

Unit 6-3 Novel Previews

CORE Novels

Catherine, Called Birdy - Lady Catherine (called Birdy) is the fourteen-year-old daughter of a knight and lady of a manor. Their only daughter, she is expected to wed soon, thereby bringing in a significant price from her suitor. Birdy, however, has other ideas. She knows that in terms of some people (barons, kings, etc.) her family is not particularly rich, but she also feels that no money in the world would be worth her marriage to some empty-headed blockhead. As such, the book follows the day-to-day activities of a young lady in jolly old England as she outsmarts and drives away a variety of different potential husbands. To do so, the tale is told through Birdy's journal entries, usually beginning with a note as to what the saint day it is and how they died. The book really hits its stride when Birdy finds herself engaged to a man that repulses and disgusts her more than any other she's met thus far.

Crispin The Cross of Lead - Genre-jumping author Avi clocks in here with his 50th book, *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*, an action-packed historical narrative that follows the frantic flight of a 13-year-old peasant boy across 14th-century England.

After being declared a "wolf's head" by his manor's corrupt steward for a crime he didn't commit (meaning that anyone can kill him like a common animal--and collect a reward), this timid boy has to flee a tiny village that's the only world he's ever known. But before our protagonist escapes, Avi makes sure that we're thoroughly briefed on the injustices of feudalism--the countless taxes cottars must pay, the constant violence, the inability of a flawed church to protect its parishioners, etc. Avi then folds in the book's central mystery just as the boy is leaving: "Asta's son," as he's always been known, learns from the village priest that his Christian name is Crispin, and that his parents' origins--and fates--might be more perplexing than he ever imagined.

Providing plenty of period detail (appropriately gratuitous for the age group) and plenty of chase-scene suspense, Avi tells a good story, develops a couple of fairly compelling characters, and even manages to teach a little history lesson. (Fortunately, kids won't realize that they're learning about England's peasant revolt of 1381 until it's far too late.)

The Book of Three - The tale of Taran, assistant pig keeper, has been entertaining young readers for generations. Set in the mythical land of Prydain (which bears a more than passing resemblance to Wales), Lloyd Alexander's book draws together the elements of the hero's journey from unformed boy to courageous young man. Taran grumbles with frustration at home in the hamlet Caer Dallben; he yearns to go into battle like his hero, Prince Gwydion. Before the story is over, he has met his hero and fought the evil leader who threatens the peace of Prydain: the Horned King. What brings the tale of Taran to life is Alexander's skillful use of humor, and the way he personalizes the mythology he has so clearly studied...

...(taken from a review) There are books that you don't want to see come to an end. There are books that rattle in your brain, heart and soul, and stay with you, never to be forgotten. Lloyd Alexander's magnificent series falls into these categories. I first read them at the age of 13 and have just read them again at 35. This series was the first that I did not want to see end. It's what got me started on reading Tolkien. The characters in Book of Three are dynamic, engaging, and more real than the average fantasy ones. The stories move along nicely with few if any slow moments. The classic elements of good and evil are all here with some twists. The theme/message is that the way of the warrior is not the only path to nobility, honor, and courage.

Dragon, Hound of Honor - You can definitely count on books from the Julie Andrews Collection to contain good story lines and inspiring messages. DRAGON: Hound of Honor is a perfect example of the fine quality work the collection encompasses. When the knight, Aubrey de Montdidier, mysteriously disappears there is an immediate sense of something amiss. Everyone in the kingdom is shocked, dismayed and horrified when, with the help of the knight's dog, Dragon, his bloodied body is found. No one can imagine why this terrible thing has happened, least of all his best friend Guy deNarac and his young page Thierry, plus Aubrey's future bride, the lovely Lady Isabelle. Through the dog, Dragon, a most unlikely suspect is eventually found, but how can a dog communicate this kind of information?

Many interesting characters bring this story to life, but the most fascinating one is Dragon, the great white wolfhound. This dog is intelligent and loyal, and ultimately helps bring the murderer of his young master to justice. Readers will be amazed at the dog's courage and willingness to sacrifice himself --- this is the story of a real hero.

Multiple expressions and words, which reflect both the time period and the French language, are found throughout the book. Helpful glossaries of French-English and medieval terms are provided for readers at the end. The authors have worked hard to tell a wonderful story and give an accurate picture of life during medieval times. Kids will undoubtedly enjoy this excellent book, which is perfect to use in an educational setting.

The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe - To avoid the threat of bombings in London, the four Pevensie kids are sent to stay with a wealthy, eccentric professor in the country. But strange things start to happen when Lucy finds a wardrobe

during a game of hide-and-seek -- when she climbs in, she finds a snowy woodland and a friendly faun. Her siblings don't believe her... until peevish Edmund also ventures through, and encounters the beautiful but evil White Witch.

Soon all four are wandering through the snowy land of Narnia, encountering mythical creatures and talking animals. They also find that the four of them are at the center of a prophecy that will lead to the return of lion-messiah Aslan, and the downfall of the White Witch. But things don't go according to plan when Edmund defects to the Witch's side...

Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH- There's something very strange about the rats living under the rosebush at the Fitzgibbon farm. But Mrs. Frisby, a widowed mouse with a sick child, is in dire straits and must turn to these exceptional creatures for assistance. Soon she finds herself flying on the back of a crow, slipping sleeping powder into a ferocious cat's dinner dish, and helping 108 brilliant, laboratory-enhanced rats escape to a utopian civilization of their own design, no longer to live "on the edge of somebody else's, like fleas on a dog's back."

This unusual novel, winner of the Newbery Medal (among a host of other accolades) snags the reader on page one and reels in steadily all the way through to the exhilarating conclusion. Robert O'Brien has created a small but complete world in which a mother's concern for her son overpowers her fear of all her natural enemies and allows her to make some extraordinary discoveries along the way. O'Brien's incredible tale, along with Zena Bernstein's appealing ink drawings, ensures that readers will never again look at alley rats and field mice in the same way.

Guided Reading Novels

The Hobbit - "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort." The hobbit-hole in question belongs to one Bilbo Baggins, an upstanding member of a "little people, about half our height, and smaller than the bearded dwarves." He is, like most of his kind, well off, well fed, and best pleased when sitting by his own fire with a pipe, a glass of good beer, and a meal to look forward to. Certainly this particular hobbit is the last person one would expect to see set off on a hazardous journey; indeed, when Gandalf the Grey stops by one morning, "looking for someone to share in an adventure," Baggins fervently wishes the wizard elsewhere. No such luck, however; soon 13 fortune-seeking dwarves have arrived on the hobbit's doorstep in search of a burglar, and before he can even grab his hat or an umbrella, Bilbo Baggins is swept out his door and into a dangerous adventure.

The dwarves' goal is to return to their ancestral home in the Lonely Mountains and reclaim a stolen fortune from the dragon Smaug. Along the way, they and their reluctant companion meet giant spiders, hostile elves, ravaging wolves--and, most perilous of all, a subterranean creature named Gollum from whom Bilbo wins a magical ring in a riddling contest. It is from this life-or-death game in the dark that J.R.R. Tolkien's masterwork, *The Lord of the Rings*, would eventually spring. Though *The Hobbit* is lighter in tone than the trilogy that follows, it has, like Bilbo Baggins himself, unexpected iron at its core. Don't be fooled by its fairy-tale demeanor; this is very much a story for adults, though older children will enjoy it, too. By the time Bilbo returns to his comfortable hobbit-hole, he is a different person altogether, well primed for the bigger adventures to come--and so is the reader.

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban - For most children, summer vacation is something to look forward to. But not for our 13-year-old hero, who's forced to spend his summers with an aunt, uncle, and cousin who detest him. The third book in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series catapults into action when the young wizard "accidentally" causes the Dursleys' dreadful visitor Aunt Marge to inflate like a monstrous balloon and drift up to the ceiling. Fearing punishment from Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon (and from officials at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry who strictly forbid students to cast spells in the nonmagic world of Muggles), Harry lunges out into the darkness with his heavy trunk and his owl Hedwig.

As it turns out, Harry isn't punished at all for his errant wizardry. Instead he is mysteriously rescued from his Muggle neighborhood and whisked off in a triple-decker, violently purple bus to spend the remaining weeks of summer in a friendly inn called the Leaky Cauldron. What Harry has to face as he begins his third year at Hogwarts explains why the officials let him off easily. It seems that Sirius Black--an escaped convict from the prison of Azkaban--is on the loose. Not only that, but he's after Harry Potter. But why? And why do the Dementors, the guards hired to protect him, chill Harry's very heart when others are unaffected? Once again, Rowling has created a mystery that will have children and adults cheering, not to mention standing in line for her next book. Fortunately, there are four more in the works.

The Squire's Tale – (Not arriving until April 2008.) A 14-year-old boy lives the adventure of being a knight's squire in this novel based on the legends of Camelot. Terence seems a typical youth of medieval England, except for the rumors that he has faeries for parents and a guardian who "remembers" the future. When Sir Gawain offers Terence the chance to become his squire, and to teach him how to become a knight, the lad agrees and soon the pair are on the road. Morris packs his story with plenty of familiar faces, including King Arthur, Merlin, and the Lady of the Lake, and the narrative is constructed of events drawn from Arthurian legend. There are plenty of sword fights and flashes of sorcery to delight readers, while the plot moves at a swift clip. Although the tale ends long before Terence earns his knighthood, he does learn the true identity of his parents, especially his father, Ganscotter the Enchanter. An author's note discusses the sources for the novel, providing plenty of additional territory for budding Arthurians to explore.

Girl in a Cage - Grade 6-10-The coauthors of *Queen's Own Fool* (Philomel, 2000) present an equally compelling interpretation of an earlier period in Scotland's history told by another young protagonist. In 1306, a year has passed since patriot William "Braveheart" Wallace was executed, and things are not going well for the cause of Scottish freedom. Robert Bruce, newly crowned king of Scotland, has managed to evade his powerful enemy, Edward I of England, but many allies have been killed or taken. A recent capture is Bruce's 11-year-old daughter Marjorie. The princess finds herself conveyed to the English border town of Lanercost, locked in an iron cage, and displayed outdoors day and night by the decree of ailing King Edward, "Longshanks," himself. Marjorie's first-person narration of her captivity and the events leading up to it is exciting and moving, and her strategies for coping with a hideous imprisonment are models of ingenuity and staying true to oneself. The time line and afterword are helpful in understanding the historical context within which the authors place their well-wrought fictional tale.

The Kingdom Keepers - Thirteen-year-old Finn and several of his friends become holograms at Florida's Disney World and then find themselves literally pulled into nighttime adventures in the theme park. Ridley Pearson's fantasy (Disney Editions, 2005) is fast paced and technologically savvy. Finn and his friends make repeated forays after hours into the very guts of such Disney icons as Tom Sawyer's Island, It's a Small World, Adventure Mountain, and other rides both tame and wild as they lay siege to Maleficent, an evil witch whose minions are at work to destroy the Disney mystique. The kids hang out at the park looking for signs and signals that will aid them in their nighttime quest for securing Disney power. Their parents are mildly suspicious, but Finn and his pals are fast talkers, willing to face their nighttime nemeses alone, rather than bringing in adult forces. Gary Littman reads with a variety of accents, some of which are less successful than others, and it's easy to differentiate among both kids and adults. Given how much Disney has seeped into the very core of Americana, most listeners will be able to understand the references and will know for whom Maleficent is a foil. While the details about why one would become a hologram for Disney are slighted, the sleuthing aspect of the tale has universal appeal.

All reviews taken from Amazon.com