

Every Variable of Us

Charles A. Bush, North Star Editions (MAR 1) Hardcover \$17.99 (400pp) 978-1-63583-074-3

In Charles A. Bush’s young adult novel *Every Variable of Us*, Alexis, a high school basketball star, dreams of receiving a college scholarship and pursuing a professional basketball career. Both are her ticket out of West Philadelphia; both are within reach before a gang member’s bullet shatters them.

When Aamani, a new Indian student and a STEM nerd, meets Alexis, she sees her as much more than an ex-athlete. And Aamani sees the self-limiting beliefs and false loyalties that keep Alexis tied to her childhood friends and risky behaviors. She sees Alexis’s potential. With Aamani’s help, Alexis channels all the drive and dedication she’d given to basketball into qualifying for their school’s STEM team.

As the eclectic team prepares for a national competition, some harbor doubts that Alexis will be an asset to their group. But her commitment and steady progress win them over. Then, with both the championship and academic scholarships at stake, Alexis is caught back up in neighborhood loyalties that put her blossoming relationship with Aamani, and indeed her life, at risk.

Charles A. Bush reveals that his early life was much like Alexis’s. As a young, Black, queer kid raised by a single mother, knowing the pain of hunger, he too was told that being an athlete was the only way he could ever get a taste of wealth, and that being queer disqualified him. His characters, born of lived experience, are engaging and relatable. The book’s events and their repercussions are intense, the emotions are authentic, and the story’s conclusion is satisfying.

Every Variable of Us is a young adult novel about how every person is worthy of love and respect, no matter how they identify, or what neighborhood they come from.

KRISTINE MORRIS



Every Word You Never Said

Jordan Greene, F/K Teen (APR 26) Hardcover \$21.99 (424pp) 978-1-73543-736-1

Disabilities and adoption are themes in Jordan Greene’s LGBTQ+ novel *Every Word You Never Said*, a sweet romance story that’s informed by social justice concerns.

Newly adopted and entering a new high school in North Carolina as a sophomore, Skylar is nonverbal and gay, making him a target for bullies. Two other outsiders—Seth, a book-worm, and Imani, who’s Wiccan—befriend him, though their support is not enough to quell the homophobic attacks by others.

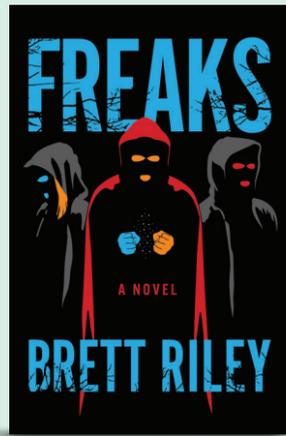
Jacob, another student at the school, is also gay, but he has a different social life and home life: he is in a rock band, and he is the son of a religious, conservative politician. As Skylar and Jacob become close, their fears and the pressures from those around them threaten to tear them apart.

Skylar and Jacob communicate through text messages and social media as well as in person; transcripts of their text messages, complete with emojis, help to tell the story. Visual and sensory descriptions abound as the boys grow and develop, finding their voices and values, even when facing judgment from school boards and a pastor, all of whom insist that they are living sinful lives.

Indeed, Skylar’s tendency to wear skirts gets him detention, and gets Jacob’s father involved: a school board member wants to institute a gender-restrictive dress code. The friends and family who rally around Skylar help him to see that he is valued, even in a society that largely devalues the worth of disabled people. This realization is the story’s turning point, helping to bring the narrative to a satisfying conclusion.

In the moving young adult romance *Every Word You Never Said*, two gay teenagers find each other and fight bigotry.

JEAANA JORGENSEN



Freaks

Brett Riley, Imbrifex Books (MAR 1) Hardcover \$18.99 (288pp) 978-1-945501-53-1

Teenage outcasts have to save their small town from a bloodthirsty monster by teaming up with their bully in Brett Riley’s fantasy novel *Freaks*.

Since grade school, Gabby, Micah, Jamie, and Christian have been bullied by B3, a group of big, dumb jocks who get their thrills from making other people’s lives miserable. Their only relief from the daily harassment comes in the form of nerding out together over video games and live action role playing. But when the four friends accidentally cast a spell that opens a portal to another dimension, they release a huge vampire beast, and their once innocent games become all too real.

That same night, the foursome discover that they’ve somehow ended up with superpowers: Gabby shoots beams from her hands, Jamie flies, Christian runs lightning fast, and Micah generates fire and ice. In an interesting twist, Kenneth, one of the B3, obtains super strength. The characters grow and change as they learn about their powers, revealing unexpected emotions and amplifying simmering conflicts.

But obtaining power in a world where you once had none results in an ethical dilemmas: the four muse over whether they will use their powers to seek revenge, or instead for the greater good. The moral responsibility weighs on them, causing tension and rifts where there used to be easy camaraderie. And while most of their group wants Kenneth to help them fight the monster, Micah refuses to work with his tormentor. He’d rather use his abilities to “get even” with the people who bullied him, and those who stood by and did nothing. Still, the teenagers are forced to act following a gruesome attack, leading to an epic, action-packed battle.

In the supernatural coming-of-age story *Freaks*, four friends must do the right thing or perish.

JENNA JAUREGUY



No Stopping Us Now

Lucy Jane Bledsoe, Three Rooms Press (APR 26) Softcover \$15 (288pp) 978-1-953103-20-8

Based in truth, the powerful novel *No Stopping Us Now* is about the fight for gender equality in sports just after the passage of Title IX.

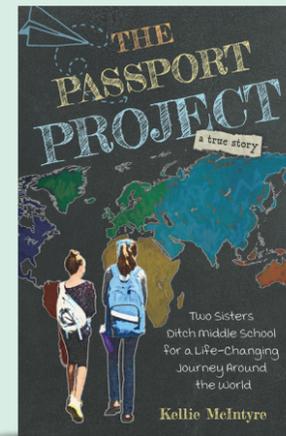
In 1974, all Louisa wants to do is to play basketball. But her Portland, Oregon, high school is downright hostile to the idea of girls on the court. Despite Title IX, which passed two years earlier to protect anyone from discrimination on the basis of sex in an educational setting, Louisa and a small group of her girlfriends are forced to use the gym before school starts to practice: they are not allowed to form a school-sponsored team.

After Louisa attends a feminist rally and meets Gloria Steinem in person, she is inspired to push for the establishment of an actual girls’ high school basketball team, with a real coach. When her voice becomes a little too loud, she has to tap into her inner strength to fight off public criticism and an antagonistic faculty, all while navigating her love life and making discoveries about her own sexuality. Louisa also tries to unravel the mystery of why her best friend has shut down, and to deal with the emotions surrounding her grandfather’s dementia.

Although the book includes plenty of descriptions about the intricacies of basketball, it is much more than a book about sports. It is a timeless and triumphant story of courage in the face of opposition, as well as a glimpse into the early days of Title IX’s implementation. Louisa’s authentic concerns also help to make the multi-layered story universal and relatable.

Knowledgeable about, and appreciative of, the trailblazers who fought for fairness and equal opportunities for women in sports, *No Stopping Us Now* is an excellent historical novel.

HILARY DANINHIRSCH



The Passport Project Two Sisters Ditch Middle School for a Life-Changing Journey Around the World

Kellie McIntyre, Shamrock House (MAR 15) Softcover \$16.99 (346pp), 978-1-73774-381-1

Inspired by actual family travels, Kellie McIntyre’s *The Passport Project* follows the adventures of a five-month international family trip with ebullience.

Sisters Delaney and Riley are going into the seventh and eighth grades. They are initially reluctant to take the trip with their parents. Still, they blog about it, revealing factors like the educational benefits of trekking on a budget. They see Iceland’s geothermal pools and visit the *Harry Potter* set in London; they eat gelato and face scammers in Italy. Stops in Sri Lanka and Australia are also included. Throughout, cultural and regional history facts are shared alongside charming hand-drawn maps.

Riley and Delaney’s entertaining travelogue is complemented by photographs of its scenes; the sisters share travel advice on topics ranging from how to pack to international exchange rates. Their entries are sympathetic in depicting the agonies and delights that surround them. They have individualized reactions to their circumstances: Delaney at first thinks of her parents’ wanderlust as an imposition, while Riley is excited, though concerned about the details of homeschooling while abroad.

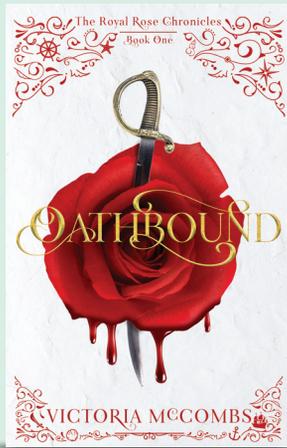
While Delaney and Riley are positive guides, they are also frank about their accommodations and minor travails, including illnesses and misunderstandings. They are sometimes self-conscious about interacting with other cultures, but they learn to adapt. And they have a family tradition of listing the highs and lows that accompany their experiences, which leads to bonding. The girls become more grateful for the trip as it stretches on, while their flashbacks to prior trips, including to Panama and Thailand, amplify their spirited approach to unfamiliar situations.

Authentic in its coverage of what it’s like to leave home for extended periods of time, *The Passport Project* is an enticing global travelogue led by teenagers whose enthusiasm and thoughtfulness make it instructive.

KAREN RIGBY



Image from *The Passport Project*: Two Sisters Ditch Middle School for a Life-Changing Journey Around the World by Kellie McIntyre. Used with permission from Shamrock House.



Oathbound

The Royal Rose Chronicles

Victoria McCombs, Enclave Publishing (FEB 15) Hardcover \$22.99 (352pp)
978-1-62184-218-7

Victoria McCombs's young adult novel *Oathbound* is filled with danger, romance, and a good dose of piracy.

Emme is running out of time. Sick with the same disease that killed her father, her only hope lies in retrieving the Elmer Nut from a cursed island, Iilak. To do so, she joins a band of pirates, facing memories of her pirate mother, who abandoned Emme when she was a child.

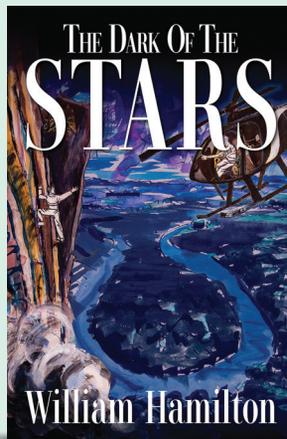
Arn also needs to reach Iilak, though for different reasons. He bound himself to notorious Admiral Bones, and if he fails to pay his debts, he'll die. With their lives—and love—at stake, Emme and Arn set sail together, confronting their pasts and deciding what future they'll build.

The narrative alternates between Emme and Arn's perspectives. Though headed to Iilak for different reasons, their fears of inadequacy are similar. Emme is desperate not to become like her mother; she fears falling in love with the pirate life. Arn wants to prove that he is worthy of being a captain; he hopes his men won't learn of his debt.

The book's imagery is bold, but the violence of bloody battle scenes stops short of being gratuitous. Arn's ship, *The Royal Rose*, is a good backdrop for laughter and heartache alike; humor is generated as Emme dons a pirate's apparel. And future adventures are promised as Emme enters into her own oath, and as Arn deals with the fallout from his deceptions.

A girl learns to love seafaring while also learning from past mistakes in the fantasy novel *Oathbound*—a story that's sure to awaken readers' thirsts for adventure.

VIVIAN TURNBULL



The Dark of the Stars

William Hamilton, Authority Publishing (MAR 28) Softcover \$19.95 (366pp)
978-1-949642-93-3

In William Hamilton's posthumously-issued novel *The Dark of the Stars*, two teenagers enter a mythical realm, where they band together to survive.

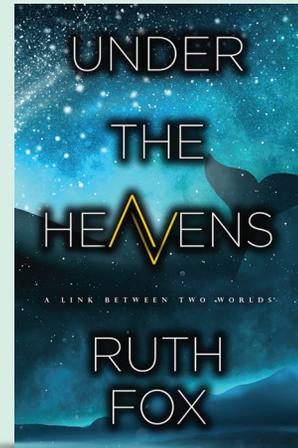
Robert is an orphan who is planning to go on a holiday with his friends. Instead, he is visited by a suspicious milkman, Karl. He learns that he and Karl have been charged with a grand quest: they are to save the people of Santania, who are beset by a mysterious illness.

In Santania, a famed naturalist has died, and his alleged fortune in diamonds is missing; an impressive and power-hungry doctor needs the population to remain sick in order to enact his greedy plans. But Karl and Robert work against the doctor, seeking to deliver medicine into the right hands before all of Santania falls. Meanwhile, Karl hides compelling secrets from Robert; these feed into his desire to overcome Santania's dark forces.

From tropical rain forests to moors, settings play a powerful role in the story: the lands hide people, but also serve to reveal them, exposing their weaknesses and affording them few places to hide. Each landscape boasts distinctive features: there are ants who stitch flesh, to trees whose abilities are used to ease people's pain; Indigenous remedies become a source of respite. Still, though a host of locations are named, not all are described in the same manner; some locales are hazy.

The story undulates: the reaches of its villains and heroes prove to be broader than first thought. But Karl and Robert endure to the end, trying their best to save the world from rapacious villains—and helping to make *The Dark of the Stars* a thrilling young adult quest.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH



Under the Heavens

Ruth Fox, CamCat Publishing (APR 12)
Hardcover \$24.99, 978-0-7443-0476-3

Ruth Fox's *Under the Heavens* updates the tale of Noah's ark, transforming it to feature whales in space and a mission gone awry.

Working under an assumed name, Kim is the only human aboard the *Seiiki*, a giant spaceship bringing Earth's last whales to the planet New Eden. The link installed in her and in the genetically modified whales allows them to communicate via thought. But the technology is so new that some of the whales are able to use it to break the barriers between their species, which not only keeps Kim busy troubleshooting, but also puts her in danger.

The whales, all named after biblical characters, have distinctive needs, personalities, and vendettas. They refuse to be passive passengers among the stars. And Kim begins to suspect that the organization she works for, the Crusaders, has more to its plans than she's been let in on. With an intruder on the ship, and with her own future and those of the last whales at stake, Kim decides where her allegiance lies.

The future Kim inhabits has seen humans ascend into space, but also descend to inhumane depths of poverty. Kim's past as a thief and criminal marks her as a survivor. She's resilient and resourceful, but slow to trust, and the dangers she faces aboard the *Seiiki* force her to reevaluate her independence and lack of vulnerability. The depth of Fox's worldbuilding, paired with the deep development of her characters, results in a sense of urgency. The story also asks important questions about technology, and about when automation hurts and helps humans.

In the space-set adventure novel *Under the Heavens*, a young woman contemplates the complications of communication and trust in a futuristic world.

JEANA JORGENSEN