


Review: New young adult fiction from Susin Nielsen, Sarah Henstra, Susan Juby and others

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The Game of Love and Death

By Martha Brockenbrough, Arthur A. Levine Books, 336 pages, \$20.99

Teen love stories abound, but when have the personifications of love and death ever acted as characters in the plot? In this highly ambitious, strikingly original look at the star-crossed lovers trope, Love and Death are portrayed as competitive, immortal puppet masters who have been battling it out since the beginning of time with human pawns. This round, their human "players" are Flora and Henry, two teens from very different worlds living in late 1930s Seattle. This is a big, juicy wallop of a concept book – a successful experiment in deconstructing teen romance that is at once fairy tale, historical fiction and Socratic dialogue. Pick it up now as this is the YA title of 2015 that will cross the void and become standard adult dinner party conversation.

Magonia

By Maria Dahvana Headley, HarperTeen, 320 pages, \$21.99

Since John Green's *The Fault In Our Stars*, many are quick to slap the dismissive trend label of "sick lit" on *any* novel featuring *any* teen with *any* affliction. Yes, Aza Ray Boyle, the main character of this gorgeously rich fantasy, has a deadly mystery lung disease. But it's not what you think. Seriously. Aza can't breathe on Earth because she is meant to live in the sky. Rather than being the weepy climax, Aza's death is the starting gun of the entire plot. And the sky world of Magonia that she enters is lush, vivid, nautical and fraught with ecological peril – think *Avatar* meets *Moby Dick* at 50,000 feet. While undeniably on trend this story is, more importantly, just simply breathtaking.

Mad Miss Mimic

By Sarah Henstra, Razorbill, 259 pages, \$16

Ryerson University English professor Sarah Henstra debuts with a historical novel about morphine mania and pyromania in Victorian London. Seventeen-year-old Leonora Somerville is facing down a life of spinsterhood due to the bipolar nature of her speech; she vacillates wildly and unexpectedly from stuttering to mimicking the voices of those around her. But then she meets a dashing young bachelor who is active in importing opium, but no one much minds because it's 1872 – until things start blowing up. Opiates and explosives aside, this is

ultimately a romance as Leonora struggles to figure out whom she can trust and whom she wants to love. This is the perfect beach read for that teen who got an A in History (and would rather stay inside watching *Downton Abbey* than go to the beach in the first place).

The Truth Commission

By Susan Juby, Razorbill, 309 pages, \$21

Susan Juby is one of our country's great court jesters with her hilariously astute depictions of small-town life that always favour loving mockery over flippant derision. Her latest is no exception. At a prestigious fictional arts high school in Nanaimo B.C., Normandy Pale is living under the shadow of her comics phenom of an older sister. There is everything you would expect in a Juby novel: the bone-dry humour, the barrage of pop culture references so cool they border on hypothermic and the comfortable straddling of teen and adult fiction. But there is also a mystery surrounding Normandy's sister that veers in an unexpectedly dark but fascinating direction. The best humour writers never settle for the expected – Juby is among them and this is her finest novel yet.

We Are All Made of Molecules

By Susin Nielsen, Tundra, 248 pages, \$19.99

Perhaps it's from the time cutting her teeth as a screenwriter on the original *Degrassi Junior High* series but no one – absolutely no one – captures the lovable flaws of the pubescent human creature like Susin Nielsen. Thirteen-year-old Stewart and fourteen-year-old Ashley are thrown together in a blended family situation after Stewart's mother dies and Ashley's father comes out. Like most people at the sunrise of adolescence, these two shift from deeply insightful to deeply irritating in one breath. But their moments of fledgling arrogance, lack of self-awareness and nerves-induced flatulence make them uproariously relatable, such as when Ashley, in all worldly confidence, uses the phrase "joie de beaver." A joyful, effortless read with some squeal-worthy moments for Nielsen fans who will recognize character cameos from past books.

All the Rage

By Courtney Summers, St. Martin's Griffin, 336 pages, \$21.99

A year after she is raped by the small-town golden boy, 17-year-old Romy Grey wakes up on the side of the road bruised, partially disrobed and with no memory of the previous night. The mystery becomes more disturbing when Romy learns her former best friend went missing at the same time. An unquestionably tough read, but not because of extraneous or voyeuristic details. Summers boldly and thoughtfully grapples with the indescribable pit of anger, regret,

guilt, sadness, paranoia and brokenness that follows a sexual assault. And the inevitable question: Should teens be allowed to read about subject matter like this? Since too many have to live through this very thing, or support others who have, yes.