2027 CRKCA Finalists – Complete Detailed Summaries

The Bellwoods Game by Celia Krampien
Genre: Horror (Ghost Story)
AR BL: 4.6 Point Value: 8
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Fall Hollow is haunted. It's believed that when Abigail Snook went into the woods many years ago, never to be seen again, she started haunting the woods. Since then, it's tradition for the 6th graders at Beckett Elementary to play the Bellwoods Game, in which 3 kids are chosen to go into the woods on Halloween night. Whoever rings the bell there wins and saves the town for another year. But if Abigail's ghost captures all the players first, the spirit is let loose to wreak havoc on Fall Hallow. Now it's Bailee's year to play. Legend has it, the game's winner gets a wish. If Bailee wins, she can go back to the way things used to be before her grandmother got sick and everyone at school started hating her.
The story opens years earlier on a stormy Halloween with Abigail Snook hurrying through the woods on her way home after school trying to avoid bully, Margery Danes, and her two sidekicks, Jess and Josie. During a scuffle in the woods, Margery takes Abigail's locket. It had been Abigail's grandmother's locket. Angry, Abigail turns to face the girls who turn and run. They don't see Abigail stumble or her feet slide over the slick wet rocks on the cliff. That's what they tell police the next day when Abigail is missing.
The story jumps ahead to present day Halloween with Bailee Heron excited to play the game. Everyone knew about Abigail Snook who went into the woods and never came out. People said she'd been playing a game… one she'd never finished. According to legends Abigail's spirit remained doomed to roam the woods every Halloween night. She was unable to rest, kids said, until she finished her game. And, for that, she needed others to play. Bailee's friend, Madison, has been chosen as Keeper of the Game. After school, a new kid at Beckett, Noah Davies, stops Bailee to ask her questions about the Game. To persuade Ms. Chivers to let him start a school newspaper, he wants to write his first feature article about Abigail Snook. Bailee loves to write scary stories in her writing journal, so she keeps a lot of the stories and legends she's heard over the years about the Bellwoods Game in her journal as well. But when Noah asks her why the bell was put in the woods, Bailee says she'll ask her Nan. A couple weeks earlier, her Nan had been hospitalized with TIA (similar to a stroke). The day of Nan's TIA, Bailee was about to go into the Bellwoods to see if her friend, Fen, would chicken out on a dare to cross the bridge when Principal Bright came to deliver the news about Nan. Since Bailee was seen with the principal right before the dare and then she didn't show up to watch Fen, instead going to the hospital, classmates assume she is the one who told Principal Bright about the dare and got everyone into trouble. When Nan came home from the hospital, it was decided that she would move in with Bailee's family, clean out her house and sell it. When Bailee gets home from school she asks Nan about the bell. Nan tells her that stories about spirits haunting the Bellwoods are as old as the town itself. Long ago, people passing through the woods rang the bell to protect themselves. The bell isn't the only superstition connected to the Bellwoods. According to old legends, travelers would also bring little trinkets into the woods, something to sacrifice in exchange for safe passage home, in case they happened upon any spirits. Bailee notices this sounds a lot like the secret game she and her friends are about to play. Bailee thanks Nan for the stories and heads to Pott's Cemetery where the Bellwoods Game is supposed to begin. At the

cemetery, volunteers to play the game line up and draw stones from a bag. Three of the stones are marked with an X. The three volunteers to draw the marked stones will become this year's players. Fen, Carmen Alverez (smartest kid at Beckett Elementary, she even skipped a grade) and Bailee have the marked stones. Last year's winner, Arlo Jackson tries to tell the players to 'stay together and stick to the paths. Don't trust what you see, it's not all real. Get to the bell as quick as you can'. The words catch in Arlo's throat who becomes red in the face, choking. When the game starts, Fen takes off running. Carmen follows. When Bailee gets into the woods, she hears footsteps and sees Noah has followed her in, hoping to get a story about Abigail Snook and what really happens in the game. Then Fen and Carmen find the two, so the foursome sets off together for the bell. Soon Fen takes off ahead of the others. Then Bailee and Noah notice Carmen is not behind them anymore and they hear her yell. They follow her voice, and another girl shows up and points them in right direction. Carmen stopped to tie one of her bootlaces. When she looked up, Bailee and Noah were gone. She tried to catch up but the path disappeared, and Carmen's foot sank knee deep in a narrow crevice. She tells them she heard a whisper calling her name. Noah thinks it was probably just the wind. Bailee gets Carmen's foot free but all three of them begin to hear the whisper growing. Then a swarm of bats come out of the cave and descend on the kids. Bailee runs and the bats follow her, then leave. As they walk on, Noah asks who the girl was that they saw on the path when they went to find Carmen. Neither of the girls know who it was. Then they see a hooded figure who charges toward them. The girl from the path appears again and tells the three kids to run and follow her. As the hooded figure tries to strike at Bailee, the unknown girl throws an arm in front of Bailee to protect her. The girl goes limp at Bailee's feet. Carmen turns on her flashlight and the hooded figure disappears. Noah suddenly makes a gagging noise, pushing to get away from spiders. The unknown girl starts to wake up. Carmen and Bailee help her up. She leads them on telling them they must hurry before the Specter comes back. When Bailee asks the girl who she is, she slings a red cape around her shoulders and tells them she's Abigail Snook. The kids realize she's telling the truth because they've seen her picture in articles. Abigail verifies that she is indeed dead. She tells them that on the day of the game she becomes more real, almost like her old self. Noah asks about the Specter. Abigail explains she doesn't know if it has a real name, but she doesn't hang around to find out. Abigail calls it The Specter and says it is not a ghost like her. The Specter's history is older and more complicated than anyone knows. It's not really a being… it's more like a feeling or a concept. It's a figment of the imagination or a nightmare made real. It looks like what you expect to see. That's why the bats were so strange. They weren't real bats. The Specter's purpose is to scare. It's all part of the game. The Specter needs some time to recover after an attack, but it'll be back, so they must move on. Abigail explains she's helped other kids over the years. The Specter doesn't like it and has found a way to punish her. The Specter takes a memory from Abigail. The kids hear footsteps running toward them and find Madison. She's come to tell them to get out of the woods now because it's not safe. Madison moves on calling for Fen. The other three try to stop her but she goes off the path, getting farther away. Abigail tells them the Specter will hunt Madison even though she is not one of the players. Bailee runs off to find Madison. While she's alone the Specter appears and wants Bailee to tell her a story. Carmen, Noah and Abigail show up with the flashlight in time to save Bailee. Abigail shares that kids who get touched by the Specter don't remember what happened to them. Their brain goes blank. They're left with a sense that

something is missing. As the kids continue, they meet up with Fen. Then Madison comes running up the path toward them. Bailee fills Madison and Fen in on Abigail and the Specter. Abigail tells them they must finish the game, or the Specter will haunt the town until next Halloween. Fen says the Specter touched him and took the gift from his pocket so he cannot be the one to ring the bell. He's out of the game but he wants to continue to the bell with them. Fen presses Bailee to tell him why she ratted on him about the dare. Madison confesses it was her who went to the principal because she was worried about Fen. She didn't know everyone would accuse Bailee and she apologizes to her. Bailee is angry, but the kids move on to find the 'cut', a shortcut, a narrow passage through the cliff that leads to the bell. As the kids rush through the passage, it begins to close in on them. Abigail holds each side of the crevice back so they all make it out. But a massive amount of spiders come at them. Noah is afraid of spiders and The Specter knows it. Abigail yells to watch for The Specter. The spiders are just a distraction. The Specter appears as a huge spider the size of a horse, and attacks Noah, taking his pen as a gift. Bailee tells Noah he now has safe passage out of the woods, but he wants to continue with them. As the kids cross the river, stepping on stones, Madison stops halfway saying there is something in the water. The stepping stones sink into the water leaving Madison on one stuck in the middle of the river. Fen wades in to get her but Madison won't move. Hands reach out of the water to grab Madison, but Carmen keeps them away by flashing light on them. The kids all try to rescue Madison, but the Specter appears as three witches and gets Madison's ring. When they reach a trail leading up to the ridge on the other side of the river, Noah volunteers to stay with Madison who has not fully recovered yet from The Specter's touch. Carmen leads the way up with her flashlight. The Specter gets Carmen and takes her flashlight. Now the Specter can use the light to move around even in daylight. The kids all surround Bailee who is the only one who can ring the bell now. Fen charges at the Specter and tells Bailee to run to the bell. As Bailee crosses the bridge, Abigail tries to help. Both girls end up falling into the river below. Bailee begins to see memories belonging to Abigail, the girl who took her locket, her dog Elvis, an A+ on her math test, etc. After seeing many memories, a hand pulls Bailee from the river. It is Abigail. Bailee shares one of the memories with Abigail: the day you died the Specter was watching you in the woods. It was trying to catch you. Before it could, you fell from the ridge. You drowned in the river. Abigail shares that since she never has anything to give the Specter, no gift to sacrifice in exchange for safe passage out of the woods, it takes her memories and keeps them here in the river to taunt her. Close enough to touch but impossible to hold. It likes to remind her of where her old life ended and her new existence began. The other kids help Abigail and Bailee up and develop a plan for Bailee to ring the bell. They all pull up their hoods and tighten them around their face, then start running. But Abigail and Bailee switched clothes so the Specter stops the wrong girl. But still the Specter gets between Bailee and the bell. When it seems the Specter has won, Bailee makes a deal with it. Bailee will give it a story, but she will tell the story rather than letting the Specter take it from her. Bailee tells the story of the Specter in the woods and a girl (Bailee) who is not afraid of what's in the woods because she knows it can't hurt her. Then Bailee's shadow separates from her and appears near the bell. The shadow reaches out to ring the rope's shadow. The bell rings and the game ends. The Specter has to gift the shadow and Bailee something. Bailee's shadow wants the bell. The Specter tells Bailee the story of how she started The Bellwoods Game; Teens used to gather at the bell to tell scary

stories. They'd ring the bell to start, calling spirits in and ring it again to end, sending spirits away. But one day during the stories, the Specter/Spirit tried to touch a clip in one of the girl's hair. The Specter was able to touch the clip and when it took the clip from the girl, it became visible to the teens. They ran off, forgetting to ring the bell to send the spirit away. Bailee asks for Abigail's memories back. The Specter gives Abigail's memories to Bailee and tells her she'll have to carry them around until she finds the right place to put them. Then the Specter tells Bailee that by accepting the Ghost's gift, Bailee agrees not to tell anyone what happened in the woods that night. The world goes dark and Bailee, Fen, Carmen, Noah and Madison are all waking up back in the cemetery. The next day after school, Fen, Carmen, Noah and Madison meet Bailee to show her a note Noah had added to his notepad before the Specter took his pen. It says, "The winner knows what happened." The other children can't remember anything about the game. But thanks to Noah's notes they are able to piece together most of what happened Halloween night. Bailee helps fill in the parts they couldn't remember, choking and spluttering in the process. She also finally shares what happened to her grandmother the day of Fen's dare. Two weeks later, Bailee is at Nan's house helping her pack after her house sold. The 4 kids come by to help, and Noah shares he's gotten permission to start the first school newspaper. Each of the kids asks to take on a roll to help with the paper. Nan puts the kids to work hauling boxes while Bailee goes back upstairs to Aunt Margery's old room to make sure she hasn't missed anything in her packing. She opens the closet door and her cat, Magic, comes in and rubs against Bailee's ankle. Magic goes to a corner of the closet and starts scratching. Bailee sees a board sticking up. She grabs it and with a wiggle, the board breaks free from the rest. Bailee finds a silver locket. Bailee feels a rush of energy go from her head down her arm into the locket… Abigail's memories. Later, with packing and dinner finished, Bailee and her friends go back to the woods where the bell used to be. With the bell gone, the game can't be played any more. Madison throws the rulebook into the river. Bailee leaves the locket on a mossy rock where the bell used to be. As the kids leave for a movie marathon at Fen's house, Bailee looks back and thinks she sees a girl in a red cloak with a braid over one shoulder and something silver glinting at her collarbone. The girl smiles and waves. Bailee blinks and the girl is gone.
Kids who like scary stories will love it. There's one character, Arlo, last year's Bellwoods Game winner who uses they pronouns and it is confusing initially. Arlo is not a main character to the story.

Farther Than the Moon by Lindsay Lackey
Genre: Contemporary Fiction
AR Reading Level: 4.7 Point Value: 10
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The story opens with 8-year-old Houston Stewart and his 5-year-old brother, Robbie, outside on the back deck in their sleeping bags looking up at the moon in Woodland Park, Colorado. It's been 5 days since their dad left the family. Houston helps his mom take care of Robbie who has cerebral palsy and epilepsy. Robbie is in a wheelchair and needs 24-hour self-help care. He blinks Yes and shakes his head No but he has an iPad with an accessible language app to tap out communications since he can't talk with words. Houston and Robbie love space and want to be astronauts. Houston knows no one like Robbie has ever gone into space before, but he promises Robbie he'll never leave him behind (like their father did).

Fast forward 5 years; Houston is 13 and he's been accepted into the Junior Astronaut Recruitment Program (JARP) in Houston, Texas for a month during his summer break from school. Houston knows tons of astronaut trivia and his favorite astronaut is his grandfather, Carey E Broderick, who had been to space 7 times, helped build the International Space Station, was a part of one of the Hubble Telescope repair missions and 1 of only 6 people to fly the Manned Maneuvering Unit or MMU. But years ago, there was a falling out between Houston's mom, Danica, and her father, Carey Broderick, so Houston has never met him. Houston's grandmother died when his mom was 18. After his father left, Houston asked his mom if he could meet his Grandpa Broderick, but she tells him she's not ready to let him back in yet. He tells Robbie about Grandpa and shares that he's trying to figure out a way to meet him while he's in Houston since that's where Grandpa lives. Robbie types that Houston should invite Grandpa to his Final Mission Project at the end of JARP so 'Mission: Meet Grandpa is born'. Robbie doesn't want Houston to leave without him, and Houston feels guilty that he must leave Robbie, but he assures Robbie that he hasn't forgotten his promise to go to space together someday. A woman with JARP meets Houston and 3 other kids at the airport. On the ride from the airport to Johnson Space Center, Houston meets Freya Aaby from Rhode Island. They connect quickly when Houston notices the names on her t-shirt are all women astronauts. Maverick Schemp from Washington DC whose dad is a congressman is also in the van with Houston. Initially, Maverick is arrogant and overbearing, sometimes demeaning to the crew. At the LMEB (Leland Melvin Educational Building) the three kids meet Captain Santiago, the director of the JARP. Houston and Maverick find their room. They are roommates with George Kingston from Huntsville, Alabama. Houston and George quickly become friends. On the first day there is a trivia competition that Maverick and Houston volunteer for. The third participant is Tahmina who Houston immediately crushes on. Houston wins the trivia competition and Maverick seems jealous. At breakfast the next morning, Houston and George meet Freya's roommates. One is Tahmina, the other is Dongjoo. In their first class, they are assigned to a crew. Houston, George, Maverick, Freya, Tahmina and Dongjoo become a crew. In a frustrating conversation with Maverick, Houston blurts that Carey Broderick is his grandfather. Then worries that his crewmates will find out that he lied about knowing him well. Houston hopes to do everything right in the JARP so he can impress his grandpa at his FMP and his grandpa will want to stay in his life and they'll be a family again. Their first guest lecturer is supposed to be astronaut Eileen Collins, but she is called away at the last minute and is replaced by Carey Broderick. Dongjoo is a viral science communicator on MeV (an educational video platform) with almost 2 million followers. JARP has given her permission to document her experience to share on her social media accounts, so she has a backstage pass to access guest lecturers. When they meet Carey Broderick backstage, they all introduce themselves, including Houston. Grandpa recognizes his name and acknowledges Houston is his grandson, but it becomes apparent that the 2 have never met. After the interview, Grandpa says it was nice to meet all of you and he leaves. Houston is upset Grandpa didn't stay to talk with him. He left just like his father did. Houston runs to the dark auditorium to be alone. Tahmina finds him and Houston shares about Robbie with her. Tahmina shares that her uncle is deaf and her grandma is an accessibility warrior for him like Houston's mom is for Robbie. Tahmina's Nanni made sure the whole family learned sign language. Tahmina asks Houston if he wants to talk about his grandpa, but he says no and dismisses her. Houston avoids his crew for the weekend but is forced to work with them in class. As they try to

complete challenges, Maverick is rude and demeaning to Houston. The crew is assigned to build a robot for a bot battle. Houston knows robotics is a weakness for him and he's already let his team down on the Microgravity Wall challenge when he lost focus because of Maverick's snide comments and questioning everything Houston did. His crew asks Houston to work with Freya on the drive train and electronics. He is surprised they want him to help. He is doubting himself and his value to the team. That evening his mom calls him and tells him Grandpa requested contact information, so she had just gotten off the phone with him. She knows the 2 of them met. Grandpa felt terrible for how the situation played out and was mad at her for not warning him that Houston would be there. Grandpa told her Houston was a remarkable young man and asked her if the two of them could meet again. She gives her ok and Houston is eager to spend time with his grandfather but also has moments of fury at the way Grandpa walked out of the room on their first meeting. His conflict over Grandpa takes its toll on his focus in robotics. He intentionally avoided working on the bot as much as possible, certain that his crew thought he'd only mess things up anyway. Maverick was constantly breathing down his neck, questioning his every move. On Friday, they lose their bot challenge in round 1 when their bot's drive train shorts out. Maverick unleashes blame and fury at Freya during lunch in the cafeteria. Houston tries to take the blame saying he noticed the motors were 20 amps when the plans called for 40 but he didn't say anything. Maverick still blames Freya, calling her an emotional spaz who can't handle a conversation when she starts to cry. She puts her headphones on, and Maverick says if she had quit listening to music for 5 seconds this week, she'd have noticed her mistake. Houston tells Maverick the term spaz is offensive and Tahmina agrees. As the 2 boys shout at each other, Captain Santiago and Carey Broderick enter the room to witness the commotion. Captain Santiago calls the crew out to the lobby. Grandpa leaves. Captain Santiago tells them what she just saw is unacceptable. Tomorrow the team will sit down with Instructor Young to explain themselves. She tells Houston General Broderick is here to see him. Grandpa apologizes for the way he reacted at their first meeting and asks for Houston's forgiveness. Grandpa hopes Houston will give him a chance to get to know him. He asks Houston if he'd like to go on a field trip with him. Grandpa borrows a JARP golf cart and takes Houston to the Space Center Houston Museum. The museum is closed but Grandpa knocks on the door and Skeet lets them in. There's a rocket hanging from the ceiling. Grandpa tells Houston all about the Satern Five. He says Houston's generation is like the command module. They will benefit from the generations of work that came before them and be the ones taking truly exciting journeys to the moon and beyond. Houston is amazed and impressed. They go have ice cream and talk some more… about NASA, JARP, Robbie and Houston's promise to take him to space someday. Grandpa loves the idea. He tells Houston that NASA was working on flying Stephen Hawking on a shuttle mission back in the day. Hawking had one of greatest brains in human history and NASA thought it was possible for someone with severe limitations to fly… no reason they can't think so again. When Grandpa takes Houston back to LMEB, he talks to Houston about what he saw between Houston and Maverick. Grandpa says a crew is family but there's no such thing as a crew without conflict. The best crewmates are the ones who examine their own faults first. A true leader develops the skill of self-examination. Think of Maverick as an opportunity to change and grow if he's right about what he says, and if he's wrong Houston will be better able to explain why you do what you do. At their crew meeting with Instructor Young, Houston apologizes for his deception about knowing his grandpa and tells

them they are all so cool. Freya tells Houston, they weren't mad at him that night when his grandpa left. They wanted to help him, but he shut them out and made it harder to work together. Houston apologizes for abandoning them. He never wants to be the one to abandon someone. Freya says it didn't help that Maverick kept picking on him. Maverick tries to deny it, but the crew confronts him on his bullying and tells him his "joking" isn't funny, it's disrespectful. Calling Dongjoo crazy because she sees a therapist and calling Freya a spaz is a jerk move because calling anyone a name that hurts someone with disabilities is uncool. Words like that are powerful. Freya explains that she wears headphones because she has a sensory processing disorder and sometimes the world is too loud for her. The headphones help her keep focused. She's not listening to music. Maverick says he's sorry to Freya. Maverick says he and his dad are not close like Houston thinks. Maverick's dad is mean sometimes and Maverick is not sure his dad likes him at times. He doesn't want to be mean like his dad. He apologizes to the crew. This meeting deepens relationships within the crew. At a video call with Robbie, Houston introduces Robbie to his crewmates. After that, Danica asks how the meeting with Grandpa went. He tells his mom about Stephen Hawking and she cautions Houston not to make promises to Robbie he can't keep. The Jr. ASCANs (Astronaut Candidates) are called to the auditorium for a special announcement. This year the FMPs will not be individual projects. There will be one FMP presentation by each crew. Houston's crewmates share their ideas for individual projects, hoping to choose one to complete as a team. Houston tells his team about Stephen Hawking, and his first idea was to create an FMP to get Robbie to space. But thinking about what his mom said he's not sure about his idea because maybe he's perpetuating a promise he can't keep. The team decides to design an AR rover for Robbie to feel like he is in space. Robbie can put on a headset and see the Moon in real time, control the rover, and look up at the stars. They call it the Robbie Rover. In classes, Houston's team wins the 2nd team challenge and each of them will get to fly in a T-38 jet on Saturday. Freya is scared but Houston reassures her. When their flights are over, Freya is glad she did it. She puked 3 times, but she didn't gray out and she was ok with g-forces. On Sunday, Grandpa comes to visit the crew. They tell him about The Robbie Rover and he invites them to his house next week for Robbie to meet everyone. Grandpa has a pool so they can swim and do a practice run of their presentation. On Friday, Mom and Robbie arrive in Houston, and they all go out to dinner. Mom tells Houston her mom got sick and her dad left. On Saturday, Grandpa picks up Houston and brings him to his house. Houston enjoys looking at Grandpa's mission notebook, artifacts from missions, photos, etc. in Grandpa's house. It's like a museum. Robbie and Mom arrive. Grandpa gives Robbie his patch for STS-122. It's from the mission Grandpa and Leland Melvin, Robbie's favorite astronaut, were on together. The patch has been to space. Robbie loves it. At dinner, Grandpa and Danica start to talk about what has been upsetting her all these years. Danica confronts her dad about leaving her mom when he knew she was sick. Danica is upset so she leaves the house to go for a walk. While she's out, Houston asks Grandpa why he left Grandma. Grandpa says he didn't know she was sick when he left on his STS-122 mission. Patti, his wife, didn't tell him. He found out later that she'd known for months. On day 8 of his 12-day flight, he got a radio call from ground control that Patti passed away suddenly. They offered to bring the astronauts home, but Grandpa decided to finish the mission. Grandpa thought Danica was old enough to understand that to end the mission, for NASA to bring them all home, would have cost millions of dollars and there were experiments and time-sensitive tasks that would not be completed. Grandpa was

in shock and Danica had always been so independent that it didn't occur to him until it was too late that she didn't just lose Patti, she lost her mom. Grandpa has regretted that decision every day since. When Danica comes back, Houston tells her that he and Grandpa talked… Grandpa didn't know Grandma was sick and he's really sorry. Grandpa and Houston go pick up the crew the next morning. At Grandpa's house, Grandpa creates a pool floatie for Robbie. The kids play splash tag with Robbie in the pool. After swimming and cake the crew give their presentation to Robbie, Danica and Grandpa. During the presentation, Robbie becomes very agitated and has a grand mal seizure. Houston's mom tells him Robbie had two previous grand mals in the last month while Houston was away. She didn't tell him because she didn't want to worry him. Right before the seizure Robbie wrote on his iPad, "No robot. You brother break promise. Go Moon together." Danica explains that Houston didn't give Robbie a way to get to space. He offered him an alternative. Instead of working to find a way to validate Robbie's desires, Houston saw his disability first. Houston reminds her that she said he shouldn't mislead Robbie with a promise he can't keep. She admits that he's right and she was seeing Robbie's disability first too. She apologizes to him. On the drive back to LMEB, Grandpa tells Houston all the things that went wrong during his MMU flight and says sometimes things don't go the way we plan. When a mission goes wrong, you and your crew do everything you can to make it right or make it work. Sometimes, when you persevere through the hard stuff, you get the rare and spectacular gift of a whole new perspective. Even though Houston's presentation didn't go as planned, he has a good crew that he can trust, that will support him to the end, whatever he decides to do. Houston's crew is waiting for him when he gets back to LMEB. Houston tells them he can't present the Robbie Rover. His crew tells him they will start over with a new idea even though that guarantees they won't win because they must have project information already turned in and approved. They have 12 hours before they must present. Their new project is named Moon Shot. Tahmina signs through the presentation. They present the RMS, Robbie Maneuvering System which is based on the original MMU but adapted to act as an enclosed-environment, multiperson, maneuvering unit. Two astronauts will be enclosed in the capsule, and they can operate the jetpack independently or as a team. But if needed, the RMS can be piloted entirely by computer. The RMS gives the astronaut more flexibility to move as their body needs, without sacrificing the safety of the EVA suit. After the FMP presentations, Houston and Robbie meet the astronaut Robbie is named after, General Robert Stewart, Bob. They meet Freya's and Tahmina's families. George and Dongjoo become a couple. Freya's mom gives them all a t-shirt she made for them with all their names on it. A woman with the European Space Agency, Yvonne Hoischen, comes over to talk with the team. She tells them the ESA has launched the Parastronaut Feasibility Project, actively recruiting astronauts with disabilities and she believes that's at the heart of the crew's presentation today. She asks Houston if he, his crew and his brother would speak with her and her colleagues sometime. Robbie says 'yes' for all of them. Back at Grandpa's house, Houston's mom tells him she and Grandpa spent a lot of time talking. She learned that her mom kept her illness from her dad. She thought he'd chosen his job, his crew, over his family. She thought he'd abandoned his wife in her greatest time of need, and she couldn't forgive him for that. But she was wrong. Her mom hid the truth from everyone. She says she and Grandpa are ready to work on being a family again. Grandpa is building a pergola to have more shade for Robbie around the pool next summer when they come back.

This story will keep the reader engaged and wanting to read on.
Language – butt a few times (pgs. 138, 206, 219), crap/pg 157
They is used for her/him when referring to Instructor Lowry (pages 136-138) but it is not distracting to the story.

The Liars Society by Alyson Gerber
Genre: Mystery
AR Reading Level: 4.3 Point Value: 8
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Weatherby Walker and her next-door neighbor, Skip (an adult), unexpectedly win the Northeastern District Championship Regatta. Afterwards, when Weatherby is putting away the sails she notices the new sails are slightly bigger than they should be and she forgot to get them approved and stamped before the race. She is considering reporting it when Dr. Fairview, the head of Boston School offers her a full sailing scholarship. Ever since she received her dad's journal a few months after she and Skip signed up to sail in the regatta and their names were listed in the newspaper, Weatherby wanted to go to Boston School to study environmental science. This will give her a chance to share something with her dad, who she's never met since he died years ago. The only thing she must do is keep the fact that she cheated, because of having a bigger sail, a secret. Jack Hunt and his older brother Ford came in second and that was not supposed to happen. Ford came home from boarding school to help Jack win. Hunts always win but not always honestly. The week before, Ford gave Jack a laxative to put in JB Lodge's water bottle hoping to keep him in the bathroom, missing a couple of races so Jack and Ford could win. JB had a bad reaction and pooped his pants in front of everyone… parents and their biggest rivals, Harbor Hall and St. Windsor. He was shipped off to boarding school in New Hampshire and didn't return to Boston School. Jack feels sick about what he did, but no one can find out. Hunts are supposed to do whatever it takes to get to the top… but not get caught. Their dad, Charles H Hunt, is disappointed in them and tells Jack he needs to sail better. Jack is not as competitive as Ford or his dad. He loves sailing for fun and being out on the water. (Jack is named after his father… his full name is Charles Jack Hunt.)
On her first day at Boston School, Dr. Fairview assigns a fourth form (7th grade) prefect to show Weatherby around campus. It turns out to be Jack Hunt. Neither of the kids are happy about the arrangement. He shows her to Hunt Hall where all her classes will be. At lunch, Weatherby meets Teddie Covington who will be on the sailing team with her. She also meets Iris (who also goes by MP) and Harper. The girls tell Weatherby about Hart Isle which was also donated by the Hunt family. The 7th graders will take a class trip to Hart Isle and Weatherby can't wait. Her father's journal described his trip to Hart Isle but a page is torn out just as he reaches a dead-end trail and describes what he sees as unbelievable, changing something in him forever. Weatherby wants to see what her father saw. After classes she meets up with Jack who shows her where the field house is for sailing practice. Her partner for the first day of practice is Teddie and they are boat number one, the best boat. During their sail, Weatherby gets nervous and freezes up. She gets knocked into the water where there is a white, foamy blob twice her size floating beneath the surface that is thick and sticky, yanking her down. She kicks

hard to get up to the surface. Her boot gets left behind but she makes it back up into the boat. Weatherby capsized their boat and everyone saw. She tells Teddie about the white blob. Teddie says it's some type of pollutant that the school is supposed to be taking care of. Weatherby is pulled from boat one and placed with Jack on boat three at the next practice. After practice, Jack and his friend, Pres (Prescott Flores), take a school sailboat back out for a joyride. They go to an area near Lakeview Woods and tie up the boat while they walk the paths in the woods. Jack has brought along some snap-its, the things that pop and sound like firecrackers. The boys throw them at the ground until Pres smells smoke. Leaves catch fire and the flames grow and spread way faster than they should. By the time the boys get back to the boat and get off the island, Jack sees the woods burning like the trees were soaked in accelerant. But they didn't smell any gas so that can't be. Jack calls his dad and tells him Lakeview Woods are on fire but he didn't mean to do it. His dad tells him to get home and keep his mouth shut. When Jack gets home his dad tells him it's handled, and the woods are off limits to everyone. No one was hurt. After dinner, Jack goes to Ford's room and opens the hidden compartment to look at Ford's maps of Hart Isle. Ford is a talented artist and Jack likes looking at the two sides of Ford's map… the Hunt side and the Boston side. Jack and his family go to the Hunt side every summer and stay at Kingman Cottage which is more like a castle overlooking the forest. The Hunt side is completely private. The Boston side is for students at Boston School. Jack will go there for the first time on his class trip. There is a secret society called Last Heir. It is the ultimate Hunt tradition to join the group. Every Hunt has taken the society's oath. Heirs are powerful and they run everything. Since Jack is in fourth form now, he could be tapped by the secret society. Then he will play the game, beat the gambits and take the oath – Trust Before Truth. Truth Before Tradition. When Jack gets into Last Heir, he'll get to know details about the family and its business that makes nonstick solutions and waterproofing. In science class, Jack and Weatherby get paired together. As they start their science lab, Dr. Fairview calls for a meeting where he announces the funds for their Hart Isle trips were stolen. Someone hacked into the bank's computer system and wired the money to an account out of the country. Their trip to Hart Isle is postponed until further notice. After school, Weatherby gets a message that her mom will be late due to work. When Weatherby sees Teddie, she is invited to Cape Rye Polo Club, Teddie's parents' country club. Teddie's mom says she will take Weatherby home and Weatherby's mom says it's ok. The girls meet Iris and Harper there for dinner. At Jack's house, Chief Roberts is there questioning Charles about his brother, Yates, and the missing money. Yates used to be CEO of Hunt International but now he's not allowed back in the company and there's a settlement arrangement in place that Yates recently requested to revise. But Yates does not need money and would have no reason to steal from Boston School. Jack goes to his room and pulls out the letter that arrived from Uncle Yates. It was addressed to Charles Hunt. Jack opened it and read it but still doesn't understand what it is trying to say. There are some words in all caps which indicate an anagram. Jack's family uses anagrams for password clues so he knows the anagrams mean something, but he hasn't figured out what yet. He is keeping the letter hidden for now. At school the next day, Jack gets a phone message tapping him for Last Heir. The message asks for $25,000. Ford says refuse to pay it. Then Jack tells Ford about the letter from Uncle Yates that he's been hiding. Ford tells Jack to burn the letter and don't tell anyone else about it. At sailing practice, Jack and Weatherby sail strong together, like they've been sailing together their whole

lives. When putting the boat away Weatherby notices that Jack ties a knot with a double loop rather than a single loop like she and most others do. She asks if he always does that and he says yeah but no one else has ever noticed it before, not even Ford. She tells him a good crew sees everything. At the Regatta on Saturday, the kids find out some of their boats have been graffitied with a poem. Pres and Jack each think the message is for them. They find out they were both being asked for $25,000 and neither paid it. They think the poem is from Last Heir. Due to the damaged boats the Boston School team is not allowed to sail in the regatta. At school on Monday, there are a bunch of reporters. Headlines say a scholarship student's home was vandalized and an insider is suspected. The walkway leading to the student's home was graffitied with a poem claiming Harper is a liar… she's at Boston School on a scholarship. (Harper's family doesn't have money like many of Boston School students do and she's been leading her friends to believe she has money like they do.) Weatherby's mom tells her if she's ever approached by anyone, even the police, she should never talk to anyone without her mom present. When Weatherby meets up with Teddie, Iris and Harper she finds that Teddie and Iris are mad at Harper for not being honest with them about who she is. They don't care if Harper doesn't have money. Harper apologizes but Iris and Teddie remain angry. Iris and Teddie leave for class. Weatherby follows Harper to the girl's bathroom to talk with her. Weatherby gives Harper tissues and eye drops and tells her she understands. Harper shares that her father got super sick and her mom quit work to take care of him. Ever since her dad got sick, her grades have gone down. Weatherby admits her secret about the wrong size sails and winning the regatta with Skip that got her into Boston School. On Wednesday after school, Weatherby gets a poetic message inviting her to Last Heir. The message says they know she lied about winning the race and participating in this game is not optional. She's to meet at 5:00 to find an envelope in the archive and play a game with a select few who have been tapped for Last Heir. When Weatherby gets to the library archive, Jack, Pres, Iris and Harper meet her there. In the envelope there is another poem saying that if they beat the gambits, win together, they will be in Last Heir forever. It says, "So Liar meet Thief meet Sneak, Fake and Cheat." They have 24 hours to make copies of documents on Lopez, Spire, and Klein from Rosenberg-Kim Esquire (a legal firm where Iris's mom works). The next day the kids work together to get the documents from Iris's mom, Miriam. They distract Miriam's assistant, Olivia, while Miriam is out of the office. Iris hacks into her mom's computer, finds the documents and makes copies of them before leaving. At her regatta on Saturday Weatherby's mom is unable to make it but Skip shows up to cheer her on. Weatherby discovers that Charles and Skip know each other. Jack tells Weatherby that Skip is best friends with his Uncle Yates. Jack and Weatherby finish first in the regatta. After the race Weatherby asks Skip if he's friends with Yates Hunt. Skip says they used to be best friends, but they haven't known each other for many years. Weatherby asks Skip if he was tapped when he was at Boston School, but he says he can't talk about it and asks her to never ask him about it again. He tells her to be careful about trusting the Hunts. Ford tells Jack to get rid of Weatherby as his sailing partner because she's not who she says she is. The next week after practice the five – Liar, Thief, Fake, Sneak and Cheat meet because they've all received another poem indicating they have a final gambit together. They must travel to Hart Isle together, ride the zipline and get a sample of dirt to find out why people got hurt. They have 48 hours to complete the task. They take the Hinckley (Jack's family boat) after school the next day. Iris doesn't want to go. She

admits to being the one who stole laptops on a dare. She returned them but doesn't want to do something again that she knows is wrong. She's the thief. Pres admits to being the cheat. Jack tells the others about the laxative in JB's water bottle. Even though they all know his secret he still wants to go to Hart Isle to find out what is going on there. The kids convince Iris to help them find the truth. In the boat, the navigation system goes haywire, but Weatherby suggests restarting it and they are back on course. Jack gets them into the Hunt side of Hart Isle and gets everyone into their zipline gear. But when they get to the sliding door that leads to the zipline, Jack can't get it open with the codes that he knows. He calls Ford who tells him to get out of there. It sounds like a trap because Last Heir would never send them to the other side of Hart Isle. Ford hears another voice and asks Jack who he's with. Jack tells him Weatherby, Harper, Iris and Pres. Ford tells them to leave. Jack hangs up and tells the others about a family tradition where every house has a rock-lined path at each door. The second to the last rock on the right has an anagram carved on the bottom. The passwords are all family names. They follow the stone tiles and lift the correct one. It says HE BY WATER. The password is Weatherby. They don't understand why Weatherby's name is the password, but they intend to figure that out later. They get to the end of the ziplines and Weatherby takes the lead. She's read her dad's journal many times and knows the directions he gave. At the end of the path, they find a landfill and a sign saying Hazardous Materials. Weatherby goes forward to collect a sample. Harper yells at her to stop but Weatherby won't stop until Harper tells her that landfill is what's killing her dad. Everyone goes silent as they figure out that Last Heir didn't send them to this landfill. Harper admits that she did it to save her dad. He used to work there. He signed papers saying he wouldn't tell anyone about the place and now they won't pay for his treatment. Everyone he worked with is sick. He's running out of time. The doctors say his symptoms are from being exposed to 'forever chemicals' through breathing the air and drinking the water. Harper vandalized her own house and told the world she was on scholarship to make herself look like a victim so no one would suspect her of setting this gambit in motion. Harper's family can't sue because they don't have any money. She tried asking Pres and Jack for money, but they didn't pay so she had to get proof that the landfill is real, and that Hunt is covering it up. She needed the legal documents and a soil sample. Harper admits that she stole the Hart Isle trip money. Her aunt works at the bank. Harper goes to help her with filing and shredding papers. She knows where they keep the spare security key. She got into the system and moved the money, but she couldn't use it without getting caught so it's still sitting in a different account. Harper says she had to tell them everything because she couldn't let Weatherby get hurt. Harper is the Sneak. Jack thinks Harper made some bad choices, but she had a good reason. His dad told a lot of lies to cover this up and made choices that hurt a lot of people, and he didn't have good reasons. And Ford was covering for Dad too. He said Last Heir would never send them there which means the society knows the truth. The kids all agree 'no secrets among friends'. Weatherby takes a soil sample and tucks the bag into her jacket. They get back to the zipline platform when a voice booms at them to "Freeze". The three security men tell Jack that Ford called and they know who he's with. They take them to Hunt HQ. On the ferry boat to HQ the kids decide to form their own secret society of liars who fight for the truth. They want a name for their society that is undercover… the opposite of what they are… The Liars Society. Weatherby remembers the white foam when she capsized her sailing boat. It's from the chemicals at the Hunt plant. She calls the Department of Environmental

Protection and reports a contamination anonymously. Jack calls Ford and is angry that Ford knew about the contamination and has been covering it up. Weatherby asks Ford about her name. Ford doesn't know who she is, but Harper asks her about her dad's journal. Did it give any names she could look up. Weatherby remembers Gus and Hutch being mentioned as her dad's best friends. Ford says Gus is a friend of Jack and Ford's dad, Charles. Weatherby figures out that Hutch is Skip (Hutchinson). But Skip said he never met Peter Graff, Weatherby's father, so Peter Graff can't be her father. Skip and Gus were both friends with Yates. Yates must be her dad. Jack and Weatherby were born knowing how to sail together. They're cousins. At HQ the kids are held in separate rooms. Weatherby won't talk until her mom arrives. Before security arrives, Weatherby tells her mom she knows her dad is Yates Hunt. The security lady pulls out a document for Weatherby to sign but her mom, Genevieve Walker, won't let her sign it and refuses to sign it on her behalf. In the car ride home Weatherby tells her mom she made the anonymous call to the DEP. Genevieve tells her she didn't know she was pregnant until Yates left. She tried to reach him, but she doesn't think he got any of her messages. Then Weatherby was born. Her dad always said that if he ever had a daughter, he'd name her Weatherby. Her friend, Cayden, invited her to the Harvard Club Winter Ball and Yates was there. They danced all night and dated all year. Then Yates and Charles had a fight over the company. Yates shut down what Weatherby saw on Hart Isle. He understood the science and wanted to change things, but it was expensive. So, Charles went behind Yate's back and opened the landfill again. He also set Yates up. He made it seem like Yates had knowingly ignored the harmful effects of chemical dumping and intended to hurt people. He threatened to blow the whistle on Yates if he didn't leave and never come back. Yates was afraid for himself and Genevieve and she didn't want Charles anywhere near Weatherby. She apologizes for not telling Weatherby the truth about her father. Weatherby tells her mom Jack is her cousin and her friend. Genevieve says Jack can come over anytime. But Weatherby is not allowed at his house ever. Weatherby says she wants to meet her dad. Genevieve says she'll help her find him. Harper's dad is going to be taken care of with all his medical expenses paid by a third-party corporation. She will spend some time with her family and then return to Boston School. The class trip money was moved back to the correct account. Jack confronts his dad about the chemicals being dumped in the woods. That's what caused the poppers to catch fire when they shouldn't have and why Charles doesn't want Jack in the woods. Charles tells Jack scientists investigated and tested Hart Isle and the woods and there's nothing to worry about. But Charles also tells Jack that the chemical dumping on Hart Isle hasn't happened for years. He says the site hasn't been used since Yates left. Jack knows he's lying because he saw it. Jack realizes the only thing more powerful than his dad is the truth and he doesn't trust his dad at all. Charles tells Jack he paid Weatherby's scholarship through an anonymous donation, but Genevieve can't know about that because she doesn't want money from the Hunt's. When Jack gets back to his bedroom, he notices that the knot tied for his hidden compartment has only one loop. He always ties with two. Ford was in there looking for the letter. Jack goes to his closet and finds the letter between his floorboards where he left it. He reads it again to see if he can understand more now that he knows what Dad is doing on Hart Isle. He unscrambles the anagram NEAR LION PIT to be TRAIL ON PINE. So, the letter reads, "I have not interfered with your mission to restore Kingman's work at Trail on Pine." (That's the trail they took from the zipline.) "I hope you will consider an adjustment to the terms of the original agreement so that I can

contact LAKEVIEW REVENGE" is GENEVIEVE WALKER. Jack realizes that Yates has figured out Weatherby is his daughter and has been trying to do everything he can to get to her. AND Jack realizes that Yates sent this letter to their house intending it for Jack. He addressed it to Charles Hunt with no middle initial and had it delivered when only Jack was home. The next morning, when Weatherby gets downstairs for breakfast, her mom is listening to the local news. A reporter tells about the missing money being returned. Then he reports that Yates filed a lawsuit after learning that he unknowingly fathered a child with ex-girlfriend, Genevieve Walker. Everyone at school is going to know that Yates Hunt is her dad. Weatherby is just glad her dad is alive. At school, she ignores the reporters waiting there for her and finds her friends. There's an assembly first thing and Dr. Fairview announces that the money for their class trip has been returned but the Dept of Environmental Protection started looking into a concern on the island that morning. As soon as they have approval from the DEP, they will be ready to go to Hart Isle. He will have more updates soon. Weatherby and Jack find a quiet place to talk. Jack tells Weatherby her call worked. The DEP sent a team last night and found everything. The DEP called the EPA and the investigation is starting to spiral into something much bigger. They're looking into the area around the lake and the woods and all Hunt International properties. His dad is going to have to face consequences for his bad choices. Jack also tells Weatherby about the letter and what it says. He thinks there are more secrets and that Yates hid them in the letter. He gives the letter to Weatherby who says she'll try to solve the puzzle fast and keep the letter safe. Then she notices her backpack is slightly unzipped and finds a thick envelope inside. Jack got one too. There's a poem inside from Last Heir directing them back to Hart Isle. Weatherby notices that Last Heir and Hart Isle have the same 8 letters and they are an anagram for THE LIARS. The kids believe Last Heir wants them to take the oath to become liars too. They believe Harper, Iris and Prescott got an invitation too. They want to find out what else they are being lied to about and vow to each other "Truth before trust."

The chapters alternate between Weatherby and Jack, but each chapter is labeled so it's easy to follow who's narrating. Each character narrates in first person. There are no language issues or social issues other than Genevieve and Yates had a child outside of marriage. Each child has made a bad choice but has feelings of regret about their bad decision making. Book 2 is titled *A Risky Game* and was published in 2025. Book 3 is titled, *A Secret Escape* and is due to be released April 6th, 2026.

In Book 2, A Risky Game, Weatherby, Jack, Harper, Iris and Prescott get invitations to Last Heir, as does Weatherby's best friend, Teddie Covington. There are 4 other students who get invitations, but they are eliminated early on. The story opens with Weatherby looking for clues in her bedroom in the Bishop House where she and her mom have moved to have security now that she's been announced as a member of the Hunt family. The Bishop House is part of the Hunt Estate. She and her cousin, Jack, believe there is more information hidden in her father's letter. They want to figure out what the anagram, W. MAINLANDERS OIL means in his letter. In her closet, she finds words hand-carved into the wood: LANDSMAN WIRE OIL –G. It has the same letters as the anagram in her father's letter. She and Jack believe it is a different anagram hiding the same secret. They pull out Yate's letter and discover there's more on the back in invisible ink. Now they have more anagrams to figure out. The back of the letter says, "HERBS PIROGI was SO OPINED because of W. MAINLANDERS OIL." At a masquerade gala 10 students get a message for Last Heir to meet in the boathouse. They find a clue that

leads them to the phone booth, where they are to go in one at a time to find the hidden room and get their puzzle box to get a key. They have one hour and they must go in ABC order by their first name, which means Weatherby will be last. When Ulysses steps out to let Weatherby go in, he locks her in the tomb. On his puzzle box there was a typed note telling him to lock the tomb after the last person enters. When Pres reads the note, he, Teddie, and Jack run back to the tomb to get Weatherby out. Pres throws Ulysses's puzzle box in the river so he's out. After the regatta on Saturday, the remaining 8 students find their next letter. They are to go to the library archive, enter a hidden bunker to find a map for the next part of the game. When they get to the library, Jack drinks the water from Weatherby's water bottle and becomes unresponsive. Teddie and Weatherby call 911 and an ambulance takes Jack to the hospital. There was a medication that slows down the brain and puts you to sleep (benzodiazepines) added to Weatherby's water bottle that was intended for her. Jack, Teddie and Weatherby didn't finish the gambit to find their map because of Jack's emergency. The Liars meet at the library archive to go through the face books (year books) from past years to find out who RiRi is. She was Teddie's mom's best friend until she moved away to Argentina. Weatherby's dad's letter said HERBS PIROGE didn't really move to Argentina. The kids discover HERBS PIROGE is Grier Bishop, Kingman's sister's daughter and SO OPINED is poisoned. Weatherby's bedroom was Grier's until she died. She was Jack and Weatherby's dads' cousin. And Grier looks like Weatherby. The students learn their trip to Hart Isle is back on and they receive a message that they will find instructions in their chateau after they arrive. They must finish the gambit by sunrise on day 2 on Hart Isle. Ford comes home from boarding school and finds out what has happened to Jack and Weatherby. Jack tells him about Grier and Ford apologizes for telling their Dad about the letter from Yates and for turning them in for being on Hart Isle. The brothers call a truce and decide to work together to find out what the family secret is that Grier died for. Just before the students leave for Hart Island, Weatherby gets a note telling her to stop looking for answers, digging up the past, and trying to win the gambits. It tells her not to be a spark… sparks get extinguished. On Hart Isle, Jack and Weatherby are assigned to different halls. Jack is in Wigglesworth with Iris and Teddie. Weatherby, Pres and Harper are in Cabot. Artie is eliminated when he's caught cheating at the boat race and Priya injures her ankle on the zipline and goes home. The halls have competitions. Only students remaining on the top two teams can be in Last Heir. Iris agrees to help Teddie and Jack because she found her map and knows where to go for the final gambit. Pres and Harper will lead Weatherby to the correct location for the fencing gambit. Once they cross a 10-foot lagoon, swinging individually by a rope, they start the fencing gambit. Following the instructions, Weatherby suits up to fence against Iris. As the girls begin a voice says, "Halt!". It is Yates, Weatherby's dad, and he tells them to drop their weapons because Iris's foil tip has been broken off and is a sword that can kill Weatherby. Iris freaks out that she could have hurt Weatherby. Yates said Genevieve, Weatherby's mom, told Skip Weatherby was afraid that something could happen to her on Hart Isle… that someone wants to hurt her. Skip contacted Yates who came to watch over Weatherby. Together, they conclude that Charlie, Jack's father, is the one trying to kill Weatherby. Yates tells Weatherby and the other kids to trust Ford. They will need his help to keep Weatherby safe from Charlie. Yates says he cannot tell them what the last anagram, W. MAINLANDERS OIL, is. It is a family secret that even those in Last Heir don't know about. The kids check all the foils and finish the

gambit. Now Weatherby's Hall just has to get enough points in the last day's events to make the final two. Wigglesworth is already the top team. Cabot is in last place because of Artimis cheating. Weatherby and Yates make plans to meet in St. Moritz, Switzerland where she will request to do her study abroad. Yates has a house there. Pres and Weatherby are partners in the labyrinth for the final competition. Cabot needs to win this to be in the top two halls. Pres and Weatherby win the labyrinth and Cabot moves into 2nd place, earning Pres, Weatherby and Harper a place in Last Heir with Jack, Iris and Teddie. When Weatherby gets home, her mom tells her Skip had to leave to stay safe. She doesn't know where he went or if he'll be back. Weatherby tells her mom she needs to legally add Hunt to her name so there's an official trail of who she is. That way, she can't just disappear and not be noticed like Grier did. She also tells her mom she met her dad and she's going to see him in Switzerland next year during her study abroad. The Liars meet Weatherby in her bedroom to search for more clues to find the last anagram. Under a floorboard, they find a rock with an anagram of a Hunt name on the back (a family tradition for hiding keys). W. MAINLANDERS OIL. The anagram isn't a word, it's a Hunt name. They figure out it must be William Anderson but Jack doesn't know who that is. They also find a small brass wheel hidden in the space beneath the floorboard. When they turn it, a hidden staircase comes down from the ceiling. In the attic, they find a jewelry box with a lock on it. They use the name William Anderson to open the lock. Inside the box is a sealed envelope and a thick gold key that they believe opens a Swiss safety deposit box. The letter says they've found the original Last Heir bunker to find the truth about WILLIAM ANDERSON. Before they take the key and attempt to open the safety deposit box, they are encouraged to visit CRESSEDA A. HELD at ILES DE CHARADS. Taking the trip to Switzerland and uncovering this secret puts you and the lives of everyone you love at risk. Weatherby notices the last two anagrams have the same letters. They are anagrams for the same thing… CHARLES IS DEAD. The kids think the Charles that is dead must be Jack's dad. Everyone knows his grandfather, Kingman is dead. Jack's not dead so it must be his dad. Then who is the man pretending to be his father? The whole team decides to study abroad in Switzerland with Weatherby so they find the truth. They invite Ford to the attic/bunker and bring him up to date on all that they've learned. Ford comes up with a plan. Weatherby and Jack need to have a public fight at regatta regionals, keeping the yelling vague. Then they cut off all contact with each other, letting Charles think he's won. Also, let Dad believe that Jack and Ford are still on the outs with each other. Don't let him know they've made up. When they are both in Europe, they can make contact again. Ford tells them he'll request a study away program for the fall to help them in Switzerland. They vow, 'truth before everything'. Weatherby apologizes to Teddie for keeping secrets, but she can't tell her anything more. Someone is trying to kill Weatherby and if Teddie knows too much, she will be in danger too. The six kids are sworn into Last Heir and Charles' eyes are burning with rage. His expression is livid. Ford and Weatherby see it too and they all know Weatherby is still in danger.

There are no language concerns in this story.

Light and Air by Mindy Nichols Wendell

Genre: Historical Fiction
AR BL: 5.0 Point Value: 8
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Set in the fall of 1935, Halle's mom (Mama/Isabel) comes down with Tuberculosis, she is sent away to J.N. Adam Tuberculosis Hospital in the woods of upstate New York. Halle and her father (Papa/Graham) both test positive for TB but are both in a dormant state so they are not contagious and can continue with regular routines. However, students at school shun Halle and call her names. Halle is glad her best friend, Thelma, has not deserted her. It's been over a month, and Papa won't be completely forthcoming with her about Mama's condition and, in fact, he seems angry with her most of the time, Halle decides to walk to Perrysburg to see Mama. She hasn't slept well and isn't feeling well but Papa didn't even ask if she was feeling ok when she overslept. He just yelled at her to get to school and then left for his job as a history teacher. She prepares her schoolbag with food, water, a change of clothing and a book and sets out on her journey, leaving a note for Papa. As it gets late in the day, Halle is struggling to keep walking and feels worse as her trip goes on. She catches the toe of her shoe in a tree root, loses her balance and crumples to the ground and everything goes dark and silent. When a search party is launched, Doc Gray finds her, but Halle is feverish, has quite a bump on the head and a violent cough. Halle is resting at home when she coughs up blood and is taken to JN Adam in Perrysburg. After more than a week, Halle's fever breaks. She's given a notepad and pencil to write with since her vocal cords are swollen from the infection causing laryngitis. She finds out she has pneumonia. After a few more days Halle is moved from isolation to the children's ward where she meets her 3 roommates, Flossie, Viv and Rita. When she starts school at the hospital, she meets Eddie and Sam. Halle becomes close with these 5 children. Miss Tillson, Halle's teacher, and her friends make sure Halle's 11th birthday on 11/11 is a special day for her. She continues asking to see Mama and they keep telling her Mama isn't well enough yet, so Halle decides Mama needs honey water like she has at home every morning. Eddie, Sam and Flossie walk with her to meet Melchior, the beekeeper. She learns later in the story that Melchior is also the hospital director's (Dr. Fenton) father. Melchior agrees to get a big jar of honey to the adult ward and Flossie's older sister, Lulu who works there will make sure to get the honey water to Halle's mama every morning. When the girls get back to their room, Rita tells them Viv had a hemorrhage. Later in the week, Flossie's mom who works at the hospital, comes to the girls' room to tell them Viv died. The girls are devastated and so are Eddie and Sam when the girls tell them what happened to Viv. Halle asks Sam and Eddie to walk her over to the adult ward after dark so she can visit Mama. Her visits are very short… just a few minutes so Mama will know she's there for her. After Halle's first visit the boys take turns walking her over to the other building since now they all know the way. Halle's mama seems to be getting better as Halle visits. But one night, the lights are on in Mama's room, so Halle stops in the hall to listen to the nurses talking rather than going into Mama's room. Mama had a hemorrhage, and the nurses say the child is her biggest problem. Halle believes it must be her fault Mama hemorrhaged. She goes back to her room, packs her bag and leaves in the early morning hours to go to the train station and get a train to Perrysburg. She'll figure out what's next when she gets there. But at the train station she changes her mind, deciding she wants to be with Mama when she dies so she starts walking back to the hospital. Melchior finds her and takes her back to his place letting the director know she's been found. She tells Melchior everything…

the visits to Mama, the hemorrhage that's her fault and her plan to run away. He assures Halle Mama's hemorrhage was a minor one, she's alive and it's not Halle's fault Mama hemorrhaged. He tells her there's another explanation for what the nurses said but it is Papa's place to tell her about that. He assures her it's ok to be mad at God, just don't stay mad forever. Halle sleeps and Melchior makes her pancakes when she wakes, then takes her to the director's house where Papa is also waiting for her. Papa tells her the reason Mama's recovery has been slower is because she's pregnant (that's the child the nurses were referring to). The director tells Halle he will set up regular visits for her with her mama. Four months later, on the eve of the first day of spring, Mama gives birth to a baby boy, Elijah (Eli for short). Two months after that, doctors declare Halle, Mama and Eli healthy enough to go home. On the morning of Halle's last day at the sanitorium, she, Flossie and Rita meet Eddie and Sam at Viv's makeshift memorial of forget-me-nots they had created on the hospital grounds near the swings which Viv always loved. Halle says her goodbyes to the others, and they exchange addresses agreeing to keep in touch. Eddie would be going home later that week. Rita hoped to be home by the fourth of July and Flossie, her mom and sister hoped to be heading back to Buffalo at the end of the summer. (Flossie's dad died of TB.) Halle had asked Papa to carve four honey dippers for her to give to each of her friends to remember their time together at the sanitarium. Papa had etched JNA on each handle for J.N. Adam. As was tradition at JN Adam, patients, nurses, and orderlies were armed with noisemakers of all sorts to celebrate patients' discharge. Halle and Mama's discharge was special because Eli was the first baby born at the sanitorium. Thelma and Halle write to each other during Halle's stay at the sanitarium, so readers know their friendship has endured the hardship.
There's an author's note after the epilogue giving historical facts about TB, James Noble Adam (the mayor of Buffalo, New York) and his purchase of land for the development of the hospital (which really existed). The author also explains the story behind the story… how she came to the idea to write this story.
This story keeps the reader engaged and rooting for Halle, her mama, and her friends. Pros/cons; Halle mentions God a couple of times in the story. She prays for her mama and Viv. A child dies. There is no bad language.

Lightningborn by Julie Kagawa
Series: Storm Dragons
Genre: Fantasy/Adventure
AR Reading Level: 6.1 Point Value: 12
Copyright: 2024
Remy knows only the rich can own dragons, and he's far too busy worrying about where his next meal will come from. His father departed on a ship and never came back. Since his mother's death 3 years earlier, he spends his days trying to survive the streets of Cutthroat Wedge, one of the many islands floating in the gravitational pull of the magical Maelstrom raging below. He thought about leaving Cutthroat Wedge to see the capital, but the sky ships were the only way to leave and none of the ship crews wanted a frail, small, sickly boy. Remy quit trying to become a pirate and started stealing from them instead. The first night of the story opening, there's a terrible storm raging and Remy runs out of his small shack in

case a lightning strand should hit it. He sees a pirate sky ship he knows by reputation, the Windshark, belonging to one of the most dangerous pirates in the kingdom, named Jhaeros who is a ruthless, cruel storm mage. Mages were common aboard sky ships for powering the ship crystal that enabled it to fly. After cannon fire from the ship, Remy saw something dark flutter down from the sky, landing with a splash in the center of a pool. The creature let out a cry, weakly flapping its wings against the water. It was obviously hurt and probably close to drowning if it couldn't fly. Remy splashed into the pond. He reached out an arm and the creature immediately latched on, digging into his skin with tiny talons. The creature's head twisted up to look at Remy with bright, purple eyes. It was a baby dragon. Remy pulled the dragon to his chest and scrambled into a pipe just as the rain poured down in sheets. Remy calls the baby dragon Storm and wonders if Storm is an orphan like him. Together they fall asleep in the stone pipe. Storm wakes Remy the next morning. Remy can see clearly in the morning sun, the dragon's scales are a deep cobalt blue with silver markings like lightning strands down its back, neck and over its wings, its' horns shiny black. Remy looks for the tattoo that will tell him who the dragon belongs to but there isn't one. It's a wild dragon and according to Bart, a white-haired, shriveled old man who was always at the Salty Barrel tavern telling stories about dragons, wild dragons were extinct, now myths that exist in old sailor tales. If Remy could keep the dragon hidden long enough, once it grew up a bit, Remy could finally leave the island and fly away to the capital, to a new life in the city. Storm shoves his muzzle into Remy's pocket that holds the food package from the night before. Remy realizes Storm is hungry and pulls the pigeon kabob from his pocket for Storm. After eating, Storm sleeps in Remy's hammock and Remy runs to the Salty Barrel to ask Crusty Bart how to care for a dragon. Meanwhile, Gemillia Sunwind Gallecia, the princess of Gallecia, is assigned a 15-page report on the history and dangers of uncontrolled magic and mages as a consequence for practicing magic outside of class hours. At the library, Gem finds a book that mentions the Ancient Ones. She's never heard of them before so she looks for more information about them but finds nothing. When Gem asks the head librarian where she can find information about the Ancients, she's told those books are housed in the restricted wing, not for students. Gem is summoned to council chamber where her father, King Gallus Gallecia XIV is sharing the news with nobles, councilors and politicians that the island crystals are falling, meaning the islands are sinking and could drop dangerously close to the Maelstrom in as little as 10 years. Every island, from the capital to those in the farthest reaches of the Fringe, is kept aloft by storm crystals but the crystals are going dark and the magic stored within is fading. Once the crystals are gone, the kingdom will sink into the Maelstrom. The College of Magic, where Gem is a first-year student, will be temporarily shut down so all available storm mages can be summoned to power the crystals. This will buy the time needed to find a way to preserve and save the crystals. All other storm mages available will be summoned to the capital. This must not get out to the citizens because it will cause panic and chaos. One councilor asks about the Ancient Ones but no one has seen an Ancient in hundreds of years. King Gallus says we can't waste resources looking for Ancients when there are things we can do right now. (The queen had died shortly after Gem was born so her father is preparing her to be the future queen as heir to the throne.) That night, after midnight, Gem sneaks to the dragon stables to find her dragon, a white, blue-eyed runt, Gem named Cloud. Cloud flies her to the college where she sneaks to the library to find the restricted wing and books about Ancients. She learns the Ancients were dragons. True Dragons that had

existed before the Shattering of the World. The ones who had taught magic to humans in ancient times. She found out True Dragons are not extinct. No one knows where they've gone but there are several instances throughout the kingdom's history when someone has seen or met a True Dragon. The most recent account happened barely 30 years ago, to a sky knight called Sir Bartello Axtell when he was on a mission with his dragon. Sir Bartello was escorting a merchant ship when they were attacked by sky pirates. His dragon, Blazetalon was struck by cannon fire, fatally wounded. Both dragon and rider fell into the Maelstrom and were presumed dead. Ten years later, Sir Bartello was found on a small uninhabited land chunk many miles from the edge of the kingdom. When asked how he survived, Sir Bartello claimed he had been saved from the Maelstrom and put on the island by a True Dragon before it vanished back into the storm. Physicians determined that the stress and dehydration had caused him to produce the illusions he thought were True Dragons. He was given permanent leave from the sky knights. Three months later, he left the capital without warning. His current location is unknown. Gem needs to find Sir Bartello so she can find the Ancients and save the knigdom's storm crystals. When she returns to the dragon stables, telling the sky knight captain she'd just taken Cloud out for a morning flight, Gem asks the captain about Sir Bartello. Sir Cassandra says the last she heard, Sir Bartello was on a ship sailing to Cutthroat Ridge, a place for smugglers and sky pirates. At the Salty Barrel, Remy asks Bart what, and how often, dragons eat. Bart asks Remy about his sudden interest in dragons but before Remy can answer, Jhaeros, captain of the Windshark, steps into the tavern declaring he's looking for a small dragon that escaped his cage last night and got caught in the storm, which blew it here. He offers a chest full of gold coins and jewelry for the dragon's return. And just in case anyone has thoughts of taking his dragon for themselves, he holds up a skull declaring this is what happens to those who steal from him. Remy runs back to his hut to hide Storm. Bart follows him and sees Storm. Remy shows Bart the dragon has no tattoo and tells Bart he's pretty sure Jhaeros killed Storm's mother. Bart helps Remy hide Storm at Bart's shack. At the edge of the island there's a stairway cut into the side of the cliff, forming a narrow path down a wooden walkway jutting from the side of the rock wall. The walkway curled around the rock and ended at a house perched on the side of the cliff. Bart says no one comes around to bother him here. He leads Remy up a ladder to the loft where he sleeps and shows him a door that opens into a tunnel that ends in a cave where Storm can stay hidden. Bart gives Storm a rat skewer and tells Remy it takes 3 years for a dragon to grow big enough to ride. Bart tells stories about dragons to the pirates looking for the lost dragon for coins. He uses the money to buy food for Storm, Remy and himself. Back at the capital the king tells Gem he must travel to Wyndhaven to speak with Duke Nox about the storm crystal crisis and will be gone for a few days. Gem packs Cloud's saddlebags and heads east to Cutthroat Wedge. At Bart's shack, Storm is chasing a centipede to eat and discovers a large hole near the bottom of a rock pile. Storm follows the centipede into the hole and Remy follows. At the tunnel's end, Remy finds another cave, huge stalagmites rising from the floor. In the center of the chamber, there's a cluster of blue and purple crystals reaching the ceiling. Remy can hear the hum coming from the massive gemstones. He can feel the vibrations of energy and magic that go through the floor. He has stumbled onto the storm crystals of Cutthroat Wedge. As Remy reaches to pick up Storm, the back of his hand brushes the smooth edge of the largest crystal and a jolt flows through him. As Remy staggers away, emotions swirl through him… Storm's emotions. As the 2 head back through the

tunnel to Bart's cave, they see Ferus, the owner of the Salty Barrel standing in the middle of the cave. They freeze in the tunnel to see what Ferus will do. As Ferus bends down, about to look in the tunnel, Bart arrives and asks what Ferus is doing in his home. As the 2 men talk, Remy overhears Ferus mention that Bart was a sky knight. After Ferus leaves, Remy asks Bart about being a sky knight but Bart won't talk about it. The next morning, Remy wakes to the ground shaking and voices outside Bart's door. Bart is already gone but Remy gets into the tunnel to hide with Storm as Jhaeros and his crew burst through the door. (Ferus told Jhaeros that Bart may be hiding the dragon.) They can't find the dragon so they leave but fire a cannon at Bart's house from their sky ship as they do. The cannon destroys Bart's house but the cave behind it is still there when Storm and Remy come out of the tunnel. As soon as the sky ship leaves, Remy tells Storm to stay put while he goes to warn Bart. As Gem and Cloud travel, they fly into a storm. A pirate sky ship, the Queen's Blade, flies overhead and offers to let them aboard until the storm passes. Not wanting Cloud to get hurt in the lightning storm, Gem boards the ship. Captain Cutlass tells Gem to take the dragon to the cargo hold and don't let him set her ship on fire. Later, Captain Cutlass has Gem brought to her cabin where she tells Gem she recognizes her as the princess and a mage. Captain Cutlass wants to know why Gem is flying towards Cutthroat Wedge. Gem will only say she's on an important personal mission looking for someone. The captain offers to take Gem to Cutthroat Wedge, escort her around the island to help her find who she's looking for, keep Cloud hidden in her cargo hold in exchange for a good word to the king… asking his sky knights to look the other way if they ever encounter her ship. Gem makes the deal. As the Queen's Blade approaches Cutthroat Wedge, there is an explosion. Gem must tell the captain who she is looking for because Captain Cutlass doesn't want to endanger her crew and her ship without knowing who they are looking for. Captain Cutlass decides that although it's risky, they will enter the port to see if they can find Sir Bartelllo. When Remy arrive at the Salty Barrel, the Windshark is floating above the tavern. Bart is outside with Jhaeros circling around him. Bart refuses to tell Jhaeros anything so Jhaeros is about to kill Bart when Remy runs out from hiding to stop him. Storm also leaps into the air and clomps down on Jhaeros's wrist. Bart tackles Jhaeros and tells Storm to run with Remy. Jhaeros's pirates capture Storm in a burlap bag, punch Remy and take Bart to care for the dragon. Remy blacks out. Gem and Captain Cutlass see the Windshark leaving the floating island. Gem (as alias Mary Featherbottom), Captain Cutlass, Jack (crew member), and Lysander (the ship's mage) go landside to the Salty Barrel. The men tell Captain Cutlass that Jhaeros took the dragon and Bart away on his ship. Gem tells Captain Cutlass, she will have her father give Captain Cutlass anything she wants within reason if she will take Gem to rescue Bart. Remy steps forward telling them he has a connection with Storm, can feel Storm and knows which way he's flying. Remy can guide them to Bart and Storm if they take him with them. After fighting off sky sirens (bird women), Remy sees Jhaeros through Storm's eyes and hears what Jhaeros is telling Storm. Jhaeros plans to use Storm as bait to lure adult True Dragons to the Vortex where magical energies swirl and gather into one giant, chaotic pool. Then he will drain a dragon of its magic and use it to overthrow the kingdom. Remy tells Captain Cutlass and Gem about this and must share that Storm is a True Dragon too. Over the next 3 days as they sail toward the Vortex, Remy and Gem get to know each other and Gem shares with Remy that she is the princess, her father would not approve of her being here and Bart may hold the information integral to helping the kingdom. At the Vortex, the group sees the Windshark. The

Queen's Blade provides a distraction firing a barrage of cannons, so Gem and Remy ride on Cloud to the Windshark's bilge hole, to rescue Bart and Storm and try to get out again. The two get onboard the Windshark and find Bart. He tells them Storm is on the top deck in Jhaeros's quarters. Remy makes his way up past 2 gun decks to the captain's deck pretending to be a powder monkey (boys fetching gunpowder for the cannons). Remy makes it inside Jhaeros's cabin and picks the lock to the cage Storm is held in. Jhaeros enters and raises his sword to Remy. Storm leaps forward sending blue light from his mouth sending a streak of lightning to Jhaeros's chest. While Jhaeros is down, Remy grabs Storm and runs to the balcony. Cloud, Gem and Bart show up but Jhaeros sends a streak of lightning to the railing where Remy is standing. Remy and Storm fall into the Maelstrom. Jhaeros sends a gust of wind that drops Cloud, Gem and Bart to the deck. Jhaeros realizes Gem is the princess and orders her dragon and Bart be thrown overboard. Gem throws out her arm, sending a streak of lightning towards Jhaeros who blocks it with his hand. Jhaeros approaches Gem, as Storm, with Remy on his back, appear alongside the Windshark. The magic of the Vortex caused Storm to grow. Remy and Storm provide a distraction (by sending a streak of lightning toward Jhaeros) for Gem and Bart to mount Cloud's back and fly to the Queen's Blade. As Remy and Storm follow, they see Jhaeros is still alive. With everyone back safely on the Queen's Blade, Captain Cutlass directs her ship to the capital, telling Gem she expects to be compensated for the damage done to her ship. Storm can communicate telepathically with the captain, Remy, Gem and Bart now. Bart asks Gem why she's come for him. Swearing Remy, Bart and Storm to secrecy, she tells them the crystals keeping them afloat are failing. If they don't do something to stop it, everything they know will fall into the Maelstrom and be lost. Sir Bartello may be the only person alive with knowledge of how to save the world.
The story ends here leaving the reader ready to read book 2 in the series; *Firebred*. The story alternates between Remy and Gem until their paths meet. Language: piss-pot/pg. 206, The third book in the trilogy is *Skyshattered* (due out April 2026).

Lucky Duck by Chris Kurtz
Genre: Animal Adventure
AR RL: Point Value:
Copyright: 2024
Frank is 10 days old at the opening of the story. He has two sibling ducks, Darryl and Darlene. He's very proud to be a duck and his mom, Samantha, is very caring. She tells the ducklings they are her first hatchlings. She laid 2 batches of eggs before them that didn't survive. She found a rock with 3 spots on it and knew it was her lucky amulet to hatch her eggs this time. Every first-time mother duck gets to have her own celebration called a Duckanalia, where other adult ducks in the clan gather to say nice things, congratulate the mother and welcome the ducklings into the clan. Things go well at the Duckanalia until Uncle Dave declares that Frank is not accepted into the clan. He's not one of them. Samantha is upset and ends the Duckanalia. The next day, Samantha takes the ducklings to the pond to practice swimming. The family notices that Frank's feet are exceptionally big for a duck. The ducklings are playing when Frank decides to hide in some reeds from his siblings. Darryl and Darlene swim away and Frank finds himself in the middle of a group of half-grown ducks. They ask Frank if he's the oversized egg and

tell him he was a late hatcher. They try to call him names like Big Head, Fuzz Butt and weirdo but Frank insists on his real name. Frank's mom comes looking for him and tells him those ducks are not his friends. Back at the nest, Frank asks his mom about being an oversized egg and she tells him he was a beautiful egg and he will make her proud and show everyone what a great bird he is. Samantha seems to know Frank is not a duck but it doesn't matter to her. The next day, the family goes for a swim again and Frank finds the half-grown ducks who again start calling him Freaky Duck and telling him to make his mom proud, he should leave. They tell Frank fake names for themselves. They start donking him on the head, telling him they're testing his quality. They tell Frank their real names after the donking… Derrick, Dennis, Dexter, Donna, the Fab Four. Samantha calls for him, so Frank goes back to his family. That night in the nest, Frank hears a faraway honking about flying and a journey. It gradually gets softer until it fades completely. He thinks it is the moon speaking to him. The next day, Samantha takes the ducklings out to show them how to duck their heads in the water, how to preen, practice their wing flaps and snap their beaks at predators because ducks don't take kindly to non-ducks in their pond. She shows them how to find snails to eat but Frank prefers eating grass. Frank steps up on a rock that turns out to be a turtle. The turtle doesn't have a name so Frank names him Turtle Rock, TR for short. Back with his family, Samantha is asking Frank about the non-duck Darlene saw talking to him when Uncle Dave comes along saying he's called a meeting about a non-duck problem. At the meeting, the clan learns a fox is taking ducklings. Frank overhears because he follows his mom and hides to listen in. Samantha decides to move their nest to a safer location and tells the ducklings about predators like raccoons, possums, weasels, ferrets and stoats. The next morning at the pond, Frank talks with the Fab Four and they tell him someone needs to go on a quest to save the clan. Frank wants to make his mom proud, so he volunteers. The Four tell Frank he's looking for a powerful amulet, a tooth, bone and claw from a predator and he must leave immediately. They say they will tell his family why he left (but they don't have any intention of doing so). Frank leaves the pond heading into the forest when he meets TR who tells him those 4 are not his friends and it's a stupid quest. Frank argues and says he can save his clan. TR says he's going with Frank because he shouldn't be going into the forest alone. They walk all day and find a place to sleep for the night. On the second day, TR notices Frank is growing feathers in his wings and Frank notices he's growing back and chest feathers too. On the 3rd day, the pair meet a possum stealing eggs from a nest. Frank grabs the possum's tail in his beak and pulls him down from the tree. As the possum tries to come after Frank, TR bites onto his tail and won't let go even as the possum runs off. As Frank investigates the eggs to see if there are survivors, the mother bird swoops down, pecking Frank, calling him a baby killer. He tells her it wasn't him and she stops attacking, and flies away. Frank continues looking for TR when it starts to rain and he overhears 2 stoats, Stumpy and Boss, talking about finding food. Frank runs away but feels lost when he stops running. A while later, Frank runs into Stumpy and Boss again. As Stumpy and Boss are chasing Frank and about to bite his neck, the mother bird swoops in screeching and pecking the stoats until they run to their den. Frank thanks her and introduces himself. Her name is Mini and she leads Frank to a quiet spot near a stream. She asks Frank why he's in the forest alone. He explains his quest and tells her about TR. She says she helped him because he tried to save her eggs (but they all died) and she wanted to apologize for attacking him. She says maybe she can help him find TR but they hear thunder, she takes off and Frank smells smoke. Mini flies back and

tells Frank, there's a forest fire. She says follow the stream to the lake and then swim. As he's swimming in the lake to an island, something grabs his leg. It's a raccoon that asks Frank to please help him. Frank says to grab his wing instead of his leg so he can paddle. Frank drags the raccoon to the island and out of water. The raccoon says his name is Flinch. Frank sees burns on one side of Flinch. Frank sits his body down next to Flinch to keep him warm in the night. He stays next to Flinch until the sun is high in the sky so it will be warmer when Frank moves away. Frank finds some tasty water plants that have snails on the bottom of them. He brings the snails to Flinch. Flinch thanks Frank repeatedly for saving his life and says he won't rest until he can return the favor. He asks Frank to be his friend. Flinch promises Frank from this day forward he will never eat birds or eggs again. The next day, Flinch tries to catch a crawdad in the water but he's in too much pain to be successful. Frank dives his head under, grabs the crawdad in his beak and flings it onto the sand for Flinch. Frank gets 3 more for Flinch. The next day, Flinch asks Frank why he is out alone at such a young age. Frank tells Flinch all about his quest, TR, Mini, the killer fox, the Fab Four, the stoats. Flinch offers to help saying he's seen some bones and teeth in his travels. That night, speaking as a friend, Flinch tells Frank he's not a duck, he's a goose. Frank thinks about it all night. The next morning, Flinch tells Frank his feathers seem thicker and longer than yesterday. Frank flaps his wings and his body lifts out of the water. He practices all day with short runs, flapping his wings around the island. By the next day, Frank can run on top of the water while flapping and then glide a short distance. Flinch is thrilled for Frank and cheers him on until Mini arrives and starts pecking him on the head. Frank shouts to Mini that Flinch is his friend. She stops attacking so Frank explains they've been staying together on the island while Frank was waiting for Mini and Flinch is going to help him find some bones. Frank explains Flinch's rescue and Flinch tells Mini if she gives him a chance, he will prove himself to her. Mini says she found TR and now that she knows where Frank is, she will lead TR to him. Frank tells Mini that Flinch helped him figure out he's a goose, not a duck. Frank tells Mini to have TR meet him back at the duck pond since TR is a slow traveler and Frank will be heading back that way soon. Mini says she'll meet him back at the duck pond with TR. The next morning before Flinch is awake, Frank goes out to practice turning and landing when he's flying. Back on the island, Flinch is awake when Frank gets back. Frank hears a band of geese overhead and then sees them land in the lake. Flinch coaxes Frank to introduce himself and say hi. Frank meets Camilia and her family, mom/Tendriya, brother/Cassian, sister/Eliana. They are on their migration. They wonder if Frank would like to join them. He says he can't because he's on a scouting mission for his family to find the best way for migration. Camilia says maybe they'll see each other again at the gathering place. Frank hopes so. The geese leave the next morning and Frank feels sad. Flinch says he's feeling better, some of the bare patches of skin are growing fuzz and they better get going on the quest. Flinch swims across the lake to the forest. Flinch leads them to some bones belonging to a mole and has to convince Frank a mole is a predator. Flinch collects a paw, a tooth and a bone and carries them in 1 front paw, walking on the other three legs. The pair decide Frank will fly while Flinch hurries on land and they will meet at the stream that feeds the duck pond just inside the forest tree line. When Frank flies over the pond, he sees a fox feeding on 2 dead ducks on the bank of the pond. Frank meets Mini, Flinch and TR. The foursome come up with a plan. Frank reunites with Darryl and Darlene and tells them about their part in the plan after he scares away Dennis, Derrick and Dexter. (Donna got caught by the fox.) Darryl and Darlene swim with

Frank to the stream and walk up the bank where Frank introduces them to his new friends. Mini alerts the group when she sees the fox hiding behind some tall grass watching the ducks. On the bank of the pond in the fox's line of sight, Darryl pretends to be sick, sitting on the bank and then limping. Darlene pretends to have a hurt wing. As the fox springs into the water at Darryl and Darlene, TR latches on to the fox's tail and Flinch leaps onto the fox's back. Mini arrives pecking at the fox's head. Then Frank crashes his body full force into the fox's head. He goes under. When the fox manages to break the surface to take a breath, Frank donks him with his beak and pummels him with his wings. As the fox tries to get out of the water, the other ducks attack, donking the fox's head and nose, others flying on his back to weigh him down. There is a choking, raspy sound in the fox's throat as he struggles to swim. His head is getting lower in the water. The fox gets to land but slumps away into the tall grass as Mini gives him one final peck on the head. The ducks gather on the bank and Samantha steps forward to reunite with Frank. Frank says he'd like to introduce the duck clan to his friends and points out that in the face of extreme danger they worked together. Samantha, Darryl and Darlene stay for the introductions but the rest of the flock swim away without a word. Frank realizes he can't stay at the duck pond. He tells his family he will always love them but he must go figure out how to be a goose. He promises to come back to visit. Samantha tells Frank she loves him and will worry about him every day. After she swims away, Frank turns to his 3 friends and tells them he thinks he needs to learn how to migrate, asking them if they want to try it. They all decline. TR will stay at the duck pond. Mini wants to go start a new family. He promises the 3 of them, he'll come back to find them. He says he loves them all forever. Frank lifts into the air, letting the wind slip over his wings. Listening to a soft voice in his head that he's never listened to before, he turns and heads in a brand-new direction.
There are no language concerns in this story.

The Millicent Quibb School of Etiquette for Young Ladies of Mad Science by Kate McKinnon
Genre: Humor/Fantasy
AR RL: 6.1 Point Value: 7
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Gertrude (12 ¾ years old), Eugenia (12 1/8 years old) and Dee-Dee (11 years old?) Porch are 3 sisters who live in the town of Antiquarium with their snotty adopted family. They attend Mrs. Wintermacher's School of Etiquette for Girls until the day Gertrude releases a bat from her pocket, causing Mrs. Wintermacher to zigzag around the room with a javelin to kill the bat while the other girls scream and scatter. Eugenia pulls a heavy velvet curtain from a nearby window and hurls it over Mrs. Wintermacher, tackling her to the ground and knocking over a lit candelabra. The flame grows so Dee-Dee aims her catapult toward the water pipe overhead causing it to crack open and rain down, dowsing the flames. Mrs. Wintermacher expels them. But the three sisters coincidently find mysterious invitations to Marjory Questions' School of Etiquette for Young Ladies in their backpacks on the way home that day. At dinner with their adoptive family, the Parquette's, Aunt Desdemona and Uncle Ansel announce they are considering giving the 3 girls away due to the incident at school. At the table are their 7 cousins, all girls named Lavinia. Aunt Desdemona says they are sending the 3 girls to Austria to the School for Failures in the morning. Gertrude shows Aunt Desdemona their invitations to Marjory Questions' school and tells

Aunt Desdemona they were invited on scholarship. Since the school for failures is extremely expensive, Aunt and Uncle agree the 3 girls will start the free school the next morning. The girls walk to Mysterium Way and find the school. Millicent Quibb is there waiting for them. She scares the girls who start to scream and run away but Antonio, a hermit crab, helps Millicent subdue the girls and get them into Millicent's living room. She asks the girls what their passions are. Eugenia likes rocks. Dee-Dee likes machines. Gertrude likes animals. Millicent tells the Porch sisters the town is in danger and she needs their help to save it. She convinces them to accompany her on one mad science expedition. If they are frightened or bored, they will part ways. Millicent walks them downtown to show them a chip missing out of the marble steps to the bank and the ponytail of marble missing from the bichon frise statue in town square. She tells them the Krenetics Research Association, aka the KRA, has returned. They quest for power, money and eternal life. Mayor Majestina Deween arrives with cameras and reporters following her. She is sharing the story of the defaced statue. Millicent and the Porch sisters move away to look for clues. Gertrude finds a hole in the cobblestone. Millicent tells them it is from the bite of a Kyrgalops… a monstrous worm with giant teeth that bites through stone. It's illegal to breed them but the KRA did it. The sisters follow Millicent to a swamp where they feed leeches to a Hornflower that then blows a low note to open a staircase in the middle of the swamp to the Mad Science Library of Antiquarium. Gertrude finds a feather that matches a feather she's seen on one of Mrs. Wintermacher's hats. Believing their former headmistress is somehow involved in the stealing of the Kyrgalops, Millicent takes the sisters to their previous school so they can beg to be reinstated, hoping to learn more about Mrs. Wintermacher's plans. Mrs. Wintermacher tells them she'll go get the reinstatement forms and the sisters can go on to class. But the sisters hide in a trunk in her office and spy on her when she returns. When Mrs. Wintermacher returns, she pulls a large piece of granite from her desk drawer, removes a painting from the wall to reveal a large hole cordoned off by steel bars with a dark void behind the bars. A Kyrgalops moves forward to the bars to eat the granite pushed through the bars. Mrs. Wintermacher gets a phone call. The sisters hear her tell the caller she has contained the worm and will lure the worm to the desired location on Sunday. The sisters see a red circle with 3 letters tattooed on the palm of her hand… KRA. Millicent arrives pretending to be interested in a job at Mrs. Wintermacher's school to provide a distraction for the sisters to escape out a window. The next day the sisters return to Millicent's school. They must break into Dr. Fifi Bubblegumme's laboratory to retrieve the diary. While cutting some lemons, Gertrude finds red worms inside. She sings to them but as she sings high notes the worms burrow further into the lemon. When she sings low notes, the worms wriggle out of the lemons to gather closer to her and listen to the song. After they serve the lemonade to Millicent, they go to Bubblegumme's laboratory. In one corner there is a pile of books as high as the ceiling all labeled diary. Dee-Dee quickly devises a machine to ferry the books to the elevator. Meanwhile, the room fills with worms. Gertrude remembers her singing and orders everyone to sing high. The worms start to recede. Dee-Dee feeds blue silk over the swarm of worms and the worms propel it forward as the sisters pile the leather diaries onto the conveyor belt. Once outside, the group loads the books into the trunk of Millicent's Gerbilcar. Ursula Wintermacher watches the scene through a pair of opera glasses. Lavenia-Steve, the youngest Lavenia, also sees her cousins loading the books into a strange car. After hours of searching through the diaries, Gertrude finds information about the Kyrgalops. Their preferred

habitat is salt water where it can live on a diet of algae and old shells. The male lives as a parasite in the stomach of the female, never growing larger than a hamster. The Kyrgalops becomes docile in the presence of a Panacea Slug. It can't resist the smell and taste of the Bichon Frise. The worm can be lured to any location by a congregation of these dogs. The worm can crunch through any type of metal or stone except a rare unnatural mineral called Prismuth, which can be found pearled inside certain oysters off the coast of Taiwan. Millicent announces they need to build a cage of Prismuth, sneak into Mrs. Wintermacher's office to transfer the Kyrgalops into the cage and carry it out to sea to save the town. Millicent gives each of the sisters Rapier Vine seeds to keep in their pockets. The vines can snap iron bars in two but can't survive in acid. Aunt Desdemona invites Marjory Questions (Millicent) to tea. Aunt Desdemona shares that her husband, Ansel, got Prismuth when he was killing dolphins off the coast of Taiwan. He had some of it made into a brooch for Desdemona but brought back a whole load of it made into brooches which are stored in the closet. Millicent whispers to the sisters to steal all the brooches. Lavinia-Steve hears what Millicent says to the girls. Eugenia and Dee-Dee use the Prismuth to build a cage. Millicent and the sisters go to Mrs. Wintermacher's office to get the Kyrgalops but it isn't there. Gertrude hears voices through the worm's tunnel. She goes in and the others follow. They hear KRA members meeting to discuss their next move. The members are wearing porcelain animal masks so the Porch sisters can't tell who they are. Ursula Wintermacher removes her mask and tells the KRA that the prized snack of the Kyrgalops is the Bichon Frise. The group decides to hold a dog show and the Bichon Frise is the only dog allowed in Antiquarium so all the dogs in attendance will attract the Kyrgalops. When the people get angry that their dogs are eaten by the giant worm, they will blame it on Millicent Quibb who is rumored to be a mad scientist up to no good. The group wants to use the Kyrgalops to bite through the entrance to KRA founder, Talon Sharktuth's, vault to get to his monsters, machines and elixir. Gertrude goes to the mayor, Majestina DeWeen, to ask her to stop the dog show because the dogs will be in danger of getting eaten by a giant worm. Some bad guys are using the dogs as bait to get the worm to open a vault. Gertrude tells the mayor of their plan to trap the worm in a Prismuth cage they made. The mayor calls the Parquettes to come pick up Gertrude. They take her home and lock her in the turret at the top of a winding staircase in the attic of their house. Aunt Desdemona locks Eugenia and Dee-Dee in their bedroom. The Parquettes go to the dog show with all 7 of their Bison Frises. Gertrude finds her Bat Straightener (a rope tied to a vest) in her dress pocket. Using the bat straightener, the bats lift Gertrude out the window and gently lower her 4 stories to the ground. She lets Eugenia and Dee-Dee out. Millicent Quibb is overhead with her flycycle to pick them up and hurry to the dog show. They have the Prismuth cage hanging below the flycycle. They arrive at the park just as the mayor is ushering all the contestants with their dogs into a large pen and padlock it closed. When they land, Mrs. Wintermacher takes the Prismuth cage and throws it into the pool. Chlorine makes Prismuth limp like spaghetti. Gertrude figures out the mayor told Mrs. Wintermacher and is part of the KRA. Gertrude tries to stop the contest but the Kyrgalops arrives. Gertrude swallows the Rapier Vine seeds from her pocket. The vines grow out of her mouth and around the padlock. Before long the iron cracks in two. Dee-Dee rushes over with lemonade from a nearby stand, pouring it down Gertrude's throat, withering away the vines. The crowd burst out of the pen with their dogs. Majestina DeWeen announces that mad scientist, Millicent Quibb is at the dog show, trying to destroy them with this giant worm she has clearly

created. Eugenia and Dee-Dee get back on the Flycycle. Gertrude wades into the swimming pool and retrieves the bars of the Prismuth cage, which are now light and bendy as noodles. She ties the ends of the Prismuth ropes together forming a lasso. She starts singing in a low voice to make the Kyrgalops come toward her. Gertrude lassos the Kyrgalops, mounts onto its back holding the lasso like reins, singing high notes and rides it across Red Dune Beach into the sea. Eugenia and Dee-Dee hover over Gertrude in the Flycycle and lower a rope to Gertrude. Gertrude pulls herself onto the back of the airship. The KRA has a meeting in which the leader banishes Mrs. Wintermacher from the organization and the town for good, effective immediately. Aunt Desdemona tells the Porch sisters they are being sent to a boarding school in Austria where they will stay until they are 16. Millicent Quibb and her house are gone. Three weeks later, the sisters arrive at Versagenschule School for Failures in the Austrian Alps where they meet Dr. Hundfreund. At the nearby frozen Austrian lake, Millicent Quibb is planning to rescue her students… the Porch sisters. In the epilogue, the Kyrgalops emerges from the sea and starts eating away at the door of Talon Sharktuth's vault.
Language: fart, Gourd is used in place of God… like Good Gourd. When listening to the audiobook, I thought there was a part that said, "God knows where you have been." And "Oh God, Oh God." But it could have been Gourd in place of God and I heard it wrong. I checked the book out and skimmed through it but couldn't find either of these quotes. There is a LOT of nonsense in the story. This is the first book in the Millicent Quibb series. The second book came out in September 2025. It is titled, Secrets of the Purple Pearl.

The Mystery of Locked Rooms by Lindsay Currie
Genre: Mystery
AR RL: 4.4 Point Value: 7.0
Copyright: 2024
Twelve-year-old Sarah Greene wants to spend 7th grade beating the hardest escape rooms with her best friends, West Jones and Hannah. They call themselves the Deltas. But when Sarah's mom gets a foreclosure notice on the front door, Sarah catches her mom crying and worries they will have to move to Michigan to live with Grandma and Grandpa and she will not see West and Hannah ever again. Sarah's mom works two jobs because her dad has been diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome which keeps him in bed sleeping most of the time. When Sarah tells the Deltas about her family crisis, Hannah mentions the "funhouse treasure". Sarah has never heard of it, but West knows she's talking about the Triplet Treasure. A set of triplets (Hans, Stefan, and Karl Stein) built a funhouse back in the 1950s. Their parents died when they were 8 years old (during the depression) and they were split up for adoption. They grew up separate but found each other as adults and decided to build the funhouse together with a bunch of complicated secret passages and hidden riddles… like an escape room before there were escape rooms. The triplets never got to open the funhouse because one of them died. The other two were so sad that they never opened it. Eventually they all died, so the funhouse just sits there now. The triplets said they hid a treasure somewhere in the funhouse. Some people think the triplets made up the treasure thing for advertising. But the triplets said the treasure would belong to whoever found it. Sarah says they should look for it. If it's real, it could save her family's house. West points out that a guy named

William Taters got arrested for trying to break into it last year. The Deltas do some research before starting to find the funhouse and discover that the ownership of the building is still in question. Hannah uses her Uber account to get the threesome to the train station, West bought the train tickets online, and they walk the last 1.4 miles from the train station to the house. All 3 kids tell their parents they are trying out a new escape room. Most escape rooms don't allow cell phones in the room so their parents know they will be out of touch for a while. The funhouse is about 15 minutes outside of Park Glen in the town of Maplewood. The kids go to the side yard of the house and find a picture behind some bushes on the outer wall which is very strange so they know it must be a secret entrance. They rotate the picture around to find a door. Once inside they see a mosaic on the tile floor that says, "Fortune favors the bold". The first room looks like a big circus tent. It's dark and dusty but the Deltas have their cell phone flashlights, 2 camping lanterns, and a black light that West packed in his backpack. They use the black light a couple of times in the funhouse. Through the rooms the Deltas find 3 symbols, a wishbone, a deck of cards, and a compass. The Deltas notice everything in the first room is in groups of threes… 3 mirrors, 3 locks, 3 sides on the triangles leading them to the understanding the triplets used the rule of 3's (things are more memorable in groups of 3's). To get out of the circus room, the Deltas must swing on a rope across the room to an opening high on the opposite wall. Once all 3 in the 2nd room, West gets out the camping lanterns. The Deltas figure that the rooms have more than one way to move forward so that each time you go through the funhouse, you can have a different experience. The next room is divided in half with a glass wall. Each side has boxes hanging from the ceiling. They try finding a key in one of the boxes to get to the other side, but when Sarah looks at her reflection in the glass she notices there's a line across her forehead leading her to discover there's a hidden door in the glass wall. The next room is elegant with hundreds of books on the shelves around the room. The Deltas choose a wrong path in the library and end up back in the library where they started. Sarah remembers seeing a W on the slide that took them down the wrong path and using the clue they found, they figure out the W stands for West and the theme for the library is Directions. Since they know the west passage was wrong, they have 3 more directions to choose from… north, south and east. They figure out the books are arranged by topics that spell out which direction they should choose. For example, there are books about Noodles, Narwhals, Napping, then books about Oceans, Ornithology, Ophthalmology. Taking the first letter of each topic spells out NORTH. The next room is filled with pillars and statues. Hannah gets trapped in a small cylinder below the floor. She finds a clue written on the wall that says to find the key to get out and she sees a magnet hanging on a hook in the wall that she inches up to Sarah with her nose since the capsule is too tight to move her arms. Sarah and West look around and notice there are 3 statues that are almost identical. They are statues of the triplets. The only difference is the direction their eyes are looking. Following their gaze, they find a grate set into the floor with a deck of cards engraved on it. At the bottom of the shallow rectangle is the key which they retrieve using the magnet. The key releases the bars covering the top of Hannah's cylinder so West and Sarah can pull her up and out. This triggers a door to open to a mirrored corn maze. There's no ceiling, just one big room. Hannah's phone dings indicating a text from her parents came in but she's lost the signal so she can't respond to them. Hannah's parents tried to reach her because they needed her home sooner and when they couldn't reach her, they tried to use her laptop to ping her phone. Hannah had a bunch of articles opened on different

tabs about the funhouse, so they know where the Deltas are. The kids go the wrong direction through the mirrors but turn around and go back the way they came and mark the mirrors with Hannah's lip gloss to mark their trail, avoiding repeating the wrong turns. They find a chest with a clue that says to use the thing they shouldn't waste and figure out it is their breath. They start breathing on the glass to fog it up and reveal the next clue. The clue leads them to a room that has an empty pool in it. West steps on a button that triggers 3 sections of mirrors to move, creating 3 new doorways. They must choose the correct door. Three has been their lucky number so they take the 3rd exit door. The police have arrived and are calling the kids. Hannah finds writing at the bottom of a mirror telling them there's only one more room and then they're done. They push the button on the mirror, and it opens to the final room. They find a slide that leads out of the funhouse. Hannah goes down first and then West. As Sarah sits at the top of the slide, she notices a triangle carved into the metal. She slides a tiny bolt to the side, and the triangle door pops open dropping a folded yellow paper into her lap. When Sarah gets to the bottom of the slide her mom is waiting for her. She asks her mom to make sure her friends don't get in trouble because they were trying to help her find the treasure and save their home. Her mom goes to talk with the police while the Deltas gather to talk. Sarah shows them the paper and opens it. It says, "Congratulations!" It's the deed to the funhouse. The epilogue jumps ahead 6 months to the grand opening of the funhouse by William Taters who bought the funhouse from Sarah because one of the triplets, Stefan was his great grandfather. With the money from the sale of the property, Sarah's mom was able to get their house back, her dad got more medical help and is doing better. He is able to attend the grand opening. Sarah's older brother, Sean, gets to go to the college of his choice. William has had the funhouse cleaned and made safe before he walks the Deltas through it to show them the other rooms that can lead to the exit. He invited the Deltas to be his special guests in the funhouse at the grand opening. The kids turn down his invitation so they can go to the newest escape room at Escape City. No one has beaten the clock on the new escape room and the Deltas think they can beat it.
There are no language concerns in this story.

Right Back At You by Carolyn Mackler
Genre: Science Fiction
AR Reading Level: 4.4 Point Value: 5
Copyright: 2025
Twelve-year-old Mason lives in New York City in 2023. His parents have just split up and there's a bully at school, Steele, who won't leave him alone. As part of an assignment from his therapist, Barb, he writes a letter to Albert Einstein. He writes that he has an Amazon box that arrived a while ago but he hasn't opened it and he's worried that maybe Steele is right and Dad left because Mason's a loser. Mason vowed to never play baseball again and he wants Jordans (shoes) but can't have them because they're cool and Steele would make fun of him, accusing him of trying to be someone he's not. Barb told Mason he could type the letter but then he must print it out so he sees the letter in front of him. He hides the letter in the back of his closet with the Amazon box. The next day, he gets a letter back from a girl named Talia who is also 12-years-old but she lives in 1987. She wants to know how he got into her house and her bedroom closet, especially since he's 300 miles away from her. She questions him about having his own

computer, asking if he means he has a family computer. Mason writes back asking how she got into his closet and why she stole his letter. He doesn't believe she lives in 1987 and of course he has his own computer. Talia responds that she lives in western Pennsylvania and her best friend, Lyra, ditched her and a boy named Ed teased her about being Jewish. She doesn't understand what an Amazon box is or what it means to 'google raisins'. In her dictionary google isn't a word. She wants to play baseball and wants to know why he quit. If she were allowed to play, she would never quit. She asks why Steele called him a loser and if he's poor, how does he have his own computer. Her family doesn't even have a shared computer. Mason refuses to call her Talia because it's impossible that she's a girl who lives in Pennsylvania in 1987. At first, he thought the letters must have been from his mom, but the handwriting doesn't match hers. He tells Talia the computer is from school. Every September, teachers hand out computers to kids who can't afford them. It's embarrassing because he must walk to the front of the classroom like a broke loser. Also, it's none of her business why he quit baseball. Talia continues to try convincing Mason that she's real and that somehow their letters are passing through a wormhole of time and space. She talks a lot about her favorite baseball team, the Yankees and her older brother, Jake, who is mean to her. Mason starts writing about Steele who keeps nagging him about him and his dad quitting the baseball team and Mason wearing the same shorts every day. His dad was the hitting coach before he moved away to Atlanta. Mason writes that even though she's probably not a real person, it's nice to talk to someone who doesn't call him a loser. Talia doesn't understand how Mason can check the weather or listen to music on his phone. She shares that Lyra told her they are growing apart. Lyra is a cheerleader now and she has a crush on Kevin while Talia is obsessed with the Yankees and rambles too much. Talia writes about Ed Paxton who says Jews are dirty and Mrs. Fitzgerald, her English teacher, who ignores Ed's rude remarks. Talia tells Mason she understands how it feels in a black hole. She asks him if they can be pen pals and keep writing. Mason and Talia continue writing to each other sharing their frustrations and reassuring each other that they are enough. Mason shares bullying stories about Steele, his mom's drinking problem and explains things and words from the future (google, screens on phones, phones are microcomputers, texts, Amazon, Nalgene bottles, LOL, Google Classroom). He also tells her the score of a couple Yankees games coming up for Talia in 1987 to prove he's from the future and to help her get back at Jake. Using one of the scores Mason gives her, Talia makes a bet with Jake that if the Yankees beat Cleveland by 10 or more runs, Jake must do her dinner chores for a week. Talia shares stories about Jake, Lyra, Ed who calls her Hoshnosh and draws swastikas to flash at her, her desire to play baseball but the coach won't let her try out because she's a girl and they have softball for girls, her PE teacher asking her why she doesn't get contacts instead of wearing glasses. As the two start to believe they really are from different years, they set boundaries with their communications so they don't do anything that will change the future. They will not give last names anymore. Talia tells Mason to talk to his mom, so he does. He tells her he hates school and asks for new shorts. She tells him he must finish the school year since it's already April and tells him he can order new shorts and sweats on her Amazon account. Mason encourages Talia to call Lyra and tells her about a boy named Caleb who is maybe becoming a friend. He finally tells her the Amazon box has a Wilson A500 infield baseball glove that he saved for 7 months to buy but he woke up to his parents fighting a few nights after he ordered it. His dad left to take a new job in Atlanta 2 days later. Dad told Mason he needed a few months to get

settled, find a place for them. He'll be staying with Uncle Mike, his brother, for a while. When the glove arrived, Mason shoved the box in his closet, vowing to never watch or play baseball again. Talia tells Mason about Ed throwing pennies at her and telling her grab them off the floor since Jews love money. Then she gets detention because she walks out of class. She starts to mention a new boy who moved with his younger brother to live with their aunt and uncle next door to Talia while their mom is in the hospital. Mason tells Talia he googled Ed Paxton since she told his full name before they made the rule and he's 48 in 2025 and he spent a decade in prison for armed robbery, so he'll get what's coming to him. And Mr. B must let her try out for baseball because of Title IX, a law passed in the 70's that said you can't ban anyone from a sport based on whether they're a girl or a boy. Mr. B has to let her try out so Talia's dad starts throwing and catching with her every evening after work. One day, when he can't be there the new boy next door tells her he'll throw with her if she wants. He just made the baseball team, so she says sure. He demonstrates the drills they do on the baseball team and helps her adjust her hitting so she'll be prepared for tryouts. She's getting contacts so she can play baseball. When she went for her contacts fitting, she asked Dr. R about being Jewish and told him about the boys teasing her at her school. Dr. R tells Talia his mom is a Holocaust survivor. She's originally from Poland. When she was 20, she and her parents and little sisters were taken to a concentration camp. Her entire family was killed except for her. Now his mom talks about the 6 million Jewish people that were murdered at schools and community centers. He and Talia's mom will make arrangements for his mom to give an assembly presentation at Talia's school. Mason shares that he got a bar Mitzvah invite from Caleb, but it had been sitting in a pile of mail that's been stacking up since his dad left. Mason talked with his mom again and she contacted his dad. His dad called and Mason told him how much he misses him. His dad says he's going to fly to New York and take Mason to a Yankees game for his birthday. Mason opened his new glove, oiled it and wrapped it in rubber bands so it'd be ready to catch fly balls at Yankee Stadium on Saturday. On Friday night, Dad's flight was canceled due to thunder and lightning. No other flights were available until Saturday late afternoon and by that point the game would be over. Dad tried to find someone else who could take Mason, but no one could. Dad offered the tickets to parents from Mason's old Little League team and Steele's dad got them. Naturally, Steele rubs it in at school on Monday… tells Mason 'thanks Andy Toribio for ditching him so he could enjoy epic baseball'. Talia freaks out when she hears Mason's dad is Andy Toribio. That's the quiet new boy's name who lives next door with his little brother, Mike. Talia has her tryout and makes the team. She encourages Mason to call his dad and talk to him, tell him how bad it is at school with Steele. Mason confronts her mom about her drinking asking her if she's getting help. He calls his dad who tells him he's found an apartment. Dad's going to make arrangements for Mason to fly to Atlanta and finish his school year remotely since school in Atlanta has already let out for the summer. The new apartment is at 32 W Peach Lane, 10 minutes from Uncle Mike. Mason finds out his dad's mom had a stroke, so he lived with his aunt and uncle in New York City for about 6 months, confirming Talia's neighbor is his dad. Talia's assembly goes very well and she and Lyra reconcile their friendship. Mason's dad signs him up for baseball camp in Atlanta once remote school is over. Mason's mom is going to see a therapist. On Mason's last day of school, Steele tells him to shut up even though Mason didn't say anything (which he's done a few times before). Steele tells him it was a joke. Mason grabbed Steele, put him in a headlock and snarled, "It's not a joke. It never was a joke. It's

time for YOU to shut up. So count this as the last time you'll say anything to me or punch me ever again. Got it?" Steele scurries off without looking back. Mason says goodbye to Caleb and they agree to be pen pals. Talia writes a letter to Mason in 2023, telling him she's 48 now, has twin boys and lives in the Pacific Northwest. She hopes he's settling in with his dad, Peach Lane is beautiful, and his mom joins him soon. The wormhole remains the most amazing thing that ever happened to her. In her late 20s, her parents sold their house, and she returned to Pennsylvania to empty her bedroom and found the letters in her closet. She took pictures of them with her flip phone and made a note to write Mason in 20 years. She became a middle school guidance counselor. Jake lives in New York so every July she travels with her twins to catch a few games at Yankee Stadium and stay with her brother who is now one of her best friends. When Talia rediscovered Mason's letters, Google was just taking off. She didn't have a lot of money, but she took every spare dollar and bought an equal amount of shares for Mason and herself. She includes instructions for how he can access the stock when he turns 18. This letter is their long overdue goodbye. She wishes him good luck at baseball camp and his new school… tells him to wear his new blue Jordans. She reminds him to make noise when things get tough, life isn't about keeping away the bad or only hoping for the good. It will all come. The key is how you deal with it.
This story keeps the reader engaged and kids will likely relate to the stress and uncertainty the two characters write about. It is a fast read due to good spacing between lines and bold print when Mason writes. Language: pg. 131/hell

The Trouble with Heroes by Kate Messner
Genre: Novel in Verse
AR Book Level: 5.1 Point Value: 6
Copyright: 2025
Finn Connelly is nothing like his dad, a star athlete and firefighter hero who always ran toward danger until he died two years ago. Before Finn was born, his dad, Noah Connelly, was on the front page of the newspaper carrying a woman out from the twin towers attack. She was wearing only 1 red shoe and Noah was covered in white soot. After that event, Finn's dad fell apart, suffering from PTSD. Finn is failing 2 classes in seventh grade, English/Language Arts (failing to complete a poetry unit with *What Makes A Hero* theme) and PE. He's never made the headlines like his dad until now. Caught on camera vandalizing a cemetery, he's in trouble for destroying the headstone of a local legendary mountain climber of the Adirondacks, (called a 46er for completing the climb of all 46 peak of the Adirondacks), Edna Grace Thomas. Edna's daughter, Kelly, makes Finn an unusual offer: she'll drop the charges if he agrees to climb all 46 Adirondack High Peaks in a single summer and take Seymour, Edna's dog, along with him. Finn begins his treks with a negative attitude just wanting to get it over with. Kelly has 3 experienced volunteers who will hike with Finn. Annie lives on a farm so Finn calls her Cow Nannie. Sam is an experienced rock climber… Nerd Nannie. The third volunteer was Finn's dad's hockey coach and a fellow AA member… Coach. Finn starts the first hike with Cow Nanny. He has not packed his backpack with the necessary items from the checklist given him (headlamp, compass, water bottle, trail snacks, map, etc) and he's not wearing appropriate hiking shoes. He asks Cow Nanny for trail mix and she tells him they all promised Kelly to let Finn do the hikes on his own and only step in for emergencies. He doesn't finish the

first hike. When Finn gets back to Gram's chocolate shop after the half-hike, Finn recalls when covid hit; he and his mom packed up and moved in with Gram to help at her chocolate shop for what they thought was going to be a couple of weeks. Finn stayed in his dad's old room. His dad was working as an EMT/Firefighter so stayed back home and worked long hours helping those with covid. One day while working in the chocolate shop, Finn's mom gets the call that her husband is dead. Finn and his mom never move back to their own house. They stay with Gram. Kelly takes Finn for a practice hike. This time, Finn is wearing the hiking shoes she gave him which are her mom's old hiking shoes that she only got to wear once and happen to be Finn's size. Kelly talks about her mom. Back before the internet, 46ers wrote letters about each of their climbs and sent them to Edna. She read and answered every one of them. She understood people climb for their own reasons. Some are searching for something… confidence, courage, or peace. Sometimes they climb to remember someone or to remember themselves. The first real hike Finn completes is Cascade and Porter with Cow Nannie. When he gets home, he finds Gram's chocolate shop mistakes or broken bits not pretty enough to sell, and he creates a cookie to match the mountains he just climbed. (The recipes are in the book and Finn creates a cookie to resemble each mountain hike.) Finals week comes and Finn writes about his 2 friends, Minh and Jesse and what they write in his yearbook. On the first day of summer break, Finn meets Nerd Nannie (Sam, a retired guidance counselor) to hike Big Slide. At one point in the hike, Seymour must climb a slanted wood ladder that spans a stretch of rock too slick and steep to climb. Seymour is shaking with terror, but Finn helps Seymour across the ladder and Seymour looks at Finn with trust in his eyes. Finn is proud of Seymour when he finishes and a little sad that Seymour is not his dog. Finn calls Seymour Droolface and is not a fan of the dog but in this moment, he feels something for Seymour. Finn understands not being able to do the thing you have to do and not being able to turn back. At the top of the climb, Finn offers Nerd Nannie one of his Cascade and Porter cookies. Sam asks if Finn has cookies for other mountains too. Finn says that he's working on it and decides in that moment that he is going to do just that. That night at home, Finn recalls a time he was baking snickerdoodles when his dad came home from fighting a fire and saw Finn wearing an apron. His dad did not hide his disappointment and after that Finn only baked when his father was away. After his Big Slide hike, Finn submits a make-up work report to his PE teacher totaling 22 hours of hiking giving him the passing grade he needs. He tries to submit poems to Ms. G but they are not related to the Hero theme so she encourages him to write more on the topic. Finn's next hike is Street and Nye with Coach. At the summit of Nye, he learns that Coach was his dad's hockey coach. After the hike, back in the parking lot, Finn sees Coach's truck and remembers Coach coming to see his dad on the 10-year anniversary of the towers attack. The two of them went somewhere together. (Later readers will find out the two men supported each other at AA.) After 3 more hikes with Nerd Nannie and 2 more mountains with Cow Nannie, Finn gets to hike with Coach on Wright, Algonquin and Iroquois. He asks Coach what he remembers about his dad (Noah). After his response, Coach asks Finn what he remembers about his dad. He remembers his dad's smile but mostly he remembers his dad being gone. At the summit of Iroquois, Finn tells Coach about his cookie plan and offers one to him. Coach reaches in his bag and tosses Finn a peanut butter cup in exchange and a card falls out. Finn remembers his dad having a card just like it. (the Serenity Prayer is on the card) At the end of the hike, before he drives away, Coach tells Finn to get his schoolwork done right. After baking his cookies that night, Finn

writes a sonnet about Heroes. Finn reads his dad's obituary and writes another poem. He also wonders about the toxicology report. His mom told him that his dad didn't have alcohol in his system, but he wonders if she told the truth. After hiking 3 more mountains with Cow Nannie, Finn looks for the toxicology report. He finds a box with his dad's belongings from the hospital. In his dad's wallet is a picture of Finn and the same card that Coach had… the Serenity Prayer card. There are 2 more shoebox size boxes, but Finn's mom calls him to dinner so he has to wait to see what's in them. Two mountain hikes later, Finn lets Seymour off his leash. Sam tells him Seymour needs to be on his leash, so Finn clips the leash back on. Later, Finn goes through another box which is filled with letters from Edna to his dad in response to his letters to her. He reads through them to learn more about the summits. He learns his dad climbed 40 of 46 peaks before he died. He also finds his dad's ashes. That evening, Finn learns that Gram may have to close her shop. They aren't making enough money to pay the bills. On his next hike with Coach, the mountains feel different to Finn knowing he's walking paths that hold his dad's footprints too. On the way down the mountain, Finn sighs and Coach asks what's on his mind. Finn tells Coach he's thinking about the cookies he'll bake for this hike. Coach says Finn should bring some along on the next hike so he can taste-test them for him before Finn opens a famous bakery. That gives Finn the idea to bake his cookies for Gram's chocolate shop. He calls his cookies The Summit Collection. Finn continues to read Edna's letters and compares them to Cliff Notes for books to help him prepare for a hike. After a couple more hikes, Finn submits all his poems to Ms. G and his assignment is complete. Three college girls buy Finn's cookies to take on a hike. They post pictures online and rave about the cookies. Turns out they have a LOT of followers and Gram's shop goes viral. The start of Finn's 8th grade year is starting soon and he still has 8 mountains left to summit. When Finn is down to the final 6 hikes, he takes his dad's ashes and separates them into 6 Ziploc baggies. He's going to take his dad with him and leave his ashes on each of the mountains that Noah didn't get to finish climbing on his own. His next four hikes are with Coach and Finn recalls memories of times spent with his dad and thinks of his dad being with him on the hikes. Finn hikes 4 of his last 6 mountains and spreads his dad's ashes on the summit of all four. Only 2 more hikes to go (Esther and Whiteface) but only 4 days to Labor Day. When Finn cleans up the mud from his boots in his mom's office, he finds the toxicology report for his dad; negative for drugs and alcohol, positive for Covid-19. Twenty-four hours to Labor Day when the storm clouds finally clear. Sam is supposed to hike with Finn but he's running late. Finn tells his mom he'll wait for Sam to arrive, so she leaves Finn and Seymour waiting for Sam in the parking lot. After 20 minutes of waiting, Finn and Seymour start the climb on their own. Near the top of Marble Mountain, which you must climb before you can get to Esther and Whiteface, Finn turns onto a path that leads to a rocky overlook where the trees fall back to show all the mountains he's climbed. He lets Seymour off his leash since the sun is just rising and there's no one else on the mountain. On the summit of Esther Mountain, Finn scatters the second to the last bag of his dad's ashes. On the way down from Esther, Finn thinks he will run into Sam but he's at the arrow pointing to Whiteface, not ready to start the climb yet, and he hasn't seen Sam. As Finn stands there reflecting on his last 3 months, Seymour takes off running and barking down the trail. Finn runs after Seymour and finds he has chased a bear cub up a tree. Mother bear bursts from the brush toward Seymour. Finn makes a grab for Seymour's collar but mama bear knocks Finn into a rock and swipes at his shoulder. Finn jumps up as the bear charges at Seymour again. Finn lunges between

them, gets knocked to the ground with the bear on his chest. He hears Seymour barking. Forest rangers respond to a call for an unresponsive hiker found on the Wilmington Trail just south of Esther Mountain herd path junction; 13-year-old male, unconscious and bleeding heavily from multiple lacerations on his shoulder and head. Rangers performed a successful carry-out to a waiting ambulance. Finn wakes in the hospital. He remembers Seymour leaping on top of the bear, barking and snapping, all of them wrestling, suddenly weight off his chest and the bear chasing Seymour down the trail, catching up, growls and yelps and mud and blood before the blackness came. Finn's mom comes in his hospital room and Finn opens his eyes. He tells her everything about the boxes, the letters, the ashes and the report. He cries so hard he can hardly breathe as he remembers Seymour died saving him. Kelly arrives and Finn apologizes for letting Seymour off his leash. Kelly realizes that Finn thinks Seymour is dead so she makes a phone call and turns the phone toward Finn so he can hear the Woof! Kelly says Seymour is with her brother, scratched up but going to be ok. Finn and his mom talk about the last bag of ashes from his bear-torn backpack. She apologizes for leaving Noah's ashes in a box for so long. She explains she found it hard to let him go. The next morning, Sam, Coach and Annie visit and piece the story together for Finn. Sam was in a fender bender and had to wait for police to arrive. Coach, Annie, Kelly, Mom and Gram were up on the summit waiting for Finn to finish his last mountain climb. They drove up the toll road to meet him. When Finn didn't answer texts (except for the auto response text: I am not lost in the woods or getting stalked by a panther or swatted by a bear.) and he didn't arrive at the summit, Coach ran down the from the summit to find him and called the park rangers. Finn is amazed at all the people who showed up for him even though he feels he screwed up. Finn's friends, Minh and Jesse visit and bring milkshakes. They catch up on Jesse's time at camp, Minh's visit from his grandma from Vietnam and Finn tells them about the place on the trail with boulders and a cold, clear pool. The boys agree to hike there together before the weather gets cold. A week later, Finn is released from the hospital. He walks to the cemetery and sees a small American flag by his dad's grave. Then he walks on to Edna's grave to leave her a letter. He apologizes for kicking over her headstone and not taking better care of Seymour on the last trail, tells her he loves the letters she wrote to his dad, he hopes Kelly will let him see Seymour because he loves Seymour now, he feels better than he has in a long time but sometimes grief still makes him sad or angry, he notices things he never noticed before so thanks her for sending him into the mountains and for trying to save his dad while he was busy trying to save everybody else. That night is the 21st anniversary of the World Trade Center falling. As the news ends, Kelly and Seymour arrive. Kelly says she hopes it's ok she read the letter Finn left on her mom's grave and she gives Finn a shoebox filled with the letters Noah wrote to her mom. The ones Edna had responded to. Kelly starts crying and refers to the anniversary of 9/11. Finn learns she was the woman in the photo her dad was carrying out of the ashes of the North Tower. Finn reads the letters his dad wrote and realizes how much his dad loved him. He writes to Edna again a year later telling her he finally finished his 46th mountain that day. Coach, Annie, Sam and Seymour all hiked Whiteface together. Mom, Gram and Kelly drove up to meet them, waiting with cake to celebrate. Finn took the last ashes from his pack and with his mom they said goodbye and spread the ashes on Noah's 46th Adirondack High Peak. In his letter to Edna, he asks her to tell Noah how proud she is of him (now that he's a 46er) if she sees him. At the summit of Whiteface, Coach gives Finn two Adirondack 46-R patches. One is for his dad.

The book presents the story with various types of writing; recipes, text messages, news articles, friendly letters, poetry, documents, etc. The story includes aptronyms, metaphors, onomatopoeia (pg 74), and irony. Language: fart, pg 39/butt, pg 58/Oh my god, pg 68/Thank God, pg 99/for god's sake, pg. 193/peed, pg 234 & 251/my god, pg. 263/pee, pg 290/What in God's name happened