

**KEYSTONE TO READING SECONDARY BOOK AWARDS 2019-2020**  
**ANNOTATED MIDDLE SCHOOL BOOK LIST**

***A World Below*** by Wesley King

Mr. Baker's eighth grade class thinks they are in for a normal field trip to Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. But when an earthquake hits, their field trip takes a terrifying turn. The students are plunged into an underground lake...and their teacher goes missing.

They have no choice but to try and make their way back above ground, even though no one can agree on the best course of action. The darkness brings out everyone's complex nature. Supplies dwindle and tensions mount. Pretty and popular Silvia does everything she can to hide her panic attacks, even as she tries to step up and be a leader. But the longer she's underground, the more frequent and debilitating they become. Meanwhile, Eric has always been a social no one, preferring to sit at the back of the class and spend evenings alone. Now, he finds himself separated from his class, totally by himself underground. That is, until he meets an unexpected stranger.

(Fantasy, grades 6-9)

***Amal Unbound*** by Aisha Saeed

Life is quiet and ordinary in Amal's Pakistani village, but she has no complaints, and besides, she's busy pursuing her dream of becoming a teacher one day. Her dreams are temporarily dashed when--as the eldest daughter--she must stay home from school to take care of her siblings. Amal is upset, but she doesn't lose hope and finds ways to continue learning. Then the unimaginable happens--after an accidental run-in with the son of her village's corrupt landlord, Amal must work as his family's servant to pay off her own family's debt.

Life at the opulent Khan estate is full of heartbreak and struggle for Amal--especially when she inadvertently makes an enemy of a girl named Nabila. Most troubling, though, is Amal's growing awareness of the Khans' nefarious dealings. When it becomes clear just how far they will go to protect their interests, Amal realizes she will have to find a way to work with others if they are ever to exact change in a cruel status quo, and if Amal is ever to achieve her dreams.

(Realistic Fiction, grades 6-9)

***Chasing King's Killer: The Hunt for Martin Luther King Junior's Assassin***

by James L. Swanson

*In his meteoric, thirteen-year rise to fame, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led a mass movement for Civil Rights -- with his relentless peaceful, non-violent protests, public demonstrations, and eloquent speeches. But as violent threats cast a dark shadow over Dr. King's life, Swanson hones in on James Earl Ray, a prison escapee who tragically ends King's life.*

(Nonfiction, grades 6-9)

***Code Word Courage*** by Kirby Larson

Billie is surprised when Leo brings a fellow Marine, Denny, home from boot camp. She has so much to ask Leo -- about losing her best friend and trying to find their father -- but Denny, who is Navajo, or Diné, comes with something special: a gorgeous, but injured, stray dog. As Billie cares for the dog, whom they name Bear, she and Bear grow deeply attached to each other.

Soon enough, it's time for Leo and Denny, a Navajo Code Talker, to ship out. Billie does her part for the war effort, but she worries whether Leo and Denny will make it home, whether she'll find a new friend, and if her father will ever come back. Can Bear help Billie -- and Denny -- find what's most important?

(Historical Fiction, grades 4-9)

***Deep Water*** by Watt Key

After her father falls ill, twelve-year-old Julie Sims must take over and lead two of his clients on a dive miles off the coast of Alabama while her father stays behind in the boat. When the clients, a reckless boy Julie's age and his equally foolhardy father, disregard Julie's instructions during the dive, she quickly realizes she's in over her head. And once she surfaces, things only get worse: One of the clients is in serious condition, and their dive boat has vanished—along with Julie's father, the only person who knows their whereabouts. It will be only a matter of time until they die of hypothermia, unless they become shark bait first. Though Julie may not like her clients, it's up to her to save them all.

(Realistic Fiction/Adventure, grades 4-9)

***Front Desk*** by Kelly Yang

Mia Tang has many secrets. Number 1: She lives in a motel, not a big house. Every day, while her immigrant parents clean the rooms, ten-year-old Mia manages the front desk of the Calivista Motel and tends to its guests. Number 2: Her parents hide immigrants. And if the mean motel owner, Mr. Yao, finds out they've been letting them stay in the empty rooms for free, the Tangs will be doomed. Number 3: She wants to be a writer. But how can she when her mom thinks she should stick to mathematics because English is not her first language?

It will take all of Mia's courage, kindness, and hard work to get through this year. Will she be able to hold on to her job, help the immigrants and guests, escape Mr. Yao, and pursue her dreams?

(Realistic Fiction, grades 4-9)

***Ghost Boys*** by Jewell Parker Rhodes

Twelve-year-old Jerome is fatally shot by a police officer who mistakes the boy's toy gun for a real threat. As a ghost, his spirit observes the devastation that's been unleashed on his family and community in the wake of what they see as an unjust and brutal killing.

Soon Jerome meets the spirit of Emmett Till, a boy from a very different time but similar circumstances. Emmett helps Jerome process what has happened and recognize how historical racism may have led to the events that ended his life. Jerome also meets Sarah, the daughter of the police officer, who grapples with her father's actions.

Once again Jewell Parker Rhodes deftly weaves historical and socio-political threads into a gripping and poignant story about how children and families face the complexities of today's world, and how one boy considers American blackness in the aftermath of his own death.

(Historical Fiction, grades 4-8)

***Just Like Lackie*** by Lindsey Stoddard

For as long as Robinson "Robbie" Hart can remember, it's just been she and Grandpa. He taught her about cars, baseball, and everything else worth knowing. But Grandpa's memory has been getting bad—so bad that he sometimes can't even remember Robbie's name.

Robbie is sure that she's making things worse by getting in trouble at school, but she can't resist using her fists when bullies like Alex Carter make fun of her for not having a mom. Now she's stuck in group guidance—and to make things even worse, Alex Carter is there, too. There's no way Robbie will open up about her life to some therapy group, especially not with Alex in the room. Besides, if she tells anyone how forgetful Grandpa's been lately, they'll take her away from him. He's the only family she has—and it's up to her to keep them together, no matter what.

(Realistic Fiction, grades 3-8)

***Lifeboat 12*** by Susan Hood

With Nazis bombing London every night, thirteen-year-old Ken must escape. He suspects his stepmother is glad to see him go, but his dad says he's one of the lucky ones—one of ninety boys and girls to ship out aboard the *SS City of Benares* to safety in Canada.

Life aboard the luxury ship is grand, with nine-course meals and new friends. Ken is far from the bombs, rations, and his stepmum's glare. And after five days at sea, the ship's officers announce that they are out of danger. They're wrong.

Late that night, an explosion hurls Ken from his bunk. The *Benares* has been torpedoed and is sinking quickly! Terrified, Ken scrambles aboard Lifeboat 12 with five other boys. Will they get away? Will they survive? (Historical Fiction, grades 4-8)

***The Ambrose Deception*** by Emily Ecton

Melissa is a nobody. Wilf is a slacker. Bondi is a show-off. At least that's what their middle school teachers think. To everyone's surprise, they are the three students chosen to compete for a \$10,000 scholarship by solving clues that lead them to various locations around Chicago. At first the three contestants work independently, but it doesn't take long before each begins to wonder whether the competition is a sham. It's only by secretly joining forces and using their unique talents that the trio is able to uncover the truth behind the Ambrose Deception—a truth that involves much more than just a scholarship. (Mystery, grades 4-8)

***The Not So Boring Letters of Private Nobody*** by Matthew Landis

Twelve-year-old Oliver Prichard is obsessed with the Civil War. He knows everything about it: the battles, the generals, every movement of the Union and Confederate Armies. So when the last assignment of seventh-grade history is a project on the Civil War, Oliver is over the moon—until he's partnered with Ella Berry, the slacker girl with the messy hair who does nothing but stare out the classroom window. And when Oliver learns that they must research a random soldier named Private Raymond Stone who didn't even fight in any battles before dying of some boring disease, Oliver knows he's doomed.

But Ella turns out to be very different from what Oliver expected. As the partners film their documentary about Private Stone—with Oliver's friend Kevin signing on as their head writing consultant—Oliver discovers that sometimes the most interesting things are hiding in uninteresting places. Even Private Stone is more intriguing than expected: there's a mystery buried in his past, and Oliver knows he can figure it out.

(Realistic Fiction, grades 3-8)

**Zap** by Martha Freeman

Luis Cardenal is toasting a Pop-Tart when a power outage strikes Hampton, New Jersey. Elevators and gas pumps fail immediately; soon cell phones die and grocery shelves empty. Cold and in the dark, people begin to grow desperate. Luis likes to know how things work, and the blackout gets him wondering: Where does the city's electricity come from? What would cause it to shut down?

No one seems to have answers, and rumors are flying. Then a slip of the tongue gives Luis and his ex-best friend Maura a clue. Brushed off by the busy police, the two sixth graders determine they are on their own. To get to the bottom of the mystery, they know they need to brave the abandoned houses of Luis's poor neighborhood and find the homeless teen legend known as Computer Genius. What they don't know is that someone suspects they know too much, someone who wants to keep Hampton in the dark. (Realistic Fiction, grades 3-8)

The Keystone to Reading Secondary Book Awards lists are created to give students a voice in the selection of the children's choice book awards presented each year at the annual KSLA Conference. The information presented in these annotations represents the thoughts and opinions of the reviewers and does not necessarily represent the viewpoints of the Keystone State Literacy Association.