in solving the mystery when four mice mysteriously disappear from the pet shop. Sasspants, a guinea pig who would much rather read books, finally agrees to help when tensions rise because the suspect is thought to be a ghost. The clueless pet store owner, Mr. Venezia, adds humor to the story as he cannot tell hermit crabs from tractors, or mice from alligators, leading to much confusion and false leads.



Grades 5-7

Deutsch, Barry. (2010). *Hereville: How Mirka Got Her Sword*. Colors by Jake Redmond. Amulet. 142 pages, \$15.95, ISBN: 978-0-8109-8422-6.

This is not your average adventure story with knights and damsels in distress. Instead, it's the story of one girl's determination and quest of a sort. Eleven-year-old Mirka Hirschberg has little interest in learning how to knit, how to find the right husband, or how to keep herself safe from danger by never taking risks. Although she loves her Orthodox Jewish family, she dreams of someday fighting dragons with



a sword. Although there is no sword in her house, she hears of one guarded by a troll, and Mirka is determined to have it. Mirka's journey will take her past a witch, a relentless pig, and into the forest as well as into the path of two bullies who harass her brother. When this tale has ended, Mirka will see the point of the lessons, both in knitting and in debate, that she received from her stepmother Fruma. The graphic novel's panels are drawn through Photoshop and with an interactive pen-on-screen tool.



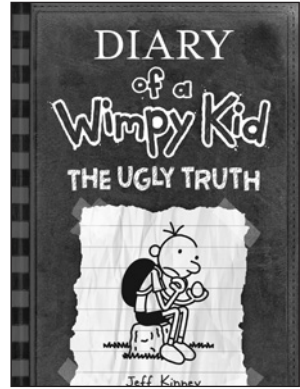
Ignatow, Amy. (2010). *The Popularity Papers*. Amulet/Abrams. 208 pages, \$15.95, ISBN 978-0-8109-8421-9.

Fifth graders Lydia Goldblatt and Julie Graham-Chang have been best friends for years, and they've decided to team together to climb the ladder of popularity. Lydia lives with her mother and sister while Julie lives with her two dads and one cat. Using the scientific method, they observe their more popular classmates, perform experiments, and try to find the key to popularity. Based on their observation of the changes from elementary to junior high in Melody, Lydia's older sister who goes from happy, flute-playing blonde to all-black garbed, black-hair dyed, and cranky teen, they are sure that they can't miss. Lydia keeps a record of their observations in a notebook illustrated by Julie and Lydia is also the one who will do the experiment. But even the best plans of best friends can go awry when it comes to popularity, and the two friends find themselves moving in different directions. Readers will laugh at many of the girls' mishaps and may even recognize themselves in some of the problems they encounter; for instance, neither could have predicted that they would end up on opposite sides in the class election. In the end, of course, both girls realize that popularity may not be all it's cracked up to be, and being true to yourself and those you can really count on is what's important. The author uses ink, colored pencil, colored marker, yarn, and digital materials to create the book's illustrations and to show how the relationship between the girls deteriorates.

Kinney, Jeff. (2010). *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Ugly Truth*.

Amulet. 218 pages, \$13.95, ISBN 978-08109-8491-2.

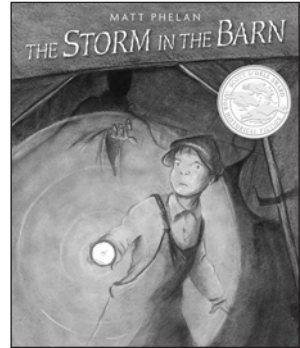
Greg has looked forward to growing up. Now with showers after gym class, parental expectations for greater responsibility, boy-girl parties, and boys-only health classes, he isn't so sure he is ready. Plus the fact that he and Rowley are no longer friends makes Greg unsure if he can make it through middle school as he is now on his own. Fans of the Wimpy Kid series will gobble this one up, laughing at Greg's cluelessness while seeing their own experiences mirrored within the book's pages.



Phelan, Matt. (2009). *The Storm in the Barn*.

Candlewick. 208 pages, \$24.99, ISBN 978-07636-3618-0.

Eleven-year-old Jack Clark is a shy boy who wants nothing more than to please his father. But Kansas in 1937, where the story is set, is not a place suited to family bonding since the men and women of the farm community are more concerned with the weather. As crops fail and dust seeps into the houses and lungs of Jack's ailing sister Dorothy, tempers rise and the town's citizens turn to superstition and cruelty to try to bring rain from the sky. While plagued by the town bullies, Jack finds solace in the stories told by an adult friend. Somehow convinced that the Storm king is in a nearby barn, Jack faces him down, and the rains fall. The pencil, ink, and watercolor illustrations allow a feeling of depression to settle over the pages, and during the jackrabbit drive a red haze fills the pages, dissipating as the men's anger does. Jack finds solace in his sister's oral reading of the *Wizard of Oz* stories of L. Frank Baum and his mother's description of a lush, fertile Kansas before all the hope had dried up.





Renier, Aaron. (2010). *The Unsinkable Walker Bean*. First Second/Roaring Brook. 208 pages, \$13.99, ISBN 978-15964-3453-0.

The geeky, pudgy, mild, and meek Walker Bean is an unlikely hero, but he readily takes on the challenge when his grandfather suffers from an ancient curse. Walker's quest includes returning a pearl skull to the witches who created it and his swashbuckling adventures will subject him to great danger as he encounters pirates, ancient lore, and magical machines.



Shiga, Jason. (2010). *Meanwhile: Pick Any Path. 3,856 Story Possibilities*. Amulet. 80 pages, \$15.95, ISBN 978-08109-8423-3.

When Jimmy must decide between two enticing flavors of ice cream – vanilla or chocolate – it's just the first of many choices he must make in this unusual book. Rather than reading panels from left to right, readers must follow color-coded tubes that move in all directions, from right to left, left to right, up to down, down to up, and move backwards rather than forwards on the pages. It's a whole new way of reading – and experiencing – a graphic novel. Jimmy somehow ends up in the laboratory of an eccentric scientist who allows him to play around with three inventions – a mind reader, a time machine, and a Killitron. Each action results in different realities and almost infinite parallel universes.

Taylor, Sarah Stewart. (2010). *Amelia Earhart: This Broad Ocean*.

Illustrated by Ben Towle. Hyperion. 96 pages, \$17.99, ISBN 978-14231-1337-9.

On her 1928 transatlantic flight, the famous aviator is forced to stop in a small Canadian town to refuel. A teenage girl in the town is intrigued by Earhart and her adventures and vows to interview her while she is stuck in the remote area because of bad weather conditions. Revealing another side to Earhart and her crew, the book contains excellent endnotes, and highlights the changing role of women.



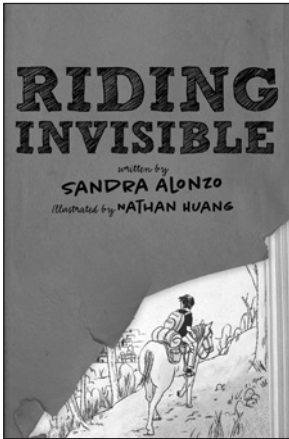
Telgemeier, Raina. (2010). *Smile*.

Scholastic/Graphix. 224 pages, \$21.99, ISBN 978-05451-3205-3.

In this autobiographical tale from the author's own dental experiences, life is fairly normal for sixth grader Raina until the day she falls and loses her two front teeth. Things never return to normal as Raina embarks on a series of dental adventures including surgery, implants, false teeth, tooth rearrangement, braces, and the social awkwardness that accompanies each of these changes. Plagued by a body that refuses to grow breasts and teeth that are decidedly different from her peers, Raina finds adolescence a tough experience. When her friends are not as supportive as might be expected, she must find other friends, gaining courage through her adversities. As she learns to speak up against peers who do not have her best interest at heart, Raina also finds solace in her artistic talents. The full color artwork does justice to the positive-thinking Raina and those who surround her.



Grades 7-10



Alonzo, Sandra. (2010). *Riding invisible*. Illustrated by Nathan Huang. Hyperion. 234 pages, \$15.99, ISBN 978-142311898-5.

Fifteen-year-old Yancy Aparicio receives a journal from his parents for his birthday, and he uses it to record his thoughts when he is forced to leave his California home on his beloved horse Shy. The family has been held hostage emotionally by his older brother Will who had a conduct disorder and is becoming increasingly violent, threatening Yancy's horse and sending them on the run. While his mother meditates and his father tries to manage the situation, things go from bad to worse. On his journey, Yancy meets some caring individuals, ends up on a ranch, and finds himself and courage. While fending off the advances of the sultry daughter of a ranch owner, the artistic teen dreams of summoning the courage to reveal his crush on schoolmate Christi while living free from fear at home. As he records his thoughts over the course of 24 days, Yancy faces some harsh truths about his family and himself. Comic strips and illustrations are scattered throughout the journal, making it clear how Yancy sees himself as largely invisible in a family whose focus remains on his troubled brother.

Geary, Rick. (2009). *The Adventures of Blanche*. Dark Horse Books. 104 pages, \$15.95, ISBN 978-1-59582-258-1.

The author sorts through the personal effects of his grandmother Blanche Womack after her death and discovers that she had a life filled with secrets and adventure. As he reads her letters to his parents, he realizes that Blanche was a woman ahead of her times and she wasn't merely a piano teacher who helped little girls learn how to press the black and white keys at all. Geary includes three adventures from the life of Blanche, each one making the reader long to hear her stories. Blanche's first adventure happened back in 1907 when the intrepid explorer left her Kansas home for the excitement and bustle of New York City in order to study piano with a master. Each night she was awakened by a sound in the walls, and finally followed it through a series of underground tunnels where she found another universe. Somehow, she ended up being kidnapped after her piano recital, survived a leap from the Brooklyn Bridge as she and a partner ran from the bad guys, and ended up posing for a nude portrait. In her second and third adventures,

Blanche went to Hollywood in 1915, ended up flying in a hot air balloon, and was saved from flying off above the Pacific by using herself as an anchor to a tree. She finally found herself in Paris in 1921 where her adventure culminated in a rapid ascent to the Eiffel Tower.

Hale, Dean & Hale, Shannon. (2010). *Calamity Jack*.

Illustrated by Nathan Hale. Bloomsbury. 144 pages, \$19.99, ISBN 978-15999-0076-6.

This sequel to the appealing *Rapunzel's Revenge* (Bloomsbury, 2008) follows the adventures of Jack and Rapunzel as they return to the city of Jack's birth. As a boy in Shyport, Jack wasn't always the most honest or trustworthy boy, and he and his sidekick Pru who loves hats of all kind became embroiled in various escapades. When one of his plans goes awry, his mother banishes him, and Jack leaves town with his goose tucked under his arm. The story begins where *Rapunzel's Revenge* leaves off. All the appealing elements of the first story are included in this one, and those familiar with the infamous beanstalk from fairy tales will have a good idea about how this story will turn out. What's exceptionally enticing is the budding romance between Jack and Rapunzel as his burgeoning jealousy when Rapunzel attracts the attention of another suitor is pitch perfect as are many of the exchanges between the characters. The artwork is vivid and appealing, bringing these beloved characters to life and prompting fans to clamor for more from this team.

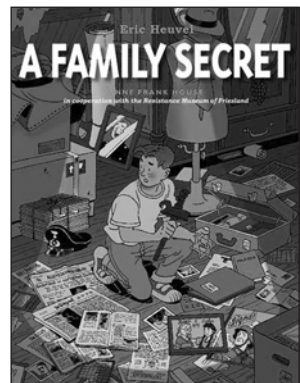
Heuvel, Eric. (2009). *A Family Secret*.

Farrar, Strauss & Giroux. 64 pages.

Hardback \$18.99, ISBN 978-03743-2271-7;

paperback \$9.99, ISBN 978-03744-2265-3.

As Jeroen looks in his grandmother's attic for something to sell at the Queen's Day flea market he discovers an old scrapbook. The scrapbook brings back a flood of memories for his grandmother and she recounts what it was like to live in the Netherlands during the Nazi occupation. Grandmother tells Jeroen about her father who worked for the Dutch Nazi Party, a brother who wanted to join the Nazis, another who secretly participated in the Resistance, and a friend who was a Jewish refugee from Germany. Jeroen learns that even his Nazi-leaning relatives did good and noble things, and the actions of those in the Resistance sometimes did things that were less than honorable. This book was originally published in Dutch by the Anne Frank House in cooperation with the Jewish Historical Museum of Amsterdam. Heuvel collaborated with Ruud



van der Rol and Lies Schippers to expand the story *A Family Secret* into another graphic novel, *The Search* (2009).



Jablonski, Carla. (2010). *Resistance Book 1*. Illustrated by Leland Purvis. First Second/Roaring Brook. 124 pages, \$16.99, ISBN 978-1596432918.

Life changes quickly for Paul and his sister Marie after the Nazis invade their French village. First, the Nazis take their father and then they must hide their Jewish friend, Henri, after his parents disappear. Eventually they seek out the French resistance and learn that it is not always easy to determine who is on which side. Paul and Marie utilize Paul's artistic talents to complete their first task for the Resistance and are eventually given a mission to transport information to

Paris and enable Henri to reunite with his parents. Will their mission succeed? This book is a perfect companion to Carla Killough McClafferty's *In Defiance of Hitler: The Secret Mission of Varian Fry* (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2008), a nonfiction book about an American's involvement with the French Resistance.



Larson, Hope. (2010). *Mercury*. Atheneum/Simon & Schuster. 234 pages, \$19.99, ISBN 978-1-4169-3585-8.

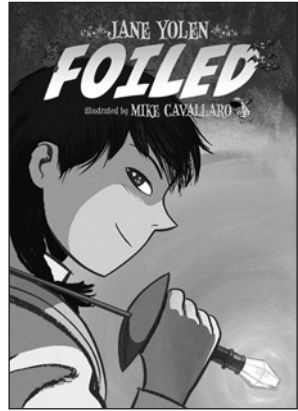
Two stories come together in this intriguing tale of the greed and darkness that often lie hidden within many of us. In the first story, set in 1859, lovely but obedient Josey Fraser, the daughter of a Nova Scotian farmer whose land contains gold, falls for a mysterious stranger who claims he has the ability to find that gold. Josey's kindly father trusts Asa Curry, the mysterious stranger but her mother does not. Josey

herself can only see good in Asa, but it turns out her mother is right as Asa cannot be trusted and betrays those around him. One hundred and fifty years later, in the same town, French Hill, teen Tara Fraser is dealing with the loss of her house. When her aunt gives her a pendant once belonging to her mother, Tara discovers that the pendant has powers. How the two stories weave together is interesting and affords the reader insight into the past and its effects on the future.

Yolen, J. 2010. *Foiled*.

Illustrated by Mike Cavallaro. First Second. 160 pages, \$15.99, ISBN 978-159643279-6.

Life is made barely tolerable for Alieria Carstairs because of her fencing prowess as she keeps to a strict training routine and defeats much older competitors in her matches. She also stays to herself, content to be a loner. When a new guy at school asks her out, she goes, taking her fencing equipment along. As she dons her fencing mask in Grand Central Station, Alieria sees all sorts of creatures that shouldn't exist and when her lost foil is returned, it comes with the revelation that she is the protector of a world called Helfdon. The illustrations are particularly effective for this unique story, filled with color when Alieria encounters a fantasy world.



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