

BRYAN GILLIS

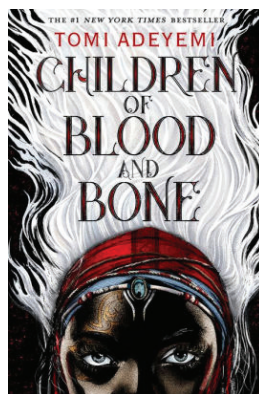
The Honor List of 2018 Prize-Winning Young Adult Books: Following Your Heart and Speaking Your Truth

After reviewing the books that appeared on the 2018 awards lists, Bryan Gillis compiled a list of six must-reads.

The 2018 *English Journal* young adult honor list selections are an amazing mix of truth and fiction, fact and fantasy. The protagonists, five females and one male, all demonstrate what it means to follow your heart and speak your truth. *The Poet X* tells the empowering, feminist tale of a young woman discovering her voice through her writing. *Children of Blood and Bone* is a fantasy set in an alternate version of West Africa where strong female characters aim to keep magic in their kingdom. Set in an alternative Reconstruction-era America, *Dread Nation* tells of one young woman's fight against racism, sexism, bigotry, and zombies. *Hey, Kiddo* is the graphic novel retelling of the author's struggles growing up in a dysfunctional family. In *A Heart in a Body in the World*, the main character literally runs away from her past trauma by running across the country. Finally, *Damsel* is a feminist retelling of the classic fairytale genre in which a damsel is rescued by a handsome prince.

Consideration of young adult books for inclusion in the 2018 Honor List begins in January and February of 2019 as the awards for the 2018 publications are announced. Editors and committees of esteemed judges confer to select winners and finalists for the National Book Award, Michael L. Printz Award, *Boston Globe-Horn Book Award*, *Publishers Weekly Best 20 Books*, the *New York Times* Notable, *School Library Journal Best Books of the Year*, and the *Kirkus Prize*, to name just a few. The books from these prestigious lists are then read and considered in terms of their relevance to and impact on the lives of

adolescents. Ultimately, the list is winnowed to six books that represent the “best of the best.”



Children of Blood and Bone

Tomi Adeyemi. Holt. 544 pages. \$18.99. Grades 9 and up. ISBN: 978-1250170972.

YALSA Best Fiction, *Publishers Weekly Best 20 Books*, the *New York Times* Notable, *School Library Journal Best Books of the Year*, *Kirkus Best Books of the Year*, *New York Public Library Top Ten Best Books of the Year*, *Time Magazine 10 Best*.

Orisha was once a kingdom of magic. Zélie Adebola, seventeen, was born a maji, a person meant to wield the magic of the gods for the good of the people of Orisha. Maji such as Zélie's mother could raise the dead and control the elements, from fire to tides. Eleven years earlier, when Zélie was just a child, King Saran of Orisha, who views magic as the source of all evil, ordered a raid that wiped out most of the maji, including her mother, and subjugated those who were left. Zélie's mother was chained by her neck and lynched with other maji. Now, those who remain live as servants, slaves, and prisoners. Often referred to as maggots and banned from speaking their sacred Yoruba language, the maji have been robbed of their magic and live in fear of genocide. Zélie sets out on a spiritual mission with her brother Tzain and pet lioness Nailah to bring magic back in

Orisha. In doing so, she becomes the main target of King Saran's maji cleansing campaign.

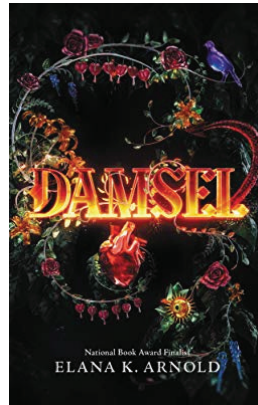
Amari and her brother Inan, the son and daughter of King Saran, grew up in the luxury of the royal palace, oblivious to the suffering of the maji. The king has raised his children to put the good of the kingdom above all else, at the expense of kindness and compassion. When Princess Amari witnesses the murder of Binta, her maji best friend and handmaiden, at the hands of her father, she flees the palace with a scroll that may hold the power to restore magic to Orisha. With the help of Zélie and Tzain, the trio become unlikely allies and journey across Orisha, seeking to unlock the power of the gods in order to reclaim their rightful place in Orisha.

King Saran assigns his son, Inan, the task of stopping the trio and retrieving the scroll, both to prove himself as a future leader and to destroy magic forever. Once Zélie comes in contact with the scroll, it manifests in her a newfound power. In addition to inheriting her mother's ability to commune with the dead, she is now compelled to wield her powers in a crusade to topple the kingdom. She initially assumes that Amari, a privileged princess, will sabotage Zélie's quest, but as their relationship develops, they begin to understand that they have much in common, and they eventually become strong allies.

Told in the alternating perspectives of Zélie, Princess Amari, and Prince Inan, *Children of Blood and Bone* contains all of the tropes readers expect from a fantasy novel: royalty, heroes and villains, magic, power struggles, betrayal, and, specific to this story, a detailed, vibrantly drawn setting that weaves West African mythology into a world that mirrors our own. A predominant theme in fantasy is good versus evil. But in *Children of Blood and Bone*, evil is not represented by a single person or entity. The author portrays evil as the oppression of a people based on the fear of their differences. Readers will experience the enslavement and torture of the maji and champion Zélie and her accomplices' efforts to rise up and defeat their oppressors.

Children of Blood and Bone is a tightly plotted, action-packed adventure that portrays racial tensions, persecution, prejudice, and genocide that parallel our world. The obstacles that Zélie faces parallel

the police brutality in America. It is the first book of a projected trilogy, so prepare for the cliffhanger at the conclusion of this one.



Damsel

Elana K. Arnold. Balzer + Bray. 320 pages. \$17.99. Grades 10 and up. ISBN: 978-0062742322.

Michael L. Printz Honor.

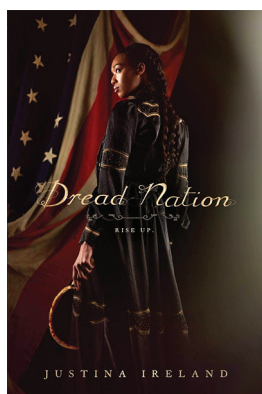
As this fresh perspective on the classic fairy tale genre begins, Prince Emory of Harding, the prince-who-will-be-king, ventures into the graylands to fulfill his destiny, a tradition that has existed for as long as anyone can remember. To claim his kingship, he must slay a dragon and rescue a damsel, who will then become his queen. Due to his father's premature death, Prince Emory is only nineteen, ten years younger than the previous princes who have attempted this monumental task. Nevertheless, he is confident that he will triumph. The prince scales a tall, craggy tower, slays the dragon, and rescues the damsel. When she wakes in his arms, she has no clothes, no name, and no recollection of a life previous to her rescue. The prince names her Ama and explains that they will return to the kingdom of Harding, where he will be made king and they will be married, because no king can exist without his queen. Without memories, Ama is completely dependent on Prince Emory. And as he repeatedly reminds her, he saved her life. As they travel back to Harding, the prince attempts to teach Ama how to be a woman. Her unease grows as she begins to discern that Emory's expectations involve her obedience.

When the pair returns to Harding, Prince Emory is crowned King. The queen mother informs Ama that the wedding will take place in a few months, that she will bear a male heir to the throne, and that her main responsibility in the months leading up to the wedding will be to learn how to be a queen. She tells Ama that her son's desires are what matters, that she should never forget that Emory saved her. Ama begins to struggle with the physical and mental limitations imposed on her. She constantly wonders about the mystery of who she was before being rescued. Despite warnings

from the prince, the queen, and her newly appointed servants, Ama ventures out of her room and begins to explore the castle, with its maze of stairs and seemingly endless corridors, and strolls through the town, where many of the king's subjects don't know who she is. Each time King Emory learns of her explorations, Ama is punished—physically, psychologically, and sexually.

As Ama begins to unravel the mystery of her identity, readers will likely be a couple of steps ahead of her. The dramatic irony this creates allows readers to get comfortable, or uncomfortable, with her situation and focus on the escalating tensions between Ama, Prince Emory, and the other members of court. Ama's total lack of memory allows her character to explore and question the damsel-in-distress stereotypes on their most fundamental levels.

Fairy tales tend to reflect the fears and concerns of the age in which they're written. *Damsel* is no exception. Arnold's modern, feminist retelling of every fairy tale in which a prince rescues a damsel deliberately mimics the cadences of older fairy tales. This brings a richness and forcefulness to the story. And like those classic fairy tales, *Damsel* is not for the faint of heart. Graphic violence, sexuality, and rape are present, though all are depicted in ways that complement the lyrical writing. *Damsel* is much more than just a modern fairy tale. It is a not-so-subtle allegory that has the potential to help teens learn how to confront their fears and challenge the stereotypes that lead to subjugation.



Dread Nation

Justina Ireland.
HarperCollins. 464 pages.
\$17.99. Grades 7 and up.
ISBN: 978-0062570604.

YALSA Top Ten Best Fiction,
School Library Journal Best
Books of the Year, New York
Public Library Best Books of
the Year.

Set in an alternative Reconstruction-era America, the Civil War abruptly ceases when the dead lying on battlefields such as Gettysburg begin to rise and eat everyone in sight. The North and the South agree to put their differences on hold and unite to battle the undead, known as

shamblers. This unification is aided by the passage of the Native and Negro Reeducation Act (NNRA), which forcibly separates African American and Native American children from their families, placing them in institutions “for the betterment of themselves and of society.” Jane McKeene, a Black teen born to a White mother, is shipped off to the most prestigious of these combat schools, Miss Preston's. Unlike most of the students who attend the school, Jane is literate. She is also extremely intelligent, willful, physically and emotionally tough, and has a sporadic relationship with the truth. Her ability to stretch it serves to both get her into and out of trouble.

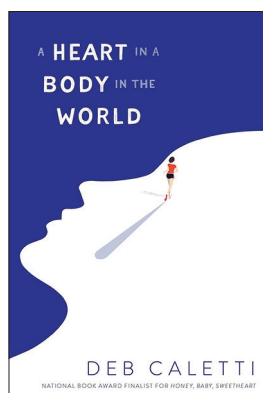
During the day, Jane trains in the hopes of being selected as an Attendant, one who serves and protects a wealthy White family, thus sparing her from the hardship of fighting shamblers on the frontlines. She dreams of graduating and then returning to her Kentucky home so that she can protect her family. Jane's relationship with her mother is a key element of the story. Each chapter opens with letters that one has written to the other. When Jane's ex beau, Red Jack, asks for her help in locating his missing sister, Jane and her classmate Katherine agree to help. As other families begin to disappear from in and around Baltimore, the trio discover a slew of powerful enemies involved in a massive conspiracy.

The group runs afoul of the corrupt Baltimore mayor and his clan of survivalists, who view the plague as God's punishment for previous efforts to establish egalitarianism. As Jane explains, “Survivalists believe that the continued existence of humanity depends on securing the safety of white Christian men and women—whites being superior and closest to God—so that they might ‘set about rebuilding the country in the image of its former glory,’ the way it was before the War Against the Dead” (63). Jane and Katherine are invited to the mayor's home under the guise of a party but instead are shipped off to a survivalist colony in Kansas called Summerland. The survivalists' warped view of natural selection places Jane and Katherine under the watchful eye of a vicious sheriff and his psychopathic preacher father. To escape and find her own path to freedom, Jane must make some unlikely alliances.

Many of the tropes associated with a zombie apocalypse are present in *Dread Nation*, and their presence

is just another reason to love this novel. There is a virus, the uselessness of military action, the alternate plans of an evil entity, a hero, and, possibly most importantly, the realization that humans are much more of a threat than any zombie apocalypse. But *Dread Nation* rises above the rank-and-file zombie novel due to Ireland's use of allegory that explores racism, bigotry, feminism, classism, and sexism. In this alternative account, the United States would have been overrun by shamblers years before any of us were born had the survivalists not forced African American and Indigenous children to wage their shambler war for them.

Ireland is an extremely gifted writer. Jane's narrative voice is strong. Her relationship with Katherine is particularly well-developed. The pair are archrivals as the story begins, Jane referring to Katherine as "offensively pretty" and telling readers "She's a know-it-all that could try the patience of Jesus Christ himself" (13). But as they meet crisis after crisis head-on, they learn to work together and gain a mutual respect. This is an engrossing, difficult-to-put-down story that will have readers anxiously awaiting *Deathless Divide*, slated to appear in the winter of 2020.



A Heart in a Body in the World

Deb Caletti. Simon Pulse. 355 pages. \$18.99. Grades 8 and up. ISBN: 978-1481415231.

Michael L. Printz Honor, YALSA Top Ten Best Fiction, New York Public Library Best Books of the Year.

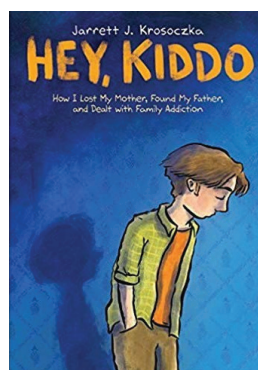
Eighteen-year-old Annabelle has it all: good looks, good grades, loyal friends, and a loving family. Readers meet her as she stands in the parking lot at Dick's Drive-In in Seattle, burger and fries in hand. Suddenly, she "takes off like a lightning bolt" (1). Why? "Well, sometimes you just snap," she tells us (2). Haunted by a traumatizing incident that occurred less than a year earlier, Annabelle attempts to flee from the source of her trauma, someone she calls "The Taker." When everything has been taken from you, what else is there to do but run? Annabelle runs and runs and runs, through mountain passes, lonely wide-open

plains, suburban neighborhoods, metropolitan cities, and small college towns. Her muscles burn, her feet ache, she considers quitting on several occasions. But no matter how hard she tries, she can't outrun the images of her past, in particular, The Taker.

With the support of her friends and family—Italian immigrant grandfather Ed, who meets her at the end of each day in his RV with food, water, shelter, and words of wisdom; her self-appointed publicity team; thirteen-year-old brother, Malcolm; and her friends Zach and Olivia—Annabelle is unwittingly transformed from a PTSD victim to a reluctant activist. Her cross-country trek eventually lands her in Washington, DC, and gains her national media attention. She is cheered on as she crosses state borders, parties are thrown in her honor, and she is even asked to speak at a prestigious college. Though unsolicited, Annabelle appreciates all the kindness, but what she really wants is to escape her guilt and the shame.

This is a difficult book to review without revealing what turns out to be a shocking but ultimately satisfying ending. What makes *A Heart in a Body in the World* such a great read is Caletti's slow reveal. As Annabelle repeatedly attempts to repress her memories of The Taker as she tackles her 2,794 mile run, readers are kept in the dark as to what actually happened that night. This can be frustrating at times, but ultimately, it is well worth the wait. From the first page, Caletti addresses issues that will be familiar to teen readers, including rape culture, violence, and the internalization of guilt and social critique.

A Heart in a Body in the World is an unflinching look at love, loss, and recovery as readers follow Annabelle's cross-country journey to self-forgiveness.



Hey, Kiddo

Jarrett J. Krosoczka. Graphix. 320 pages. \$24.99. Grades 6 and up. ISBN: 978-0545902472.

National Book Award Finalist, *Publishers Weekly* Best 20 Books, *School Library Journal* Best Books of the Year, *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, *Time Magazine* 10 Best, *Kirkus* Best Books of the Year,

YALSA Best Nonfiction, the *New York Times* Notable.

Hey, Kiddo is the beautifully written and illustrated true story of the author's struggles growing up in a difficult family. Jarrett's childhood is spent trying to make his dysfunctional life normal. Jarrett's mother has been transient his entire life, and when present, she steals, uses drugs, and entertains an endless stream of men. Eventually, Jarrett learns that his mother is a heroin addict and that much of her time away has been spent in prison. He knows nothing about his father. His basic needs go unmet, promises are routinely broken, and the stability and safety that most of us take for granted are not guaranteed. Jarrett spends his young lifetime trying to understand why he can't live with his mother and simultaneously wondering when he'll next see her. He discovers that the only way he can make sense of his world is through his drawing, primarily expressing himself through the comics he creates.

Despite his mother's neglect, young Jarrett still loves and needs her. And she loves him, but her addiction keeps her from being there for him. Jarrett's friends and teachers are supportive, and Mr. Shilale, his art teacher, helps Jarrett expand in his art studies.

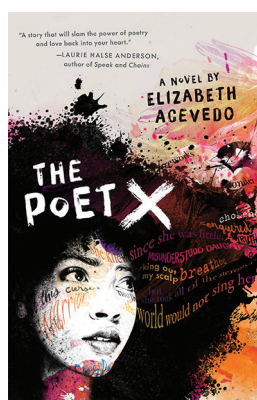
Ultimately, Jarrett's grandparents, Joe and Shirl, step in to raise him. They support and encourage him, including nurturing his artistic talents. Joe and Shirl are far from perfect. They are loud and opinionated. They smoke and drink and have their share of verbal confrontations, but they love Jarrett unconditionally. They are also funny, smart, and loyal to each other. When Jarrett turns sixteen, he gets his driver's license and sets out to find and connect with his father. Eventually, he attends art school and, after much hard work, has a spectacularly successful career as a writer-illustrator of children's books.

Krosoczka, the successful adult author, brings the wisdom, knowledge, and perspective he gained from growing up in this environment to *Hey, Kiddo*. But the character that readers see is brilliantly narrated from young Jarrett's perspective—the boy who wasn't aware of his mother's heroin addiction until third grade and was exposed to all of the dangers associated with that addiction. Krosoczka depicts real events and conversations from his childhood in ways that create a semblance of normalcy. Hanging out with friends, dating, and working on his art

counterbalance the sadness, anger, and confusion that he is experiencing. And the story is not without its moments of humor. An awkwardly positioned light switch on the wall where Jarrett has painted his male school mascot, his grandfather's bad jokes, and his driver's training, which takes place in a cemetery, the best place to practice because he can't kill anyone, bring some needed relief to what is, at times, a heart-wrenching story.

The shades of gray and burnt orange that blend and overlap give the impression of peering through a haze, both the literal haze of Shirl's and Joe's cigarette smoke and the figurative haze of Jarrett's unsettled existence. Actual family photographs—letters from his mother, his early art—are seamlessly inserted throughout the panels. One particularly poignant moment can be found in the author's notes where Krosoczka tells readers that he still has a piece of the pineapple wallpaper pattern found in his grandparents' home. The wallpaper makes its way into various kitchen scenes throughout the story. Krosoczka also shares what became of his grandparents, his mother, and how those events relate to the start of his own family as well as why he chose to use burnt orange throughout the book.

Hey, Kiddo will resonate with readers who have experienced addiction and educate those who have not.



The Poet X

Elizabeth Acevedo.
HarperTeen. 368 pages.
\$17.99. Grades 8 and up.
ISBN: 978-0062662804.

National Book Award Winner, Michael L. Printz Award, Walter Dean Myers Award, *Boston Globe-Horn Book Award*, *Publishers Weekly* Best 20 Books, the *New York Times* Notable, *School Library Journal* Best Books of the Year, *Kirkus* Prize Finalist, YALSA Top

Ten Best Fiction, *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, New York Public Library Top Ten Best Books of the Year, *Time Magazine* 10 Best.

Xiomara Batista is a high school sophomore and the daughter of Dominican immigrants living in Harlem. Xiomara has been conditioned to feel guilty for the way she looks. Her body has blossomed into

womanly curves, “a little too much body for a young girl” (5), but emotionally she is still just a girl struggling to define herself amid insults from other girls and unwanted advances from boys. Her mother is a devout Catholic who views her main duty as a barrier between her daughter and anything remotely related to sexuality. She holds Xiomara to unreasonably strict standards, including forbidding her to date boys and requiring her to attend Mass every day. Her father, a former serial philanderer, is now emotionally absent. Her twin brother, Xavier, whom she calls Twin, is a genius and is viewed as the perfect son, but like his sister, he is hiding secrets from their parents. Xiomara has learned to fight with her fists, both to protect herself from the insults and unwanted advances and to defend her brother, but eventually, she learns to channel her rage and confusion into her poetry. She dreams of competing in poetry slams, a passion she’s certain her conservative parents will never accept.

Xiomara begins to have doubts about her Catholic faith, specifically, how the Church treats women. When her teacher invites her to join the school’s poetry club, she is torn between being the obedient daughter who attends the Catholic confirmation classes that her mother has forced on her and practicing the poetry that is beginning to open her heart to love and personal growth. She also begins to develop feelings for her lab partner, Aman, and begins exploring her sexuality and the way it makes her feel. When Xiomara’s mother finds out about her clandestine relationship with Aman, she forces her daughter to kneel down on grains of rice and pray for forgiveness. Though Xiomara receives support from a dedicated teacher, from Aman, and from the poetry club and spoken word competitions, none of her relationships

provide the deep sense of courage and completeness that she finds through her poetry and the performance of that poetry.

The Poet X is a beautifully written love story about a young woman’s developing intimacy with her writing. As she discovers her voice, the themes of Latinx culture, religion, sexuality, gender roles, self-love, first love, familial love, body positivism, and feminism are all explored with respect and dignity. Elizabeth Acevedo’s ability to convey so much meaning with so few words is astounding. Although *The Poet X* is her debut as a novelist, she has published two collections of poetry and she is a National Poetry Slam Champion. This book should be on every junior high and high school teacher’s shelf.

This was a challenging year in which to make the top six picks. Three books, *The Poet X*, *Children of Blood and Bone*, and *Hey, Kiddo*, dominated the awards lists, with *The Poet X* garnering both the National Book Award and the Printz Award. This resulted in an extremely large number of YA titles landing on one or two award lists. For example, *Damsel* received the Michael L. Printz Honor Award but cannot be found on another list.

Each of these books offers opportunities for teachers to explore a multitude of topics with their students: culture, religion, sexuality, sexism, gender roles, racism, persecution, prejudice, genocide, dysfunctional families, rape culture, and teen violence are all prominently featured in the selections. Although complex and sometimes difficult, these topics become much more adolescent friendly when viewed through the lens of young adult literature. [EJ](#)



BRYAN GILLIS is an associate professor of English education and literacy at Kennesaw State University. He has served as the director of the Kennesaw State University Conference on Literature for Children and Young Adults and is the editor of ALAN Picks, an online young adult literature review page. He has been a member of NCTE since 2005 and can be contacted at bgillis@kennesaw.edu.