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## The 2020-2021 Whippoorwill Award: Redefining and Reconsidering What Counts as Rural YA Literature

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## The 2020-2021 Whippoorwill Award: Redefining and Reconsidering What Counts as Rural YA Literature

### Authors

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## **The 2020-2021 Whippoorwill Award: Redefining and Reconsidering What Counts as Rural YA Literature**

**Kate Kedley, Devon Brenner, Chea Parton, Karen Eppley,  
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The Whippoorwill Award aims to bring attention to the theme of rural spaces and people in the larger genre of young adult literature. This award annually recognizes the best books for the middle grades and young adult readers that portray the value of rural spaces, knowledge, people, and cultures. The Whippoorwill Award is intended to be a resource for young readers, their teachers and other adults in their lives to help identify authentic, complex, meaningful, and well-written portrayals of rural life. During the summer of 2022, the third cycle of Whippoorwill Book Award winners was announced (see: <https://whippoorwillaward.weebly.com>). This third submission cycle covered the publication years of 2020 and 2021 and the winners include 13 diverse and compelling books that portray rural people and places in dynamic and energizing ways.

According to the award criteria, Whippoorwill Award book winners must have “rural salience.” That is, these books must represent distinctive features of people practicing place: enacting, constructing, defining, and redefining what it means to be part of a rural geography and culture and portraying the value of rural spaces, knowledge, cultures, and histories (Sanders et al., 2021). Whippoorwill Award books challenge and embrace senses of belonging and traditions and connections to rurality and place. Additionally, books must “represent the reality of a place without overly romanticizing or denigrating that place.” Whippoorwill Award winners avoid the two major stereotypes of rural places (Kleese, in press) including (1) deficit stereotypes of rural places as places to leave or avoid; and (2) idyllic stereotypes of rural places as places of healing and respite. Instead of these rural tropes, Whippoorwill Award winning books portray rural places in their complexity and provide an opportunity for readers to consider marginalized or missing voices from rural spaces, and for students to consider varied perspectives. We intend for this to spur rural students into critical understandings of their own places and communities, and for non-rural students to challenge

stereotypical perceptions of rural spaces (Whippoorwill Committee, 2020).

The thirteen books included in this third cycle of winners continue to meet these criteria and challenge deficit or stereotypical views on rural lives and places. *Tell it True* (Lockette, 2021), for example, explores the death penalty from the point of view of a high school student who covers an execution in rural Alabama for her school newspaper. The main character develops a greater understanding of her community and finds her own voice as she covers a politically fraught topic. *In the Wild Light* (Zentner, 2021) explores what it means to love one’s rural home, and to struggle with staying or leaving, even when the opioid crisis devastates the family and community. *Rural Voices* (Carpenter, 2020) includes 16 rural stories that ensure rural areas are presented as multidimensional and dynamic places through many varied stories and lives.

This year’s winners, in particular, meet another of the award’s criteria. They “contribute to the body of diverse YA literature by providing representations of diverse people and places.” For many, the word *rural* connotes largely agrarian areas, or is regionally restricted to places in the U.S. Midwest, U.S. South, or Appalachia. Furthermore, other stereotypes of what *rural* is means that many believe rural spaces are inhabited by mostly white residents and are lacking (or even hostile to) diversity in sexual identity and gender expression. Stereotypes of rural areas suggest that rural places are unchanged by the progress of time, uncivilized, or backwards. However, rural places across the U.S. and globally are diverse—and the books selected for the Whippoorwill Award continue to represent that diversity. Many of the submissions received by the Whippoorwill Committee this cycle brought a diversity of genre and characters to add to the shelves of rural young adult literature and included a range of characters from settings across the U.S. and beyond U.S. borders. This year’s winning texts ensure that readers will expand their conceptions of rural beyond

prairies and coal mines and will push readers to dismiss ideas of rural as traditional, static, or outdated.

First, this collection of books contributes to the body of diverse YA literature by using a wide range of genres and formats that ensure that rural life is not presented as simple, backwards or lacking in storytelling, imagination, or delivery. This fact is especially true in the fantasy and magical worlds inhabited by the vampires and spirits in *Elatsoe* (Little Badger, 2020); the dragons, trolls, and unicorns of *Art of Saving the World* (Duyvis, 2020), the dystopian monsters of *Winter, White and Wicked* (Dittemore, 2020) and in the Gothic horror novel set in the Louisiana bayous in *Dark and Shallow Lies* (Sain, 2021). Kalynn Byron's *This Poison Heart* (2021) mixes modern-day botanical magic with Greek Mythology for a tale of magic and suspense.

Secondly, this year's winning texts contribute to the diversity of rural young adult literature by including representations of the diversity of people and places in rural places. We are pleased to see this as a growing theme over the past four years of the award in terms of both submissions and award winners. The winning texts this cycle are not limited to the rural U.S., nor are they limited to the regions that are typically delimited by stereotypes of "rural." *Clockwork Curandera* (Bowles & Raúl the Third, 2021) is set in colonial Mexico and the Borderlands (and is formatted as a graphic novel with steampunk monsters, vampires, and witch owls). *Like Other Girls* (Lundin, 2021) is set in the American Northwest and *Pumpkin* (Murphy, 2021) in Texas, and *The Reckless Kind*'s characters build a found family in turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Norway. Other books, such as *The Poison Heart* (Bayron, 2021), *The Reckless Kind* (Heath, 2021), and *Dark and Shallow Lies* (Sain, 2021) offer characters whose presence in rural areas and whose actions in the book challenge the dangerous stereotypes of rural areas, and the reality that these stereotypes are sometimes built on.

But perhaps most notably, this year's winners contribute to the diversity of rural young adult literature through multiple positive, complex, realistic, and even ordinary depictions of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer) characters. Thein and Kedley (2015) note that contemporary YA fiction is not exclusively focused on the often-traumatic challenge of coming out, and instead shares stories about characters who negotiate many aspects of life, with being part of the LGBTQ

community one aspect. We are happy to see the rural submissions reflect this trend; they are not limited to the stories about the trauma of being a marginalized because of sexuality or gender in a rural space. For example, Britta Lundin helps us explore what it means to be a girl who defies gender stereotypes and who likes other girls in *Like Other Girls* (Lundin, 2021). *King and the Dragonflies* explores sexuality, and the intersection of race and queerness in civil rights era rural Louisiana in *King and the Dragonflies* (Callendar, 2020). Hazel's first crush is another girl in Duyvis' (2020) *The Art of Saving the World* and Julie Murphy's third in the series, *Pumpkin*, (2021), twins Waylon and Clementine explore acceptance and sexual identity at school and as part of the accepting drag community in their rural town. In fact, more than half of this year's thirteen winners have main characters that are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning their own identities. We invite readers to explore all 13 of this year's winners and all of the books that have received the Whippoorwill Award for rural young adult literature.

#### The 2020-2021 Whippoorwill Award Books

**Bayron, K. (2021). *This poison heart*.**

**Bloomsbury. 384 pages.** Briseis has botanical powers that can be hard to keep under control and under the radar: plants respond to her very presence by growing and stretching toward her. So, when Briseis' birth mom's sister dies and leaves Briseis an estate outside of Rhinebeck, New York, Briseis and her moms move there for the summer. In their newly inherited home, they find an apothecary, and Briseis slowly learns the secrets of this medicine shop and her birth family. She discovers a hidden, poisonous plant garden that only she can access and puzzles through one strange mystery after another.

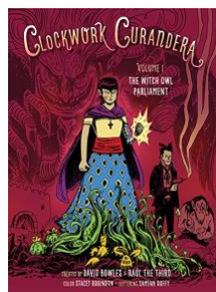


Although their town is described as a community with an average age of 65 with a total of six other Black people, author Kalynn Bayron adds an important representation to the corpus of diverse rural young adult (YA) literature. Queer and Black main characters are scarce in rural YA and fantasy literature but are slowly becoming more common. The botany and herbology in this novel are also

intriguing and feel distinctly rural with a fresh, dark fantasy twist modern-day extensions of Greek mythology. The story ends on a cliffhanger that will propel readers into the sequel. (JS)

**Bowles, D. & Raúl the Third (illus.). (2021).** *Clockwork Curandera: The Witch Owl Parliament*.

**Lee & Low. 113 pages.** 1865, the Republic of Santander, Colonial Mexico. Cristina Franco Pedregón, *curandera* apprentice, is egregiously attacked by a coven of witch owls. Enrique, her engineering brother, blends magic and machine to bring her back from the brink. To what end? Together, they discover the witch owl parliament's



plot to overthrow the Republic. As they collaborate with skinwalker Mateo, they realize that time is of the essence: Indigenous peoples and immigrants are increasingly reported missing. What will the trio uncover? And will it be soon enough to ensure the region's freedom?

Bowles' alternative and fantastical history of colonial Mexico, with magnificent illustrations from Raúl the Third, offers young readers ample opportunities to imagine rurality through diverse angles. Some are aesthetic, such as the steampunkified air balloons that fill the skies. Others are cultural, such as the meeting of Indigenous and Western lore. Others still are social, such as the characters' realization that the army won't be able to protect the entirety of the vast rural region in which they live, thus taking it on themselves to find a solution. All the while, the graphic novel insists that rural spaces are sites of profound sociohistorical importance, queer representation, and cultural creation. *Clockwork Curandera: The Witch Owl Parliament* is an engrossing, important intervention in the single story often told about Mexico. It is an inspiration for rural readers, wherever they live, to do the same. (NK)

**Callendar, K. (2020).** *King and the dragonflies*. **Scholastic. 272 pages.** When tragedy strikes and King's brother Kahlid dies of a freak heart attack, the family struggles to move on. They sit in the same seats as they used to and much of their routine still feels the same, but it's not the same at all. Nothing is. King knows he is not supposed to cry, because crying

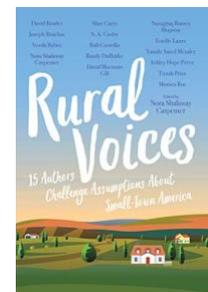
is not something that boys do. King also knows that his brother is a dragonfly. King saw him land on the casket at Kahlid's funeral. But King keeps this and other secrets from his family as they all work to grieve Kahlid's death in their small Louisiana town. When another boy goes missing, King's secrets start to boil to the surface as he grapples with becoming and being his truest self.



*King and the Dragonflies* invites readers to consider masculinity, queer identity, grief, and love through King's reflections on Kahlid's dreams and his own experiences in his small Louisiana town. This text also raises questions about the benefits and drawbacks of grieving trauma in a rural community. This middle grades' book is both tender and powerful, inviting readers to explore rurality and rural identity at multiple intersections including: place, race, gender, and sexuality. (CP)

**Carpenter, N. S. (Ed.) (2020).** *Rural voices: 15 authors challenge assumptions about small-town America*. **Candlewick. 336 pages.** *Rural Voices* is a

collection of shorter pieces that span rural locales and genres. As indicated by the author notes in the text, each of the authors has lived in and had various experiences in rural America that led them to write about the nuances, intersectional identities, and diversity that is often glossed over by overgeneralizations of rural spaces. In an effort to challenge and disrupt the single, essentializing story that is often told of rural places and people, each author contributed a short piece that offers an authentic depiction of what it can look like to be rural. In total, there are 16 pieces in the collection: two poems; three graphic short stories; one essay; and 10 short stories.



The states represented include: South Carolina, New York, Texas, Idaho, West Virginia, Virginia, Utah, Georgia, Michigan, Indiana, Alaska, and New Mexico. Most of the stories are realistic fiction but there are a few with speculative elements, and they tackle everything from issues of class, race, ableism/disability, mental health, family, religion, LGBTQIA+ identity building and acceptance, and simply being a human being with all

the beauty and challenges that come with that. As Carpenter mentions in the introduction to the collection, there are some stories in this text that will feel familiar to rural people, and some stories that won't. Rural readers will find aspects that feel like home and other aspects that will invite them to question their definition of rural and what rurality looks like and means for folks across a vast richness of places and identities. (CP)

**Dittemore, S. (2020). *Winter, white and wicked*. Harry N. Abrams. 384 pages.** On the dystopian mining island of Layce, where a group of rebels fights back against a corrupt Majority (who control the resources and keep people addicted to Kol) Winter is at once an endless season, a magical spirit, and either a friend or a controlling foe to Sylvi.



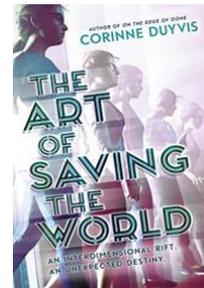
Twice-orphaned Sylvi has survived the hardships of Layce to become owner of her own hauling rig, Dragon. When Sylvi's best friend and only remaining family member Lenore leaves their home, Sylvi accepts a job to take a group of rebels across the mountains to bring her back. The book chronicles the journey Sylvi takes with the charismatic smuggler Mars Dresden; the fierce but kind and ethical warrior-woman Hyla; and Kyn, the beguiling boy with skin made of stone. Together they challenge Winter, battle fierce monsters, and navigate their relationships with one another.

Rural themes—among them the extraction of resources from the land for the benefit of a few, the power of Indigenous people as they interact with colonizers and colonizing forces, the ravages of addiction, and the importance of connection find a compelling new setting in this riveting fantasy novel. (DB)

**Duyvis, C. (2020). *The art of saving the world*. Harry N. Abrams. 385 pages.** Hazel was born and grew up in rural Pennsylvania. For fifteen years, Hazel never strayed far from her home; this is because the further Hazel moves away from her home, the more the world becomes violent and odd things begin to happen. Hazel knows she is connected to a “rift” in the earth, and this rift becomes unsettled if Hazel travels beyond a few mile radius. The government knows of Hazel's connection to the rift

and the potential disaster and stations agents so she can't leave.

Suddenly, after Hazel turns sixteen, something goes wrong. She meets another Hazel from a parallel dimension, and then another, and another, and another. Each Hazel has different traits and characteristics and understandings of their own and shared worlds. Initially, the Hazels are confused about the worlds they inhabit, the rift, and how they found each other. Together, they discover mysterious beings hidden in the barn near the rift, and with unicorns, dragons, and trolls, head on a trek to figure out exactly what is happening and how to fix it. This story set in a rural area with a dynamic cast of Hazels, will be a great read for readers who love science fiction and mysteries. (KK)



**Heath, C. (2021). *The reckless kind*. Soho Press. 322 Pages.** In a rural town, where traditions and religion dictate acceptance, three young adults challenge the rules by creating a family with those whose well-being outweighs their own in this queer historical novel set in a Nordic town in 1904.



This story describes how isolating—both through its rural, traditional setting and through nonacceptance (sexuality, physical appearance, disability, gender, or class) – a place can be. However, Nils, Asta, and Erland embody rural diversity--two of the main characters are gay and one is asexual. One of them has hearing loss and an unusual appearance, one has lost a hand, one has anxiety, and all three love the theater. One is rich and French, one is a local farmer, and one is a woman defying gender norms.

As the trio works out how to make a home for their found family--and how to win the big prize at the annual sleigh race--they also learn how assurance and acceptance from those that one loves can help silence external hostilities and magnify internal strength and determination--and that allies and friends are out there even when you feel alone. These allies and friends – and this diverse cast of character— can even be found in rural Nordic areas. (SS)

**Little Badger, D. (2020). *Elatsoe*. Levine Querido. 368 pages.** Ellie can raise the spirits of deceased animals. She's done so already for Kirby, an English springer spaniel that can sense the



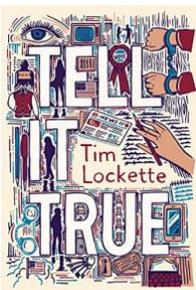
emotional pain of Ellie's human relatives. Kirby's strange behavior keys Ellie into knowing that something is amiss with her cousin, Trevor, whose death by car accident may not be as it seems. To uncover the truth, Ellie will have to traverse Texas north to

south, retracing Six-Great-Grandmother's steps to investigate a disappearance near the Kunétai—now called the Rio Grande River. And like Six-Great, Ellie will have to do so while risking vampire encounters, trips to the underworld, and owls with a capital O.

Drawing from Apache lore and weaving in its language, *Elatsoe* is a portrait of a young Apache girl and her post-Industrial, working-class town. The jobs may be gone from now crumbling factories, but their "chemical footprint remains" (p. 6). Even as readers consider the ways that greater socioeconomic forces shape their communities, *Elatsoe* will also invite them to consider, like Ellie, what stories have shaped them: the stories that give life to the places they live, the lives of those who came before them, and the responsibilities they may feel toward both. (NK)

**Lockette, T. (2021). *Tell it true. Seven Stories Press. 192 pages.*** This young adult realistic-fiction story takes place in fictional Beachside, Alabama. At the center of the Beachside is Lake Knox-Kilby. Fifteen-year-old Lisa considers Lake Knox-Kilby a "fake" lake because it was created 100 years ago by the installation of a hydro-electric dam via eminent domain.

This story is told not from the more common perspective of the vacationers who build lakeside second homes in rural communities like Beachside, but from the perspective of the people who lived there prior to it becoming a destination.



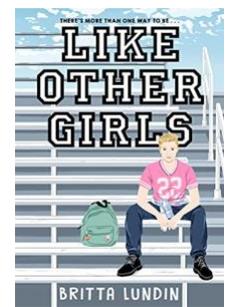
Lisa, our main character, is named for the former town of Lisa, Alabama that is now at the bottom of the fake lake created by the dam. Like the drowned

town of Lisa, Lisa also feels buried by layers of inauthenticity, and she yearns for authenticity and truth in her life at school and home. When Lisa falls into the opportunity to become the editor of the school newspaper, her tenure begins with some missteps that have negative implications for Lisa and those around her.

Soon, Lisa becomes deeply involved with a death penalty execution at the prison near Beachside. In Lisa's quest for authenticity and truth, she navigates rampant sexism in her rural high school, as well as a sea of questions about journalistic ethics and bureaucracy to finally get at the real story. (KE)

**Lundin, B. (2021). *Like Other Girls*. Disney-Hyperion. 384 pages.** Mara lives in a rural town,

goes to a small school, and spends time with her brother Noah and her best friend Quinn. Mara is a basketball star but gets kicked off the team for fighting. The next year, Mara wants to join the fall football team to show her basketball coach she can be a team player. Quinn and Mara's other friends decide the football team is sexist, and as a feminist move, they decide to suit up, too. This creates a difficult dynamic with Mara's brother (he doesn't want Mara on the team) and with Mara's friends (they think Mara should be more political about the team, but Mara just wants to play football).



Although Mara faces some pushback about her disruption of gender roles, there are also many who support her. Mara meets two older rural lesbian farmers, who mentor Mara and live happily in their rural home. Most of Mara's friends are especially bold and progressive in their understandings of feminism and gender justice and call out the toxic masculinity of bullies on the football team and in the community. *Like Other Girls*, with its queer and rural bent, is a great book for any athlete, or any reader who likes a good coming-of-age sports story with a queer and rural bent. (KK)asdfasfa

**Murphy, J. (2021). *Pumpkin*. Balzer + Bray. 336 pages.** Twins Waylon and Clementine are biding their time at a small West Texas high school, waiting for the day they can leave and be their full queer selves. Waylon is most especially looking forward to

the day when he can go “full Waylon,” where he will live in Austin (Texas) and wear the kinds of clothes he’s been saving up in the back of his closet. Unlike



Clementine, Waylon keeps his distance from most everything and everyone else at school, including PE class which he usually spends chatting it up in the nurse’s office.

When Clementine hits Waylon with a bombshell and his favorite drag queen is jilted of her rightful title because of fatphobia on his favorite show, he soothes his aching soul by turning himself into a queen. His spur-of-the-moment audition video for the drag show is leaked and the whole school sees it, and he is forced to reckon with the aftermath, especially his nomination for prom queen.

In an effort to inspire Waylon to embrace all parts of himself, his new group of friends takes him to a drag show at a popular queer-friendly establishment on the outskirts of town where he’s surprised to see a popular football player in attendance. Throughout the story, Waylon and readers are invited to confront stereotypes of rural places as wholly unwelcoming and hostile towards queer people. Writing at the intersections of Waylon’s identities (e.g., rural, fat, gay, drag queen), Murphy challenges readers to examine their perceptions of rural places and to see them as the complex places they are. (CP).

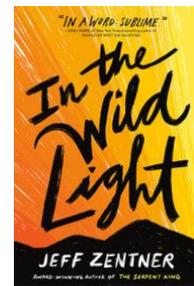
**Sain, G. M. (2021). *Dark and shallow lies*. Penguin Random House. 416 pages.** La Cchette, Louisiana won’t ever feel like home again after Grey’s best friend and “twin flame” goes missing. In a town filled with psychics, finding answers shouldn’t be a problem, but the secrets of the residents of La Cchette are as dark and deep as the river that dictates their passage. *Dark and Shallow Lies* by Ginny Myers Sain is a supernatural thriller that takes place in a remote tourist destination in the Louisiana Bayou. The more Grey searches for her

friend, the more it becomes clear that everyone has a secret in her hometown.

Grey knows that someone must know what happened to her best friend. Murderers, secrets, and mysteries complicate Grey’s investigation. Sain’s story introduces readers to the potentiality, and humidity, of a long Louisiana summer and depicts how trapped it could feel when a boat is one’s only way out. This story takes the mystery genre and interlaces it with a rural setting full of secrets and puzzles. Recommended for readers who like thrillers. (SS)



**Zentner, J. (2021). *In the wild light*. Crown. 432 pages.** *In the Wild Light* is a book about the potential of young people living in rural communities like Sawyer, Tennessee. Young people like Cash and Delaney whose childhoods have been marked by a parents’ addiction, lack of health care, and living wage jobs. And it is a book about leaving a place and people you love. While Delaney’s decision to leave is an easy one, Cash is deeply rooted in Eastern Tennessee by place and family.



Zentner leans into the tragic circumstances that Delaney wants to escape -- those often associated with rural places. She used Narcan multiple times to reverse the deadly effects of her mother’s overdoses and is nearly destitute due to her mother’s inability to care for her. Cash has had similar experiences. He lost his mother to an overdose in their trailer. But unlike Delaney, Cash has the deep love and support of his grandparents and Aunt Betsy. When Delaney’s science aptitude earns her a life-changing opportunity for both her and Cash to attend a prestigious boarding school in Connecticut, Cash must decide if he will leave Mamaw and Papaw and the river to go with her. (KE)

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