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# Great Lakes, Great Books

by Lynette Marten Suckow



**Lynette  
Marten Suckow**

Life isn't fair. No one knows that better than young adults who crave independence from the rules set by family, school, and government. The following teen books from the 2017 list of Great Lakes Great Books illustrate the wide range of circumstances we are born into and how we cope with the inequities of the world. Young Adult (YA) novels often create tension by featuring characters who experience mature situations without the benefit of parental guidance. These stories are no exception. Some protagonists are able to triumph over problematic situations, while others succumb to psychological despair. Surrender yourself to the emotion, the suspense, the heartbreak and joy of these compelling stories.

The GLGB Award committee is already working on a book ballot for next school year. The winners for 2017 will be announced at the MRA Annual Conference in Detroit from March 17-19, where teachers and librarians can pick up the latest information. Stay updated by going to the Great Lakes Great Books Award webpage at [www.michiganreading.org](http://www.michiganreading.org) under the Student Involvement tab. Until the new list is ready, enjoy these great stories.

***SALT TO THE SEA***, by Ruta Sepetys, ISBN 978-0142423622 began as a family research project that evolved into a historical fiction novel based on the sinking of the ocean liner, *Wilhelm Gustloff*, in 1945. Overshadowed by other events near the end of World War II, it is an incident not well known by Americans. Four main characters emerge from different backgrounds and perspectives, each carrying secrets of war with them. Florian, Joana, and Emilia are all refugees who travel together in order to reach the northern coast of Poland,



where they can board a ship to Germany – and safety. The journey is arduous, especially for Emilia, whose pregnancy becomes more apparent with each passing day, forcing the group to modify the social and moral boundaries of their pre-war lifestyles. The fourth character is Alfred, a young follower of Hitler and a bully who has finally found his place in the world as a Nazi supporter. Four stories intertwine to chronicle the suspenseful journey through occupied territory to gain passage on the *Wilhelm Gustloff* and a chance for survival. In addition to the historical information at the back of the book, learn more about the *Wilhelm Gustloff* online at [www.wilhelm-gustloff.com](http://www.wilhelm-gustloff.com).

In ***THE SERPENT KING***, by Jeff Zentner, ISBN 978-1770498839 Dill Early is the last in a long line of Pentecostal preachers who believe that their faith in the Lord will keep them safe from the poisonous serpents they handle during church services. Dill is not so sure. He tries his best to be an obedient son to his repressive parents who have fallen from grace in the church. Even in their less than powerful positions, they expect him to drop out of school and work full-time to pay off their debts without a thought to his own welfare. Luckily,

Dill has two good friends in Travis and Lydia. Travis navigates the unpredictable actions of a drunkard father by retreating into the world of fantasy books. Lydia has great parents who are genuine role models for the group, allowing her to achieve more in the academic and extra-curricular realm than the boys. The three friends reveal their last year of high school to readers through conversations about the future and glimpses into their home life. Zentner's first teen novel is a well-written study of life's unfairness, the hopefulness of youth, and pronounced differences in the families we are born into, as told by each of the friends in their own chapters. Keep your tissues close at hand for tears of joy and sorrow while reading this memorable story.

***EXIT, PURSUED BY A BEAR***, by E. K. Johnston, ISBN 978-1101994603 takes readers to the summer before senior year. Hermione is the captain of her cheerleading team, and this is her last year at cheerleading camp. She wants it to be perfect. It is...until the Friday night party when she is drugged and raped, and suffers memory loss of the event. As her friends grapple with academics, college applications, relationships, and their own emerging sexuality, Hermione has the additional responsibility of seeing a psychiatrist to try to remember the sexual attack. Her life is now full of decisions. What if she's pregnant? What if she remembers? Should she prosecute the attacker and relive the whole incident? Teen readers will have a lot to think about, even after they finish the story.

***GIRL IN PIECES***, by Kathleen Glasgow, ISBN 978-1101934715 introduces 17-year-old Charlie as she wakes up in a treatment facility wrapped in bandages—so traumatized, she can't speak. Readers soon find out that Charlie's father experienced severe depression and drowned himself when she was a young girl. Her mother beats her; her best friend overdosed and was moved to a recovery facility across the country; and Charlie has been living on the streets of Minneapolis with addicts and criminals ever since. Unable to cope with emotions she does not know how to express, Charlie cuts her arms, legs, and stomach. After being unceremoniously discharged from the hospital, Charlie follows a friend to Arizona, finds work at a café, and returns to drawing

portraits of people in her spare time. Just when her life is becoming stable, she falls in love with a junkie musician who inevitably drags her back down into emotional chaos. Charlie finally gets assistance from a co-worker recovering from drug addiction and from an artist who recognizes her talent. Several recovery stories from drugs, alcohol, and self-harm take place at the same time. The victims take each day as it comes and count each one a victory.

***LEARNING TO SWEAR IN AMERICA***, by Katie Kennedy, ISBN 978-1619639119 features Yuri Strelnikov, a doctor of physics at age 17, who is flown to Los Angeles at a moment's notice to work with American scientists scrambling to prevent a huge asteroid from reaching Earth. He is on loan from Russia, where his work on antimatter is putting him in line for a Nobel Peace Prize. In light of his own bright future, Yuri has good reason to save the world. However, he finds himself closely supervised and isolated as he is shuttled from the laboratory to the hotel and back again. There's tension between Yuri and NASA's Director of Near Earth Objects Program about the safest way to deflect the asteroid. Yuri is young, but he knows physics better than almost anyone. By chance, Yuri meets Dovie, the janitor's daughter, who helps him sneak away from his hotel and experience a bit of American life. She introduces Yuri to her brother, Lennon, who is wheelchair-bound and has an edgy sense of humor. The never-ending suspense continues on from one predicament to the next until the final escape scene on the Ambassador Bridge in Detroit, Michigan. The uncrushable attitudes of Yuri, Dovie, and Lennon leave readers with hope for the future of the earth and, perhaps, future stories about these characters.

## Author Biography

**Lynette Marten Suckow** works at the Peter White Public Library's Reference Desk in Marquette, MI where she provides assistance with library resources and teaches people how to use technology in the transition to digital learning. She holds a master's degree in education, and has been a Great Lakes Great Books Award committee member since 2006. She can be reached at [lynette.suckow@gmail.com](mailto:lynette.suckow@gmail.com).