

**Child of Dandelions**

By Shenaaz Nanji  
 Toronto: Second Story Press,  
 2008  
 215 pages  
 \$9.95  
 ★★★★★

Reviewed by Debra Menary

This is a revealing story about the devastation that occurred during the dictatorship of Idi Amin and the resulting political upheaval. Told from the viewpoint of a young teenage girl, it holds appeal for the 12 to 15 year olds. There is so much to be learned from Nanji's description of life in 1970s Uganda.

This book screams the question: "Does history repeat itself?" There are so many parallels to the Holocaust, they are impossible to ignore. There are references to the Jewish plight in the book, which should prompt some emotional discussion among students who have been exposed to the dark events of the Holocaust. They won't be able to help but ask themselves how these events could have happened in Uganda only three decades later.

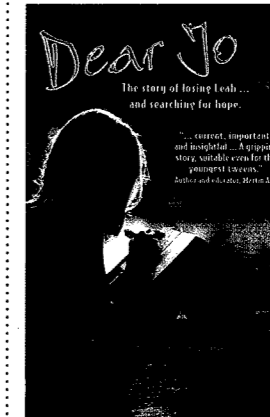
*Child of Dandelions* is a familiar tale of family conflict and perhaps an unfamiliar one of political tension. Female Intermediate students are especially likely to identify with the main character, Sabine, who is of South Asian descent. She is terrified of losing her best friend, Zena, who is a native Ugandan. As the political tension builds, Sabine and her family are at risk of losing not only their entire way of life, but each other.

This novel is not for everyone. Students would need to be carefully prepared for the graphic scenes and situations. They would need to be taught some historical background to the situation leading up to 1970s Uganda. I would advise extreme caution before using it in the classroom, because of the racial situations described in the novel.

Teachers would need to be sensitive to the backgrounds, origins and prior experiences of their students. Then they could judge appropriately whether and how to present the content.

Notwithstanding these reservations, I feel a rating of 4 stars is warranted.

Debra Menary is a grade 2 teacher with the Simcoe County District School Board.



**Dear Jo**

By Christina Kilbourne  
 Montreal: Lobster Press, 2007  
 188 pages  
 \$10.95  
 ★★★★★

Reviewed by Rosemary Renton

I did not intend to read *Dear Jo*, by Christina Kilbourne, in one sitting, but I could not put it down. Written in diary form, it is the story of 12-year-old Maxine LeMay, whose best friend has been abducted by an Internet predator. The plot follows Maxine as she recounts the events that led to the abduction; struggles with worry, fear and guilt about surviving her own close call; grieves when Leah's body is found in the woods; and eventually assists police in capturing the man who killed her friend.

With its shocking opening and short, intense diary entries, this book is easy to read and will be a popular choice with reluctant readers. But it also has a great plot and excellent writing to appeal to a more sophisticated audience.

The characters are believable and sympathetic. Leah and Maxine are good girls who meet a boy online, chat with him for months, and finally agree to meet him in a public place. How the killer manages to trick them will send shivers down your spine when you realize it could happen to anyone who lets down her guard for a moment.

The violence is responsibly handled. Although Leah is murdered, the details of the assault are never made explicit. The author uses Maxine's parents to warn about Internet safety without seeming artificial, and there are Internet safety tips at the back of the book.

Still, this book is upsetting – I cried at the end. But in this age of instant messaging, chat rooms, and Facebook, that's not a bad thing. In fact, if it were up to me, this book would be mandatory reading for every kid with Internet access. Highly recommended.

Rosemary Renton is a teacher-librarian with the Simcoe County District School Board.