



## Red Maple 2025 Nominee List – Annotations and Content



### ***40 Days in Hicksville***

Written by Christina Kilbourne

Published by DBC

Kate doesn't want to spend one minute in the "Hicksville" her mother moved them to, much less the entire year she's stuck here in the decaying house they inherited from her grandparents. She misses her boyfriend and sneaking out at night to make urban exploration videos for her growing YouTube channel.

Zach, the boy who lives next door, tries to befriend Kate even though she ignores him. But when Kate discovers her estranged grandfather lives nearby, she wants to meet him despite the small-town rumours of his violent past, and takes Zach with her.

That's when they find the crevasse on her grandfather's property and the skeletons hidden inside. That's the day they find out Kate's uncle and his friend went missing as teenagers.

Instead of counting down the days until she can leave Hicksville, Kate and Zach start working together to solve the cold case that has silenced her mother for thirty-five years.

#### **Content/Discussion Themes**

coarse language, dead bodies, unlikely friendships, family relationships, family secrets, crime, anxiety, panic attacks, violence, teen relationships, broken home, single parent, murder, abusive behaviours, alcohol abuse, lack of diversity, absent parents, rural setting, divorce, teenage pregnancy, family, murder, the restaurant industry, policing, alcoholism, child abuse, DNA testing, young love, bullying, social media, influencers, and parental responsibility

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### ***Book of Screams (Book of Screams 1)***

Written by Jeff Szpirglas

Illustrated by Steven P. Hughes

Published by Orca Book Publishers

Tanya is a huge fan of horror author Joel Southland... AND he's coming to visit her school!

Even though she is his biggest fan, she barely gets a chance to say hello. But he does give her a signed bookmark: For Tanya. Stay Scared! Reading later that night, she figures it's just her eyes playing tricks on her when she sees the ink on the bookmark move a little. But when the ink slithers toward her, it's too late...

As Tanya tries to get to the bottom of Southland's nefarious schemes, the book is broken up by nine other creepy tales, including one about middle-school horror movie fans who track down the scariest horror movie of all time, another about a kid whose "baby eye" is beginning to fall out, and yet another about a vampire suffering due to a virus that is keeping people indoors. A

mix of squirmy, funny and downright terrifying, these tales will leave readers thinking twice about the things that go bump in the night.

**Content/Discussion Themes**

trauma, horror, suspense, death

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***Call Me AI***

Written by Wali Shah and Eric Walters

Published by Orca Book Publishers

Ali is an eighth-grade kid with a lot going on. Between the pressure from his immigrant parents to ace every class, his crush on Melissa, who lives in the rich area of town while he and his family live in a shabby apartment complex, and trying his best to fit in with his friends, he feels like he's being pulled in too many different directions. But harder still, Ali is becoming increasingly aware of the racism around him. Comments from his friends about Pakistani food or his skin colour are passed off as jokes, but he doesn't find them funny. And when Ramadan starts, Ali doesn't tell anyone he's fasting because it just seems easier. Luckily he finds solace in putting his feelings into words—and poems. But his father is dead set against him using art as a distraction when he's got schoolwork and a future career as a doctor to focus on. Ali's world changes when he, his mom and his little brother are assaulted by some racist teens. Ali must come to terms with his roiling feelings about his place in the world, as a Pakistani immigrant, a Muslim and a teenager with his whole life ahead of him. With help from his grandfather, an inspiring teacher and his friend, Ali leans on his words for strength. And eventually he finds his true voice.

**Content/Discussion Themes**

Prejudice, racism, baby delivery, violence, intense violence, tween relationships, stereotyping, high parental expectations, family, community, responsibility, artistic endeavour, immigration, Pakistani culture, friendship, culture racism

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***The Cricket War***

Written by Thọ Phạm and Sandra McTavish

Published by Kids Can Press

It's 1980, and 11-year-old Thọ Phạm lives with his family in South Vietnam. He spends his afternoons playing soccer and cricket fighting with his friends, but life is slowly changing under the Communists. His parents are worried, and Tho knows the Communist army will soon knock on their door to make his brother, and then him, join them. Still, it shocks him when his father says that arrangements have been made for him to leave Vietnam by boat, immediately. Thọ tries to be brave as he sets out on a harrowing journey toward the unknown.

Co-authors Thọ Phạm and Sandra McTavish, childhood friends, have loosely based this historical fiction novel on Thọ's real-life experience as one of the Vietnamese Boat People, and includes many factual details from his journey on the South China Sea and in a Philippine refugee camp. Depictions of pirate attacks, hunger, and loneliness make for a riveting survival story, sure to elicit empathy for refugees. Eventually adopted by a Canadian elementary school

teacher, Thọ's story is ultimately one of hope, courage, and resilience. It's a valuable resource for social studies lessons on Asian culture and history and on immigration.

**Content/Discussion Themes**

war, conscription, death, Communism, runaways, asylum seekers, violence, abuse, hostages, religion, starvation

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***Escape to Ponti***

Written by Brian Slattery

Illustrated by Antonio Javier Caparo

Published by Red Deer Press

Fourteen-year-old Bec learned a lesson that day. Be careful whom you rob.

A slave on the run from his vicious master, Bec is desperate for money. But when he mugs Tien Nu, he gets more than he bargained for. Tien Nu isn't just a superb acrobat and kung fu wizard. He's also killed his father - or so he thinks. As the paths of the two boys become intertwined with the journey of a mysterious knight, mayhem ensues when they head cross-country toward the safety of Ponti, with Bec's slave master in hot pursuit.

A medieval, historical adventure in the Kingdom of Italia.

**Content/Discussion Themes**

slavery, orphans, survival, bullying, family relationships, pilgrimages, knighthood, loyalty, and friendship

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***Hopeless in Hope***

Written by Wanda John-Kehewin

Published by Highwater Press

We live in a hopeless old house on an almost-deserted dead-end street in a middle-of-nowhere town named Hope. This is the oldest part of Hope; eventually it will all be torn down and rebuilt into perfect homes for perfect people. Until then, we live imperfect people on an imperfect street that everyone forgets about.

For Eva Brown, life feels lonely and small. Her mother, Shirley, drinks and yells all the time. She's the target of the popular mean girl, and her only friend doesn't want to talk to her anymore. All of it would be unbearable if it weren't for her cat, Toofie, her beloved Nohkum, and her writing, which no one will ever see.

When Nohkum is hospitalized, Shirley struggles to keep things together for Eva and her younger brother, Marcus. After Marcus is found wandering the neighbourhood alone, he is sent to live with a foster family, and Eva finds herself in a group home.

Furious at her mother, Eva struggles to adjust—and being reunited with her family seems less and less likely. During a visit to the hospital, Nohkum gives Eva Shirley's diary. Will the truths it holds help Eva understand her mother?

Heartbreaking and humorous, *Hopeless in Hope* is a compelling story of family and forgiveness.

**Content/Discussion Themes**

topics which may be triggering for some readers: alcoholism, residential schools, foster care, child abandonment, loneliness, family conflict, poverty, despair, shame, rejection, depression, bullying, prejudice, forgiveness, abuse, neglect, trauma, and recovery. There is also language which may be objectionable for some readers.

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***The Outsmarters***

Written by Deborah Ellis

Published by Groundwood Books

Kate opens a Philosophy Booth (“Get answers to life’s big and little questions — \$2 a question”) and ends up asking some tough questions of her own.

Suspended from school and prone to rages, twelve-year-old Kate finds her own way to get on with her life, despite the messed-up adults around her. Her gran, for one, is stubborn and aloof — not unlike Kate herself, who has no friends, and who’s been expelled for “behavioral issues,” like the meltdowns she has had ever since her mom dumped her with her grandmother three years ago. Kate dreams that one day her mother will return for her. When that happens, they’ll need money, so Kate sets out to make some.

Gran nixes her idea to sell psychiatric advice like Lucy in *Peanuts* (“You’re not a psychiatrist. You’ll get sued.”), so Kate decides to open a philosophy booth to provide answers to life’s big and small questions. She soon learns that adults have plenty of problems and secrets of their own, including Gran. When she finds that her grandmother has been lying to her about her mother, the two have a huge fight, and Gran says she can’t wait for Kate to finish high school so she’ll be rid of her at last. Kate decides to take matters into her own hands and discovers that to get what she wants, she may have to reach out to some unexpected people, and find a way to lay down her own anger.

**Content/Discussion Themes**

Family relationships, teen pregnancy, traumatic memories? (pg 103), unlikely friendships, domestic violence, domestic abuse, abandonment; addiction; fraud, abandoned children, drug use, poverty, loneliness, anger management, bullying, parent-child relationships, high school equivalency, foster care, financial literacy, entrepreneurship, resiliency

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***Tig***

Written by Heather Smith

Published by Tundra Books

A new heartwarming middle-grade story from the critically acclaimed author Heather Smith featuring Tig, a young girl struggling to find peace within herself and in her new family. For fans of Rebecca Stead, Wendy Mass and Lynda Mullaly Hunt.

After months of living without electricity or parents, Tig and Peter are forced to move in with their Uncle Scott and his partner, Manny. The transition from down-and-out to picture-perfect isn’t easy, especially in pristine Wensleydale with the idyllic couple and their beautiful home.

Tig, with Peter's support, decides to make their new life messy, starting with daily arguments and her plans to become a competitive cheese racer. She'll run circles around her new guardians, outrun a wheel of cheese, and leave her past buried in her dust.

But things don't always go as planned, and Tig must decide what to truly leave behind in order to move forward.

**Content/Discussion Themes**

Alcohol, abandonment, family dynamics, dog abuse, child abuse, child abandonment, addiction, adoption by family, verbal abuse

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***Today I Am: 10 Stories of Belonging***

Edited by Jael Richardson

Published by Scholastic Canada Ltd.

In this timely, thought-provoking, funny and heartbreaking collection, ten acclaimed BIPOC authors explore the theme and concept of home. From awkward family dinners to moving to a new town, each of these stories provides a unique perspective on the theme of belonging through characters tasked with navigating and finding their place in this world.

Brought together by curator and contributor Jael Richardson, *Today I Am* will make readers laugh and cry while opening their hearts and minds to the world around them, validating how it feels to be young today. *Today I Am* includes stories by acclaimed authors Marty Chan, Rosena Fung, Michael Hutchinson, Chad Lucas, Angela Misri, Mahtab Narsimhan, Danny Ramadan, Liselle Sambury and Brandon Wint.

**Content/Discussion Themes**

diverse characters and perspectives, suspense, short stories, magic, space travel, reconciliation attempts, graphic novel short story, war in Syria, violence, racism, plane crash, science fiction, foster care, verse

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***Why We Play With Fire***

Written by Giselle Vriesen

Illustrated by ShinYeon Moon

Published by 100 Block Futures

In a thrilling journey of self-discovery and magical intrigue, Thea finds herself transported to a house for the children of gods, where she must retrieve lost keys while navigating secrets, rival schools, and her own doubts, all before the shadow creatures catch up to her.

Embark on a spellbinding odyssey of self-discovery, where Thea's extraordinary journey unfolds within a realm of enchantment and peril. Desperate to escape encroaching darkness, Thea is propelled through a mystical well by her mother and grandmother, left only with a cryptic mission to "retrieve the keys."

However, her destination defies all expectations as she arrives at an extraordinary haven—a house known as Malachite. Within the hallowed halls of Malachite, Thea unveils a world far

beyond her wildest imagination. Amidst an intricate tapestry of training and elusive artifacts, she discovers a mysterious box safeguarded by the students' within the home.

But when the three keys that allow access to the box disappear, Thea's mixed-race ancestry and connection to two gods launch her on an all-consuming quest that awakens her to her divine lineage and an awe-inspiring destiny.

Thea becomes determined to reclaim the keys before the approaching Winter Solstice, navigating treacherous rivalries and evading the clutches of the morally ambiguous Arcana—a competing school with nefarious intentions.

When her comrades fall into captivity, and two keys remain lost, Thea must gain confidence in her new abilities and leadership role to see this through. Amidst the crumbling facade of deceit and the allure of Zero, the enigmatic Arcana prodigy, she must maintain focus, for time is dwindling, and the shadow creatures draw ever closer.

As her parentage unravels and her nascent abilities blossom, Thea grapples with inner doubt and anxieties that threaten to shackle her potential. Will she rally her friends and harness her newfound powers to secure the keys' safe return? Or will her wavering confidence consign her to failure, succumbing to the clutches of the encroaching shadows?

Join Thea on an electrifying adventure where the boundaries of magic and self-belief intertwine, and the fate of worlds rests upon her resilient shoulders.

**Content/Discussion Themes**

Weed, alcohol, references to the n-word, magic, blood, diversity, family, grief, courage, power, betrayal, the supernatural, loneliness, survival, friendship, self-discovery, mythology, and stereotyping