

on the Record

True Grit

Contemporary Young-adult Novels Take on the Realities of Homelessness

by Melissa Walker



Young-adult novels have become a huge part of pop culture—look no further than the Harry Potter, Twilight, and Hunger Games phenomena for evidence of that. Books for teenagers are not all focused on magical worlds and dystopia, though. Some explore the harsh realities that today’s teens face, portraying relatable characters with true-to-life problems.

In the four novels described below, readers will meet various characters who have experiences with homelessness: an upbeat girl who lives on a bus, a boy who collects glass in the slums of Cairo, a neighborhood type who suspects her new friend is living on his own, and a runaway who has escaped her abuser only to face life on the streets. Each book inspires readers to reflect on the lives of real people, like them, who have lost the comfort and safety of a home.

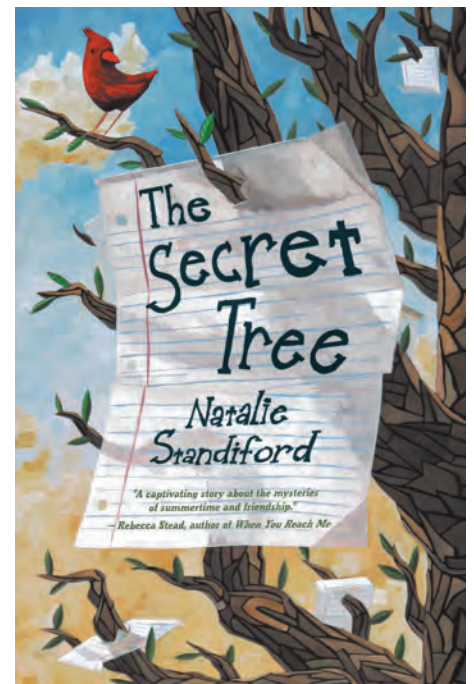
Sorta Like a Rock Star, by Matthew Quick (Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2010). The ever-optimistic Amber Appleton lives on a school bus with her loyal pup, Bobby Big Boy, and her alcoholic mother, whose latest boyfriend has kicked them out. Curling up on vinyl seats at night, Amber dreams of the future, which in her mind is as bright as the sun, despite the bleakness that surrounds her. She wears her hope like shining armor—volunteering in her community, chatting with a priest, Father Chee, about life, and striving to be a lawyer like her role model, Donna, her friend Ricky’s mom. When a deadly tragedy strikes, and Amber’s optimism falters, it is the community she has built around her—through caring for others—that helps her win back the faith that will carry her to a better place.

Books for teenagers are not all focused on magical worlds and dystopia. Some explore the harsh realities that today’s teens face, portraying relatable characters with true-to-life problems—including homelessness.



The Glass Collector, by Anna Perera (Albert Whitman Teen, 2012). Aaron, 15, lives in the slums on the outskirts of Cairo with his angry stepfather and two older stepbrothers, one of whom beats him daily. His task every morning is to go into the city and collect broken glass to bring home for recycling. As he works among the flies, dust, and garbage of Cairo’s abandoned alleys, he finds beauty in pieces of amber, blue, green, and clear glass—the way the sunlight plays off their smooth curves, the way the world appears through different lenses. When Aaron’s family kicks him out, he must learn to survive without even the barest of shelters he knew before. Following Aaron on this journey makes an exotic world vivid and real, as readers feel Aaron’s pain, indignation, fear, and, ultimately, hope.

Don't Breathe a Word, by Holly Cupala (HarperTeen, 2012). In her suburban world, Joy suffers from asthma, the smothering attention of her parents, and most of all the controlling



on the Homefront

behavior of Asher, her abusive boyfriend. After the night Asher pushes her too far, Joy has to escape. She ends up on the streets of Seattle, where she takes a new name—Triste—and meets other homeless teenagers who are trying to find ways to survive. The dangers of life on the street come fast and furious at Triste, who eventually finds a group she thinks she can trust. There is May, a girl who gives herself to men in exchange for protection; Santos, a haunted boy who won't reveal his secrets; and Creed, a guitar player whose soulfulness speaks to Triste on many levels. Cupala doesn't shy away from the gritty realities faced by runaways and homeless teens, and Joy's story is both uncompromisingly raw and redemptive.

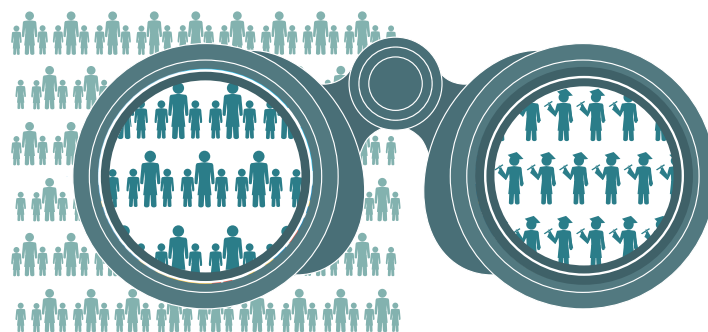
And for the younger set:

The Secret Tree, by Natalie Standiford (Scholastic, 2012). In the summer between fifth and sixth grade, 10-year-old Minty discovers a tree in the woods near her comfortable suburban neighborhood that seems to be a place to store anonymous secrets. Along with Raymond, a strange boy she meets in the woods, she finds slips of paper inside the tree that contain messages such as "I'm betraying my best friend in a terrible way" and "No one loves me except my goldfish." The two keep a notebook of the secrets, trying to match them with their confessors. Minty and Raymond begin to look into the windows of their neighbors' homes, thinking, "They all have their secrets." Soon, Minty discovers that Raymond, too, has a secret: He spends more time in an unfinished model home than at his own house, which Minty has never visited. As this summer of discovery and shifting friendships progresses, Minty, Raymond, and the people in their world share funny, mysterious, and touching adventures. ■

Databank

In 2012–13 the nation will see more homeless people than new high-school graduates

As many as 3.5 million people experience homelessness in a given year, and about 3.4 million students are expected to graduate from high school in 2012–13.



The following corrections have been made in the downloadable version of *UNCENSORED* 3.2: In "Homeless Youth: Out of Sight, Out of Mind," Figure 1 was changed to reflect information about unaccompanied youth from 2011 rather than 2010. Incorrect information was printed for Figure 2. The number of unaccompanied youth identified in public schools in 2010 was 65,317, not 43,721; and the percentage change in that number from 2007 to 2010 is 51.3%, not 49.4%.

■ In "Reaching into the Shadows," Eliana Kaimowitz was mistakenly identified as an attorney for California Rural Legal Assistance Inc. Ms. Kaimowitz is an attorney and equal justice works fellow with the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation.

For our Web extra "Hope Behind Bars," Stephen Brown's article on the potential benefits of GED programs for incarcerated women, please visit: ICPHusa.org/webextras