

The Anxious Exile of Sara Salt

Written by Gabrielle S. Prendergast

Published by Orca Book Publishers

Sara isn't great with strangers: she has selective mutism, so being in a new place isn't always easy.

Sara's little brother is born premature. He looks small and red, like a baby bird, so she calls him Birdy. Because she can't visit him often, she writes him letters about everything that's happened since he's been born—like how her mom and stepdad are sending her to Toronto to stay with her half-sister, Abby. And how Abby lives in this amazing storage container house on a vacant lot and hopes to build a whole community of them for unhoused people. Sara discovers she too has ways of getting things done—like passing the librarian a note asking for books instead of saying it out loud, or talking to the dogs at the homeless encampment as a way of meeting their people. When she sees that the mayor and the police are making things harder for the unhoused community, Sara realizes she can be an advocate—through her letters—and that there's more than one way to stand up for what you believe in and make your voice heard.

Content/Discussion Themes:

Unhoused populations, anxiety, advocacy, political action, step family, premature birth, mixed families, police enforcement, gentrification, middle-grade novel, kindness

Bea Mullins Takes a Shot

Written by Emily Deibert

Published by Random House Children's Books/Random House Books for Young Readers

After a lifetime of humiliating sports experiences, Bea Mullins knows the best way to survive middle school is to stick to the sidelines. When PE is suddenly canceled, though, Bea is forced to join an after-school activity...which is how she ends up as a member of the Glenwood Geese, her middle school's first all-girls hockey team.

Bea would be happy sitting on the bench, but she doesn't want to let down her best friend, Celia. Plus, the more time Bea spends on the rinks, the more she comes to enjoy her teammates, especially the incredibly talented--and incredibly cool--co-captain Gabi. But when low funding puts the Geese in danger of never playing again, Bea realizes she may lose everything she didn't know she wanted.

A hilarious and heartfelt middle-grade contemporary about first crushes and fierce friendships from debut author Emily Deibert.

Content/Discussion Themes:

Hockey, gender inequality in sports, friendship, learning a new thing, romance, 2SLGBTQIA+ women's sports, community

Benny on the Case

Written by Wesley King

Published by Simon & Schuster

Benny isn't your average boy from Newfoundland. He lives in a retirement home that his mother runs, he has an eighty-six-year-old best friend named Mr. Tom, he knows more about fixing boats than video games, and he has Mosaic Down syndrome. When Benny transitions to a mainstream classroom for the first time, the other students tease him for his differences...except for Salma. She's new, too, and not your typical Newfoundland girl: she's tech savvy, speaks Arabic, plays basketball, and isn't afraid to eat lunch with Benny. So when Salma's grandmother and several other residents in the retirement home are robbed, Benny asks Salma to help him catch the thief. Time is not on their side as an inspector threatens to close the home. And to make matters worse, Benny and Salma must crack the case while working on a class assignment with their bullies. Can Benny save his home and take a stand against the bullies once and for all? He's about to find out, b'ys.

Content/Discussion Themes:

Neurodiversity, mystery, perseverance, government scandal, con artists, racism, ableism, ageism, theft, death of the elderly, cancer, single parent, overprotectiveness, standing up for yourself and others, friendship, multi-generational friendships, Newfoundland life/culture

The City of Lost Cats

Written by Tanya Lloyd Kyi

Published by Tundra Books

When Fiona wanders into an abandoned mansion down by the harbor, she discovers the house is full of stray cats (and two chaotic parakeets). Fiona feels a great deal of sympathy for the animals; she understands what it's like to need a safe home. Ever since her parents died, she's been struggling to adjust to the tiny apartment where she and her Aunt Tanis now live. And Aunt Tanis has little time to spare for Fiona, between her job at The Municipal Hall and her horrible, hair-gelled boyfriend.

When the mansion is threatened by a demolition team, Fiona is determined to save "The City" and its residents. But the cats have their own priorities. Cot (short for Cottonball Fluffikins Magnificent III, a name he refuses to acknowledge) has lived in the mansion for two years and is the self-proclaimed king. He's convinced the demolition effort has been organized by the recently arrived parakeets. Those birds have got to go!

Cot's feline rival, Piper, is sure she can intimidate the demolition team and force them to leave, if Fiona will simply stay out of her way. And the parakeets . . . well, the parakeets just want to go home.

As the demolition team begins tearing down the house next door, Fiona looks for any help she can find — at the library, the butcher shop, and even at The Municipal Hall. Can the efforts of one small girl and an assortment of animals stop a luxury condo development? Can they create something better in its place?

It's going to take some quick thinking on the part of Fiona, not to mention the cooperation of all the cats, to give The City a future.

Content/Discussion Themes:

Parental loss, lost pets, finding community, activism, using your voice, standing up for others, housing crisis, animal populations, protecting heritage buildings; creating mixed-use communities

Comic Shift

Written by Ted Staunton

Published by Scholastic Canada Ltd.

Des is the kid everyone overlooks, even as he longs for some recognition. He doesn't stand out in any particular way — except one: He's a "super-recognizer," someone who never forgets a face. It's a talent not even he values.

But Des wants to change the game. So he comes up with a plan to use his superpower to help his mom's detective squad ID the members of a crime ring that are looking to make off with some valuable items at a comic convention. Instead, he meets Cosmo, who has a power of their own. Can Des's power help Cosmo before spies, police and an international comics empire co-opt Cosmo's power?

A twisty story with fantastic page-turning plot points that also delivers a universal message about recognizing the strengths of your true self.

Content/Discussion Themes:

Friendship, partnership, adventure, mystery, science fiction, fandoms, comic, police work

Death by Whoopee Cushion

Written by Vicki Grant

Published by Tundra Books

The best Halloween costumes. The funniest pranks. An endless supply of chocolate fudge that looks exactly like dog poo. Most kids would love it if their parents owned a joke shop. But twelve-year-old Manya isn't like most kids. She's an aspiring scientist. The cheap laughs at Pranks-A-Million don't interest her – but the science behind the pranks does. After all, even edible snot and stink bombs rely on chemical reactions.

Manya and her best friend, Isaac, are thrilled when their parents agree to sign them up for Serious Science. The after-school class is everything they've ever dreamed of: the science is fascinating, their teacher is supersmart, and none of the experiments he gives them is designed to stink, explode, or embarrass anyone.

Things are looking up until one day Manya comes back from Serious Science to find two police officers in the store. A trick cigar bought at Pranks-A-Million burned off a customer's eyebrows. Later, one of their Toe Jam Donuts makes someone sick. Just a couple of pranks gone wrong? Maybe. But when a whoopee cushion kills an innocent person, the joke is over. The cops swoop in and arrest Manya's parents for murder.

It's up to Manya now to prove their innocence. Suddenly, the science behind all those embarrassing pranks becomes very important indeed.

Content/Discussion Themes:

Ethics, suspense, revenge, murder, science, problem solving, family, jealousy

Ghosts of Gastown

Written by Jessica Renwick

Published by Yellow Dog

Twelve-year-old Hope Graves can see the dead. But nobody believes her. Not even her best friend. When Hope and her mom move to the Gastown area of Vancouver, their new home isn't exactly as she imagined. The ancient apartment sits over a weird crystal shop, she misses her dad, and ghosts lurk around every corner. The worst part? The strange boy whose parents own the shop can see spirits too, and he won't stop bugging her about it. Hope tries to avoid Oliver, but when a ghost appears in her bedroom with a haunting plea, he's the only person she can turn to for help. Trying to banish the spirit only leads them down a twisted path far more dangerous than any ghost. Something is hunting the souls of Gastown, and it's closing in on its next victim.

Content/Discussion Themes:

Family, grief, friendship, ghosts, supernatural, history, Vancouver; loss of a parent, mystery, horror, adventure

The Last Hope School for Magical Delinquents

Written by Nickie Pau Preto

Published by Penguin Random House

Lavinia “Vin” Lucas is out of control and out of options. Stranded by parents who would rather use their average magical abilities to study dung beetles than raise her, Vin's been on her own for years. But she's never been able to corral her own powerful, unpredictable magic. After years of detention, suspension, and expulsion from magic schools far and wide, she's now being sent to the Last Hope School for Magical Delinquents. If she gets expelled, it's the end of the line.

Now, Vin is determined to behave. Except no one at Last Hope seems to want her to. Her new teachers—particularly the school's kind headmistress—push her to explore her magic, and her mischievous classmates delight in every accident. And all the while, a mysterious fire sprite, a suspicious instructor, and her overwhelming abilities might just sabotage Vin. But for the first time, she is not alone.

So when a former student begins attacking the school, Vin must question just how much she knows about the headmistress and her new home. Is this place worth saving? And are her budding abilities—and every trick, trap, and deception in her friends' delinquent arsenal—enough to protect Last Hope?

Content/Discussion Themes:

Self-discovery, friendship, family loss, magic, positive role model

Spirit Service

Written by Sarena Nanua and Sasha Nanua

Published by Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers

All Raveena wants is to bring back her school's beloved arts program. It's been six months since her music-loving grandmother passed, and four since Hollows' Peak Middle School cut its entire arts budget. Now Raveena has no way to practice music, and worse, no way to honor Grandmama's memory.

But Raveena's world turns on its head when she and her friends stumble upon an otherworldly discovery: an old-fashioned telephone with the ability to contact ghosts! With her newfound possession, Raveena devises the perfect plan to raise funds for the arts program: Spirit Service, an agency that guides deceased townspeople to the afterlife by reconnecting them with their living loved ones. The best part? There are tons of spirits in need of assistance—and people willing to pay big bucks to communicate with them. But not all spirits are interested in peacefully moving on...

To keep their neighborhood safe, Raveena and her friends must dive into the history of their town and the mysterious phone, and in the process, uncover secrets that are much closer to home.

Content/ Discussion Themes:

Friendship; the supernatural world; entrepreneurship; different ways of grieving and finding support when you have lost a loved one; family; culturally diverse and LGBTQ+ characters
death, accidents causing pain, ghosts

Taxi Ghost

Written and Illustrated by Sophie Escabasse

Published by Random House Graphic

Adèle just wants to spend her winter break at the library, cozied up with her favorite books, and completely forgetting about her friends who are all traveling to warmer climates.

Unfortunately, life has other plans...not only does Adèle get her first period...but she learns she comes from a long line of mediums!

And if seeing ghosts wasn't enough of a surprise, Adèle learns that not only can she interact with them, but apparently, they've been using her sister's car to get around the city for years! When the ghosts won't leave her alone Adèle starts to get to know about them and their problems. Maybe helping them out will be just what she needs for an exciting winter break!

Content/Discussion Themes:

Magic/ghosts, menstruating, gentrification, political activism, family gifts, Montreal, multi-generational homes, ghosts, spirituality, grief