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REVIEW

Alternate Realities, Relatable Challenges

LAUREN BARBER, LYNN ERICKSON, & KATE BONACORSI

Running Out of Time by Margaret Peterson Haddix. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1996.

Gathering Blue by Lois Lowry. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000.

Jade Green: A Ghost Story by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor. Scholastic Inc., 1999.

Life As We Knew It by Susan Beth Pfeffer. Harcourt Children's Books, 2006.

When teenagers gaze into their future, undoubtedly they see innumerable problems that adults have--unwittingly or not--laid out for them: climate change, political divides, energy sources, abortion, you name it. No wonder the popularity of books with realistic alternative realities have become so popular. In addition to *The Hunger Games* and *The Giver*, we offer reviews for four titillating alternate realities.

While teenagers aren't necessarily dealing with global apocalypses, the changes in their lives as they move from childhood to adulthood may, at times, seem as catastrophic and hard to deal with. Susan Beth Pfeffer's *Life As We Knew It*, Lois Lowry's *Gathering Blue*, Phyllis Reynold Naylor's *Jade Green: A Ghost Story*, and Margaret Peterson Haddix's *Running Out of Time* are four engaging young adult novels which have themes of coming to terms with reality, as well as the power of relationships. When the reality that the protagonists once knew changes, they must learn to adapt and negotiate the relationships with the people around them. While the settings depart from reality, issues of compassion, community, and survival ring true as they would be for any teen facing change.

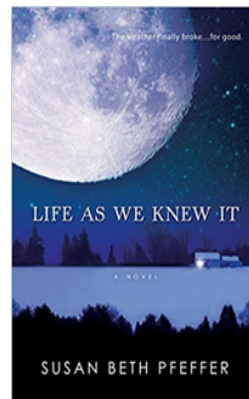
In *Life As We Knew It*, Susan Beth Pfeffer tells the story of 16-year-old Miranda, who has a normal life living with her mother and brothers Jon and Matt. Her biggest worries are about her grades and her unsure feelings about becoming the godmother to her Dad and Stepmom's soon-to-be child.

All of the sudden, everything changes as the world is suddenly focused on one thing: an asteroid predicted to hit the moon. Most people are thrilled about the opportunity to witness the astrological event, and on the night of the impact, Miranda and her family, as well as many other people on their street, go outside to witness it. However, after its impact it becomes apparent that something is very wrong.

Immediately, Miranda's life is shaken, along with the rest of the world, as tsunamis and earthquakes ravage the coasts of many countries, causing millions of people to die instantly. As the chaos erupts, Miranda's mom is determined to keep her family alive and stockpiles food. As they are inland, they are safe from tsunamis, but as the summer goes on, another threat looms; the moon shift causes magma to be forced up to the surface, resulting in many dormant volcanoes erupting, which cover the sky in ash, causing the temperature to drop dramatically. This dramatic temperature change thus makes it impossible for food to be grown. As reality becomes harsher for the family, they start eating less and less to conserve food. Living in close quarters with her family, and mounting stress, Miranda is forced to negotiate her family relationships as she takes on more adult responsibilities that are essential to their survival. The family dynamics test the boundaries of their relationships, and force Miranda to do the best she can with what she has.

As winter rears its head, Miranda and her family know that things are going to get even tougher. However, even as they become more and more isolated as nearly everyone else is either leaving town or dying, they continue to fight for survival. Will Miranda and her family survive the winter? Will Miranda reach her 17th birthday? These are both reasons to pick up a copy of *Life As We Knew It*.

Throughout *Life As We Knew It*, Pfeffer does a fantas-



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tic job of sharing Miranda's point of view on things as she comes to terms with what life looks like post moon shift. As Miranda navigates these changes she realizes the importance of her relationship with her family, and that they must stick together and support each other as they face their new reality.

In *Gathering Blue*, a companion book to *The Giver*, Lowry creates another dystopian world in which Kira, a "two-syl-

lable" girl, is the protagonist in a poor, isolated village set in the future. Kira is an orphan with a disability, something the village does not typically tolerate; people in the village who are too weak, sick, or disabled are brought to the Field to die.

Villagers are kept fearful and ignorant, and are therefore easily manipulated by the Guardians. Rumors of beasts and the prospect of being brought to the Field

aid in governing the people. Additionally, violence is a normal part of life for most of the villagers; in that way, violence preoccupies energies and attention. Men and women of the village are very segregated, each confined to their specific roles within the village. There appears to be no formal education, and the women are forbidden from learning to read. Knowledge of history is retained by the Singer and retold only annually at the Gathering; for example, Kira refers to a Cross as "the worship object," and wonders why people typically bow in front of it. Members of the community justify much of what happens as "the way it's always been."

Despite her disability, Kira's mother was compassionate enough to keep Kira alive, and raises her with tenderness and love that most other tykes never know. This early relationship gives Kira the emotional tools she will need to survive. The simplicity of the prose reflects the naivety of the characters and the lack of formal education in the village. There is little love and affection in the village, as adults regularly hit, kick, and "thrash" the tykes. While this lack of emotional engagement is typical, Kira is able to develop and sustain several friendships that give her hope and love.

Because of her talents in threading and weaving, Kira is brought to live at the Council Edifice, along with Thomas the Carver, and Jo the future Singer. Kira's life now revolves around repairing and weaving the Robe, used for the village's annual performance of the people's history. Kira is trained in the art of dying and creating colors. Along with a tyke from

the Fey, Matt, and his mangy dog Branch, Kira and her new friends consider what their unique artistic talents mean to them and to the village.

As Kira meticulously repairs the tiny threads of the Robe, she is able to use roots and plants to create dyes of every color except blue. Kira learns, however, that blue does still exist "yonder." That blue still exists elsewhere give Kira hope that change for the better is possible. Kira and her friends work toward "gathering blue" and are optimistic that their talents can change the world they live in.

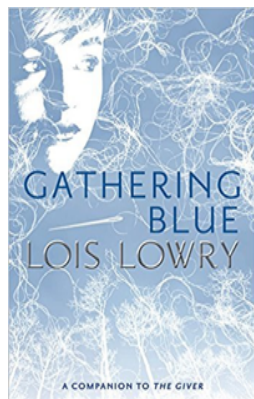
Kira learns she will be responsible for creating the new panel on the Robe that represents the future, and throughout the novel she gains greater clarity of what that future should look like. Kira must deal with many challenges: her physical disability and the stigmas associated with it in her village; the loss her parents; and adjusting to a new life inside the Edifice walls. Despite these hardships, Kira finds that relationships give her the strength she needs to use her talents selflessly.

Set in the early to mid 19th century, Phyllis Reynolds Naylor tells the story of 15-year-old orphan, Judith, who has nowhere to turn after her parents die in *Jade Green: A Ghost Story*. Finally, an uncle decides

to let her live with him, but with specific instructions not to bring anything green. Lucky to have somewhere to go, Judith agrees to these stipulations, minus the picture of her and her mother in a green frame. She decides to hide the frame deep in her trunk in her closet. But what is the scratching sound she hears? And why is her trunk ajar? It must be mice, she decides.

Judith helps the family cook, Mrs. Hastings, and also gets a job at the local hat shop. While at the hat shop she hears rumors of a young girl that died in her new house. She has been told that there is always a lot of gossip at the hat shop, but she is determined to get to the bottom of this. She doesn't want to bother her uncle with silly questions, so she asks Mrs. Hastings. Yes, a girl did take her own life in their house. Uncle Geoffrey had taken her in, and she sadly took her own life, and that's all Mrs. Hastings wanted to say about it.

Judith meets a boy of her age, Zeke, and they quickly hit it off. Her older cousin, Charles, Uncle Geoffrey's son doesn't like that Judith is hanging out with Zeke all the time. Charles has a creepy way about him. When Judith feels a



presence in her room one night, she thinks it is Charles playing a trick on her. When she lights her candle, no one is there. Another night she hears a piano playing, but when going to investigate, again, no one is there.

Where are all of these noises coming from? What will happen when Charles sees Zeke and Judith together again? What made the girl that lived in the house kill herself? All these answers will be answered in *Jade Green: A Ghost Story*.

Jessie Keyser is a 13-year-old girl from Clifton, Indiana in the 1840s in Margaret Peterson Haddix's *Running Out of Time*. When there is an outbreak of Diphtheria in their town,



Jessie's mom reveals that it is actually 1996 and that their family has been living in a live museum in which people come and view their "olden day" lifestyle everyday for entertainment, but that the owner promised to keep modern day medical help available when creating the exhibit. When Jessie's sister falls ill, along with many others in the village, her mother asks her to adventure into

the modern world to retrieve medicine from a man who resisted the creation of the live museum attraction. In addition to not knowing what the modern world will be like, Jessie's escape will be difficult because Clifton is guarded to ensure that no one exits.

Haddix does a fantastic job creating a mental picture for the reader of Jessie's adventure into the modern world through Jessie's dialogue with the people she meets and the details with which Haddix incorporates. There is a great mix of humorous and heartbreaking moments throughout the text as she encounters modern technology and learns that people in 1996 are not the same breed as those she has encountered in her upbringing. In order to find out if Jessie is able to save her community from Diphtheria, you will need to pick up a copy of *Running Out of Time* today.

In *Running Out of Time*, Jessie has to face the fact that the reality that she has been living in for as long as she can remember, is a lie. As Haddix writes the novel through Jessie's eyes, the reader experiences her thoughts as she sorts

through and has conflicted feelings about the fact that she has been living in an alternate reality. She also ponders how she feels about people watching their life within the exhibit. As Jessie learns of this secret that her parents have been keeping for most of her life, she must decide if she is going to let it have an impact on her relationship with them. Throughout the novel, Haddix does a great job of showing Jessie's process of coming to terms with the changes in her reality, as she races to help save some of those closest to her before time runs out.

Coming to terms with reality, as well as the power of relationships, are all a part of growing up. Teenagers in today's society, along with the teenagers in *Life As We Knew It*, *Gathering Blue*, *Jade Green: A Ghost Story*, and *Running Out of Time* are faced with changes and difficult decisions which they have to make. While the coming-of-age novels referenced here incorporate ideas of alternate realities, the protagonists in these stories face the same types of issues as teenagers today. They must make choices, even though they may not foresee all of the possible consequences of their actions and they must learn how to adapt and relate to those around them as they are given/ take on more responsibilities.

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