

The Hero's Crossroads:

That Fateful Moment of Decision

by Todd Mercer

Better young adult fiction eclipses old-hat conflicts of domestic disobedience and school strife. It forces heroes into agonizing choices, then spins out consequences with a wider range of outcomes than the last generation grew up expecting. One doesn't have to be eighteen years old to have a lasting impact on others' lives for good or ill, or to choose a permanent trajectory. That reality may not be fair, but savvy teen readers quickly discard idealistic fantasies.

Protagonists among these books wrestle with exploitation, imprisonment, and abandonment issues we wish teens would never have to face. They must commit to a side during wartime, without an obvious default position, and struggle to embrace their destinies. The teen years are composed of a seemingly endless series of exclusive choices, few of which are adequately addressed by small-minded public service announcements.

Historic Dilemmas

The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation: Volume II: The Kingdom on the Waves by M.T. Anderson (Candlewick, 978-0-7636-2950-2) looks at the American Revolution from a unique vantage point. When the embattled British governor of Virginia Colony, Lord Dunmore, guarantees freedom for blacks who take up arms on his behalf, the classically educated Octavian is one of many to throw in against Liberty-loving slave-owners. Anderson convincingly defies convention, casting the British in a fairly favorable light, showing that justice and injustice are determined by perspective. He's thematically concerned with shifting identity: "How do we change—within moments the whole form of our habits and dispositions may become alien to us, and we almost cannot remember what we were." Volume I won the National Book Award, and this book is no less notable.

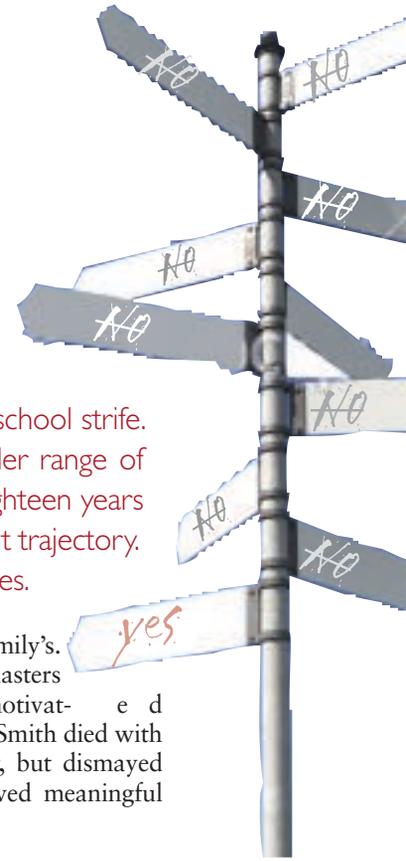
The Freedom Business (Wordsong, 978-1-932425-57-4) is a cross of forms encompassing an original narrative transcribed from a 1798 manuscript by the one-time slave Venture Smith, poems from Newberry Honor author Marilyn Nelson, and art by Deborah Dancy. Smith was born the son of West African royalty; once in bondage he was determined to work his way free. Through industry, thrift, sharp thinking, and good luck, Smith secured

his own liberty, then his entire family's. The next step was to pay off the masters of other slaves in hopes of gaining motivated labor for his burgeoning enterprises. Smith died with an impressive inventory of property, but dismayed at how few of those he freed showed meaningful loyalty.

Struggles Within Living Memory

Child of All Nations, (Overlook Press, 978-1-59020-099-5) written by the exiled German novelist Irmgard Keun in 1938, was recently translated into English by Michael Hofmann. It follows the hotel-to-hotel nomadism of a wide-eyed girl whose innocent misunderstandings of adult situations create humor in the midst of grimness. The first-person narrator is the daughter of an upbeat but deadbeat father who is essentially an artistic con man. He constantly robs Peter to pay Paul, usually keeping a city ahead of his family, comforted by mistresses. The narrator's mother hides quiet desperation, projecting positive cheer.

After the fall of Saigon, nineteen-year-old Mei Phuong escapes Vietnam on an overloaded boat with her younger brother and sister in tow, destination unknown. Conditions onboard deteriorate until Mei sees a woman prepare to leap to her death: "We watch her as if we are watching a play, no one moves to stop her, no one really believing she will do what she obviously is about to do." *Weeping Under This Same Moon* by Jana Laiz (Crow Flies Press, 978-0-9814910-0-4) contrasts Mei's uncertain life with that of Hannah, a privileged but unhappy teen from Westchester, New York, who blossoms as a volunteer helping Vietnamese newcomers in the Bronx. Hannah's affection for photography parallels Mei's passion for painting, but art is a luxury and refugees deny themselves nonessentials.



Present-day Challenges

Christina Kilbourne's *They Called Me Red* (Lobster Press, 978-1-897073-88-9) reveals what's worse than a thirteen-year-old's first job of washing gory slaughterhouse floors. When Devon's father falls for Lily, a Vietnamese immigrant with a devious plot, the hero's second job is even less promising: sex slavery in Cambodia. Kilbourne gets the dread across when the protagonist realizes the restaurant he's forced to work in is a cover business. Devon watches customers and learns, "These men were bidding for the first chance to be with me, and I knew I had only a few more days..." The sex necessary to advance the storyline is handled tactfully; fear and circumstances of imprisonment are the main focuses. A question raised is whether one should fight or acquiesce in an apparently hopeless situation.

Quintuple winner of the Arthur Ellis Award Norah McClintock profiles a teen struggling and failing to regain normalcy after incarceration for burglary and assault in *Dooley Takes the Fall* (Red Deer Press, 978-0-88995-403-8). Dooley is an immediate suspect as sole witness to the death of a boy he once fought. The cops notice an unsympathetic reaction: "He knew he should feel sorry for the kid, but the truth was, he didn't. What goes around comes around, he thought." Did the boy jump from the bridge fueled by despair, or is a killer about? When a second death compounds suspicion, Dooley's freedom appears to be fleeting. His tough-love uncle, a former policeman, could shield the delinquent or hand him over if Dooley can't figure out what's happening.

In *Shifty* (Tricycle Press, 978-1-58246-257-8), Lynn E. Hazen's title character (call him Soli, please) is a pragmatically adaptable foster child of fifteen who roams San Francisco in his guardian's van without a driver's license. He habitually breaks rules while fulfilling responsibilities thrust upon him and

gets into scrapes with police, a bag lady, and a would-be kidnapper. In state care since infancy, Soli wants to know his history. He comes to realize that his household—composed of a hero-worshipping little girl, a crack baby, and a laid-back foster mother—is a loving family. Soli describes his caretaker, funning on the Eurythmics: "Martha's singing out of tune again along with the oldies on the radio. As usual she's getting half the lyrics wrong. I swear I hear her singing, 'Sweet dreams are made of cheese...'"

When a stone-hearted social worker decides to break them up, the quick-witted but shortsighted Soli acts to prevent it.

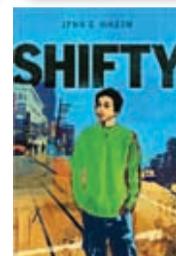
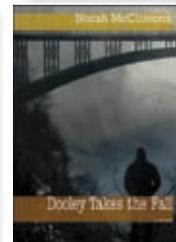
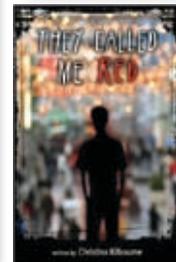
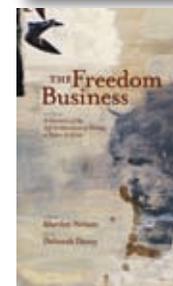
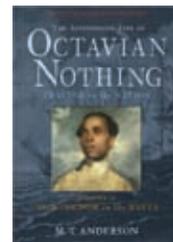
Brooklyn-born actress Theresa Saldana

appeared in *Raging Bull* and on the TV series *The Commish*; she founded the Victims for Victims support organization. Her fiction debut, *The Almost Murder and Other Stories* (Piñata Books, 978-1-55885-507-6), features five tales of Latina teenagers undergoing notable change. One is picked for a reality television show by a producer who sees her hamming it up on the subway, and another must find new purpose after a facially disfiguring accident. The title story pivots on high drama when a Nuyorican girl witnesses her jealousy-crazed father trying to end her mother's life: "The knife slid out of his grasp, but he snatched it back. Mindless of blood dripping down his face, he staggered to Mom, trapping her between the fridge and wall. Knife raised, he slurred 'Putá' again." Saldana favors early crises and unusually complete wrap-ups.

Jealousy

Across the room
You beckon men
With your fragrance.
Like bees to pollen,
They bumble by you.
I, too, fly closer,
Try to sip secrets
Of your charm.
I flit in shadows;
You bask in sun.
I sour, pucker;
My hopes rot
Like neglected fruit.

by Catie Lycurgus, age 16;
from the collection
Falling Hard, reviewed
on the next page.





Legends Yet Unsettled

William Manchee’s *Tarizon: The Liberator* (Book One of the *Tarizon Trilogy*) (Top Publications, 978-1-929976-48-5) follows a civil war between a malevolent totalitarian world government and a fairly benevolent totalitarian world government on a planet with a large minority of Earth émigrés. A Skywalker-ish figure thought to be the long-prophesied savior is initially reluctant to take up his role protecting mutants, the gilled Seafolken, and a microscopic species of builders called Nanomites from the Purists’ genocidal plans. *Tarizon* is a planet nearly wiped out by ecological disaster, aggressively repopulating for survival. That means copulation is encouraged, but committed love isn’t possible—a policy among the Liberator’s allies which he challenges, even while fighting for his life.



Veteran sci-fi writers Eric Flint and Dave Freer present a mechanical engineer/biologist named Kretz who’s investigating a gargantuan craft transporting planetoid-sized artificial habitats through deep space in *Slow Train to Arcturus* (Baen Books, 978-1-4165-5585-8). His crewmates are killed or captured by barbaric warlike beings on board—humans. Earth’s unified government has cynically combined the settlement of distant star systems with the culling of extremists and societal square pegs, each variety sovereign of their own separate realm. Kretz is on

the run, yet cautiously learning from a succession of Neo-Puritans, Matriarchists, South American aboriginals, Militarists, and flight-obsessed Icarans. His peaceful character makes an excellent lens through which to neutrally observe the flaws and virtues of several cultural viewpoints.

The after-school specials of the ’70s are now historical camp, and preachy public service announcements are authoritarian objects of derision to teens tired of oversimplification. Books like these with original premises, intelligent plotlines, and sophisticated handling of major social problems succeed because they don’t talk down to readers. They bridge the divide between concerned adults and the struggling young who know that life-altering decisions won’t always hold off until voting age. These engaging books from customer-driven independent presses are attuned to the rapidly shifting thinking and reality of readers whose lives are a series of serious decisions with palpable effects. **F**

Todd Mercer is the senior editor of the Dunes Review. He judged the first Amazon Breakthrough Novel Awards, was a juror for Poets’ Night Out and won the William Shaw Prize for Poetry. His chapbook Box of Echoes (2007) was co-winner of the Michigan Writers Cooperative Press contest.

BEYOND SEX ED

The following advice books answer questions beyond “What’s happening to my body?” to focus on dating, fashion, friends, and good old-fashioned adolescent angst. Fiction, nonfiction, and poetry books can all help girls make it through those years of hormones and painful learning experiences.

Patricia G. Penny’s *Not Just Proms & Parties* series of short novels is aimed at reluctant readers and ESL students, but the books are suitable for any teenage girl with a busy schedule. Only 140 pocket-sized pages long, *Emily’s Rebellion* (Lobster Press, 978-1-897073-73-5) tells the story of the daughter of recently separated parents who defies her mother by getting a tattoo, dates a guy labeled “bad news” by her older brother, and throws a party at the home of her vacationing grandmother, then discovers that some of her jewelry has been stolen. Throughout the story, Emily learns that it is best to tell the truth and deal with the consequences of her actions.

Falling Hard: 100 Love Poems By Teenagers, edited by Betsy Franco (Candlewick, 978-0-7636-3437-7), is a collection of expressive and mature poems about the pain and pleasure of teenage love. With references to music, mythology, Shakespeare, and other subjects from the high school curriculum, the poems explore beauty and sex in language both abstract and frank. *Falling Hard* helps move poetry from textbooks to the modern world and demonstrates how it can be used as a form of expression even outside the classroom.

Zest Books is a publishing house devoted exclusively to advice books for teens. *Indie Girl* (978-0-9790173-3-9), by Arne Johnson, and Karen Macklin, with illustrations by Michael Wertz, offers practical ways for ambitious girls to succeed at projects including starting a band, publishing a zine, and launching a fashion company. Creating an art exhibit may sound easy enough, but *Indie Girl* walks readers through the processes of selecting artists, using the right lighting, and pricing the art.

Whitney Hallberg

